

Teaching Despite the Context [Enseñar a pesar del contexto]

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ABSTRACT

A student teacher started his internship on English education in a public school from Colombia. He used the Eclectic approach to achieve the learning goals he set. The students managed to obtain great results on their assignments, but after the grades were delivered, students demonstrated that in the end they did not truly learn. And this is not just about what happens between the teacher and the students, there are more situations involved: How to properly teach in a context where students are not willing to learn, teachers do not have fair salary and health insurance, institutions depend completely on the government, and the government does not really support education? Teaching despite this context is what a teacher should do, then. At least until a change in the education system arrives by result of the teachers' actions.

Key words: education, teaching, learning

RESUMEN

Un estudiante de pregrado realizó su práctica docente en el área de Inglés en un colegio público de Colombia. Desarrolló sus clases basado en el enfoque ecléctico para cumplir los objetivos de aprendizaje planteados. Sus estudiantes consiguieron obtener muy buenos resultados, pero poco después de que las notas fueran entregadas, los estudiantes demostraron que al final no aprendieron de verdad. Y esto no es simplemente resultado de lo que pasa entre el profesor y sus estudiantes, hay más situaciones involucradas: ¿Cómo se enseña apropiadamente en un contexto donde los estudiantes no están dispuestos a aprender, los profesores no reciben salarios justos o buenos seguros médicos, las instituciones dependen completamente en el gobierno y el gobierno no apoya realmente a la educación? Entonces, enseñar a pesar de este contexto es lo que un profesor debe hacer. Al menos hasta que haya un cambio en el sistema educativo que sería gracias a las acciones de los profesores que educan nuestro país.

Palabras clave: educación, enseñanza, aprendizaje

TEACHING DESPITE THE CONTEXT

No matter what role we play in society, when we put ourselves in a teacher's shoes, we can realize how difficult it is to teach in a context where students feel demotivated, teachers are underpaid, institutions depend on the government, and the government not only denies the right support for the improvement of the education system, but also demands from institutions and teachers more than what they are capable to give or achieve.

PROBLEM

How is it possible to properly teach in such inappropriate learning environment?

OBJECTIVES

This article aims to provide a detailed description of such teaching experience and give an opinion upon the troublesome situation in education and the possible reactions from a responsible teacher.

DESCRIPTION

In a public school located in Pasto, Colombia, a student teacher of English of the University of Nariño did his internship in the 9th, 10th, and 11th grades. In the first week it was possible for him to notice many of the positive and negative aspects of the institution facilities. The entrance of the school has two wide doors, one of which is always open. Before entering, there is a "Punto Vive Digital" [Live Digitally Spot], which is an internet-access community center promoted by the Colombian Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies, and consists of a wide technological room divided in 4 sections: gaming section with

two flat screens and two gaming consoles; working section with one desktop computer and sixteen laptops; audiovisual section with video beam and white screen; class section with a whiteboard. Moreover it has good quality internet connexion and a printing service. The institution itself is not big, but as it is a secondary school (levels 6th to 11th) with few students, we may agree that it is big enough. The two-floor building has two administrative offices, a teacher's room, a janitor/supplies room, a small auditorium, a small snack shop, a small cafeteria, a small library, two public restrooms, one patio with benches, a sports field with soccer and basketball equipment, and seven classrooms. Later, the student teacher started his first classes and he could count from twenty to twenty-five students per classroom, which is a great advantage because the majority of private and public schools in Pasto and in Colombia work with forty to fifty students. Each classroom has a whiteboard, a metal desk and a wooden chair, and twenty to twenty-five wooden classroom desks. Some of the classroom doors could not be locked or even closed, and some windows were missing. When it rained, some of the classrooms had leaks, which caused interruptions in the middle of classes. The academic year in Colombia is divided (in most of the schools) in four academic terms, and the student teacher was assigned to work in the school during a semester from the university that went from February to June, 2017. Before classes started for the student teacher, he managed to contact the English teacher and the coordinator. She (the coordinator of the school) allowed the student to develop his internship in the school during the first two academic terms (from

February to May), and she was able to do this because as it was a seat of the whole school. The principal was working in the main seat but had assigned the coordinator to be in charge of all the responsibilities there. After, the student talked with the teacher in charge of the English classes and learned that the institution did not follow the curricular guidelines of the Colombian Ministry of Education and the English textbook provided by the government was not used either. The first because the teachers thought that those guidelines were impossible to cover in such a short time and little resources, and at the same time it has been known an incongruence from the government. Which basically is that it demands schools to be responsible of the education of an increasing number of students and the coverage of a great amount of items in each subject, but it does not give sufficient financial support to public institutions for the improvement of the conditions of education, which include help for students, teachers, administratives, and facilities. The second because the material provided by the government was not adequate to the sociocultural context of the schools and as it was developed to follow the curricular guidelines, it could not serve any purpose to the school, the teacher or the students.

The student teacher noticed some of the daily or normal environment inside some classrooms, even though he was not in one of them at the time, especially in classrooms from 6th to 8th levels. Students were nearly uncontrollable; teachers had to shout and demand respect constantly to keep students somewhat attentive to what they were being taught or to what they were supposed to develop in class. From

levels 9th to 11th, it was not the case. The student teacher started his classes with students from those grades and they were rather respectful and more attentive than the previous ones. It could be clear that some of the teachers had authority on students and the English teacher was not the exception. When he entered the room, students would greet him with a “Good morning” chorus and pay attention to everything he had to say. As soon as the student teacher started his classes, it could be felt that the respect they had on the teacher would be shared with the new one. Some of them had an acceptable level of English, but most had many errors in grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Before noticing this, the teacher in charge said to the student teacher:

“Algo para que tenga en cuenta es que debe traer actividades variadas y sobretodo guías que a ellos les gusta. Aunque eso sí le digo, no se vaya preocupar si ellos no aprenden bien todos los contenidos. Con ellos hay que repetirles varias veces con ejercicios y explicaciones para que se acuerden. E incluso les va bien en los exámenes o en el año, pero al siguiente ya se han olvidado de un buen porcentaje de lo que se vió en la materia.” [Something you need to take into account is that you should bring varied activities and worksheets mostly because they like it. Though, I must tell you, don’t worry if they don’t learn well everything. You have to repeat lessons many times and give them a lot of exercises for them to remember. And they can actually get good grades in exams or in the school year, but in the next one they forget a great percentage of what was covered in the subject.]

The teacher student had in mind such statement until he could see it for himself. Students had a previous knowledge thanks to the teacher's efforts to teach right and the students' efforts to get good grades, but if we talk about the motivation on learning a second language, we could find just a couple of students on each classroom who were enthusiastic about it and even had developed autonomous learning. The rest of them who studied was because of the grades.

This situation led the student teacher to take a difficult position referring to public education in Colombia, and that was that as a responsible teacher, you should take a look on what you are being asked to do (by the institution or the government), but it is more important to act according to the needs analysis you make upon the context and the students you will be trying to educate. In such way, you will be able to teach students correctly at a moderate pace that fits the teacher, but mostly the student, who has the main role in education and learning.

METHODS AND MATERIAL

The internship began on February and it was settled that the student teacher would work in the school six school hours a week (each school hour lasted fifty minutes). The teacher in charge accepted such hourly intensity but only if they split the hours so that each level had come classes with him and other with the student teacher. It was agreed and classes began. The student taught to ninth graders on Mondays from 10:10 to 11:00 in the morning and Tuesdays from 11:50 to 12:40; tenth graders on Mondays and Wednesdays from 11:50 to 12:40; and

eleventh graders on Tuesdays from 10:10 to 11:00 and Wednesdays from 11:00 to 11:50.

There were twenty-four students in the ninth grade group. They were respectful, quiet most of the time, and it could be noticed a lack of motivation in the majority of them. In the first two months (first term) the topics covered were the simple past tense focused on regular and irregular verbs (verb 'to be' was not included) used in affirmative, negative, and interrogative sentences. The objectives set were to understand and practice the functions and structures of the simple past tense in oral and written form; to understand, learn, and practice the differences in the conjugations of regular and irregular verbs. The third month (second term) covered the simple past tense with the verb 'to be' used in affirmative, negative, and interrogative sentences.

There were nineteen students in the tenth grade group at the beginning of the academic year, but after some classes two students stopped attending. The students were respectful, interested in the topics, but tired most of the time (maybe because both classes were at the last hour of the days). In the first two months the topics covered were the future tense with 'going to' and 'will' used in affirmative, negative, and interrogative sentences. In the third month the comparatives and superlatives were covered.

Finally, there were twenty-five students in the eleventh grade group. They were respectful as well, they were very attentive but in most cases they seemed unmotivated due to a lack of knowledge they felt they had. In the first month the topic covered was the passive voice with

the simple present, simple past, present continuous, present perfect, and simple future tenses, used in affirmative, negative, and interrogative sentences. In the second month, time was used to prepare students for the Pruebas Saber 11, which is the standardized test applied in Colombia to students who are in eleventh grade. In the third month the zero and first conditional were covered.

In general, the objectives set were to understand and practice the functions and structures of the tenses in oral and written form, and to understand, learn, and practice vocabulary, pronunciation, and reading comprehension. To accomplish these objectives in each level, the activities developed besides brief clear explanations included drills, dialogues, readings, word search, crosswords, games, quizzes; the materials used were reading passages, flashcards, and Prueba Saber 11 (2005, 2012, 2014) samples, and worksheets developed by the teacher whose sources were various webpages such as www.adelescorner.org, www.montsemorales.com, www.agendaweb.org, www.lingolex.com, www.perfect-english-grammar.com, www.teachingenglish.org.uk, www.ejerciciodeingles.com, www.ego4u.com, www.grammar-quizzes.com, learnenglish.britishcouncil.org, elt.oup.com, www.learnenglish-online.com, web2.uvcs.uvic.ca; and the assessment part was accomplished by responding many types of evaluation tasks (multiple-choice, cloze, matching, etc.) and open questions, in oral and written form, and in groups and individually. The student teacher based his classes on the Eclectic approach and much of the time in

class was devoted to individual and collective feedback upon worksheets and tests in order to make sure that every student could clarify his/her doubts.

On May, the fourth month (second half of the second term) of the academic year, the student teacher had planned to devote most of the classes to a mini-project. It is about an extra-class activity assigned from the university in which students are asked to carry out an event that promotes recreation, culture, arts, and any kind of task that helps students learn in a different environment from the typical classroom. The mini-project planned by the student teacher was called “Arts Expo”, and students were asked to form groups, if desired, and choose to create a comic book, a story, a play, a song or a game. Whichever they chose, they would have to start writing about it in Spanish and deliver it to the teacher. Then, they would have to translate it, and after the teacher has made corrections and suggestions, the students would have to prepare a presentation about it in the form of an exposition that would be exhibited in the auditorium of the school for each level. The student teacher managed to start the first phase where students had to deliver the Spanish and English written form of the project. Then it stayed in stand-by because of an important event that happened throughout the cities and towns in Colombia. On that month (May, 2017) started a teachers’ strike.

RESULTS

If we talk about results, first we take a look at what the teacher saw in the students reactions. Their behavior in the classes was pretty acceptable. They were attentive, though not always with learning

willingness. The students showed respect towards the teacher though also a kind of openness to talk to the teacher about the doubts they had and about the studies of the young student teacher. Some of them (especially from eleventh grade) were partially motivated in classes because they had clear goals and knew that they wanted to graduate and keep on studying. Their motivation was reflected in their interest on getting good grades, and when they could not get good results, they would feel less motivated instead of challenged. The student teacher tried to compensate this with individual feedback, and this worked with many of them.

Now, if we refer to academic evidence, on the first term the students obtained pretty good grades in general. Some tasks were not delivered, many of them were delivered late, but at one point, students showed interest in filling the missing grade or compensate with extra class work. It was sometimes possible, but even if there was not additional grade, they did a pretty good job when the next assignments were presented. Nevertheless, as mentioned before, this was about the grades, and when the second term arrived, the student teacher could noticed how the words of the teacher in charge were materialized. Students would not remember simple structures, studied vocabulary or practiced pronunciation. But the worst part is that apart from not remembering, they did not show interest on doing it.

DISCUSSION

The result of this of course was that the student teacher had to review most of the content that was already covered in order to continue with the topics. Students did not give importance to truly learn because

in the classroom what mattered was the grade, and at home they would not spend time reinforcing or reviewing the English content. They got good grades, but that did not mean at all that they truly learned. But what and who is there to blame? Students have their own lives, their own faults, their own problems as well as the teachers. Teacher face difficult situations not only at home but also at work, and even more if they really care about their families and about their vocation of educating the future generations of a country.

“Schools are out early for hundreds of thousands of Colombian school teachers and their students. The country’s main teachers union is out on strike. [...] These public school teachers have asked for higher wages and more teachers to meet the needs of students. Key issues in past strikes. The demonstrators complain the Colombian government still hasn’t addressed their concerns.” (Begue, 2017)

This was mentioned in an international newspaper, and it sums up a very complex situation that has taken place decades ago.

CONCLUSION

There have many authors in the field of education that refer to the true dynamic between teaching and learning. They state that teaching does not guarantee learning and sometimes we as students find ourselves in the situation of learning on our own:

“La enseñanza no es causa directa del aprendizaje; se puede no aprender nada de las enseñanzas de un docente, se puede aprender en ausencia de éste de manera autodidacta, e incluso se puede aprender

“a pesar” del profesor.” (Granado, 2003: 14) [Teaching does not strictly cause learning; you can learn nothing from a teacher’s lessons, you can learn in his/her absence autonomously, and you can even learn “despite” the teacher.]

Such situation seen from the student perspective can also be seen from a teacher’s perspective. There will not always be resources available, students will have problems and will not always be willing to learn, salary and health insurance will not be fair, the government will not really help and will ask for more, but all this does not mean that education will fall, because as long as there are teachers, there will be a chance for improvement, and a chance to fight for what is fair for education. Teaching despite the context is a temporary task, and it will be that way until teachers gather to change society with the support from their students, from their families and hopefully from their institutions and the government. Maybe the present teachers’ strike is a great step for Colombia’s education system, but it will continue not only here but also in South America and the rest of the world.

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