Working with pre-service teachers towards professional development
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ABSTRACT
Among teacher educators and specialists in general, there is sometimes the belief that we should only think about professional development after the person graduates. Though much of the bibliography on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) considers the stages for professional development, starting with the Newly Graduate, the present paper tries to illustrate how in the Cuban context, pre-service teachers should start considering the path for development long before they finish studies, so the question here can be: When should we start? The present paper aims at discussing important aspects related to professional development, and also suggests some ways that can be introduced to motivate pre-service teachers to start thinking on their development before they obtain their major. This work also discusses some ideas related to continuing professional development in order to help teachers become aware of the need for growth and development as a long-life endeavor in their professional lives.

KEY WORDS: teacher educator, professional development, pre-service teachers
INTRODUCTION:
When reading ELT journals or the vast amount of books and materials related to language teaching and/or teaching in general, you must have come across terms like: professional competence, teacher education, teacher training, teacher development, professional development, etc. Are these terms similar or different? What is meant by professional development and when does it really start?
Most authors consider that development comes after graduation from college or university, once the teacher education program has concluded or a certain teaching training has been accomplished. Nevertheless, it is our belief that in the Cuban context, where future teachers spend a significant number of curriculum hours doing practicum in different educational levels to get the necessary experience by linking theory and practice, the idea of development should be introduced early on in their studies with the aim of helping them become aware of the need for growth and development as a long-life task in their professional lives.

It is important that future teachers regularly assess the strengths and weaknesses of their practice to really understand what needs improvement or change. Thus, professional development tools can help them do that, first with the help of other teachers that could support and guide them, but in the end with their own belief that they can actually become good professionals if they make it their long-life aspiration.

MAIN PART: The term teacher education is regularly used as an umbrella term to refer to the field that deals with the preparation and professional development of teachers, while the terms teacher development and teacher training usually refer to two different approaches within the field of teacher education.

Training involves the development of basic concepts, theories and principles and a repertoire of teaching skills, acquired through observing experienced teachers and engaging in practice-teaching in a controlled setting, e.g. through micro-teaching or peer teaching. From this perspective, good teaching is seen as the mastery of a body of basic knowledge and a set of skills or competencies.

On the other hand, development serves a longer-term goal and seeks to facilitate growth of the teacher’s general understanding of teaching, of the teaching context and of his or her performance as a teacher. It thus builds on the initial knowledge and skill base acquired through teacher training. (Richards, Jack C., 2015 Key Issues in Language Teaching).

When comparing the two dimensions of teacher education, Freeman observed (1982: 21) as cited by J.C. Richards: Training deals with building specific teaching skills: how to sequence a lesson or how to teach a dialogue, for instance. Development, on the other hand, focuses on the individual teacher – on the processes of reflection, examination, and change which can lead to doing a better job and to personal growth and professional growth. These two concepts assume different views of teaching and the teacher. Training assumes that teaching is a finite skill, one which can be acquired and mastered. The teacher then learns to teach in the same way s/he learned to tie shoes or to ride a bicycle. Development assumes that teaching is a constantly evolving process of growth and change. It is an expansion of skills and understanding, one in which the teacher is responsible for the process in much the same way students are for learning a language.

Some ways that can be introduced to motivate pre-service teachers to start thinking on their development before they obtain their major, should be considered taking as a starting point these two different approaches within the field of teacher education.

Since the early eighties a number of approaches to teacher development have been proposed and implemented. These approaches include among others, a form of inquiry intended to help teachers improve their practice: reflective teaching.

Reflection in teaching refers to teachers subjecting their beliefs and practices of teaching to critical analysis. According to Richards (1992) in every lesson and in every classroom, events occur which the teacher can use to develop a deeper understanding of teaching; that is why
there is a close relation between reflection and development.

Reflective approaches to teacher development start from the assumption that teachers, rather than methods make a difference; that teachers are engaged in a complex process of planning, decision making, hypothesizing, testing, experimentation and reflection; that these processes are often personal and situation-specific; and that they should become the focus of teacher education and teacher professional development.

In fact, several renowned researchers (Pennington, 1992; Wallace, 1998; Farrell, 1998; Barlett, 1990; Richards and Lockhart, 1994) coincide with Richards (1992), who sees reflection as a key component of teacher development. Pennington (1992), for instance views it as the input and output for development.

In defining reflective teaching, different terms have been used. The definitions move, as Farrell (1998) explains in his article “Reflective Teaching”, from looking just at the behavioral aspects of teaching to the knowledge and beliefs these acts are based on.

Several different approaches are available to engage teachers in critical reflection. According to Barlett (1990) this is a three-part process that involves:

1. **The event itself**: While the focus of critical reflection is usually the students’ own learning or teaching, reflection can also be stimulated by observation of another person’s teaching; hence, both peer observation and team teaching can also be employed.

2. **Recollection of the event**: To produce an account of what happened.

3. **Review and response to the event**: The teacher reviews and questions the event. The goal is to process it at a deeper level.

Reflection can help beginning and experienced teachers alike, but of course they operate at different levels of reflection. Ross, (1989) identifies three levels of complexity in the reflection process:

1. **Describing a teacher’s practice with little detailed analysis and little insight into the reasons behind teacher or students’ behaviors**;

2. **Providing a cogent critique of a practice from one perspective but failing to consider multiple factors**;

3. **Analyzing teaching and learning from multiple perspectives and recognizing that teachers’ actions have a pervasive impact beyond the moment of instruction**.

Getting to the third stage should be the goal of any course following a reflective model. Nevertheless, in the specific case of our student teachers, since they are normally guided by a mentor and a university professor from campus, their aim when assisting them should be to give them preparation on this area, so that by the time they finish studies they would be in a better position to reach the third phase. In fact, because of student teachers’ lack of teaching experience, mentors and university teachers may decide to concentrate mainly on the first two levels.

In her article *Empowering Teachers through Professional Development*, Alice Murray, 2010, refers to the number of definitions given for reflective teaching. She explains that some describe individual practices while others explain what a group of like-minded teachers could do.

Murray then states that no approach to reflective teaching is superior to another. She also sees reflective practice as a fundamental part of **continuing professional development** (a process of learning and development which happens after completion of formal teacher training. The aims are: to develop skills and knowledge; to stay up to date; to do the job more effectively).

**Working towards professional development:**

Some ways that can be introduced to motivate pre-service teachers to start thinking on their development before they obtain their major, should be considered taking as a starting point the strategies and techniques suggested by the bibliography on this area.

Richards, 2015, offers some ideas about several strategies that could be used to initiate **personal professional development** and which could be suggested to be included smoothly in Cuban pre-service teachers’ programs. The most important
key points about the strategies that Richards suggests are explained below:

✓ Find out how you teach (self-awareness of one’s own teaching style and one’s own strengths and limitations as a teacher).
✓ Expand your understanding of language teaching (Language teaching is a field that is constantly revising its knowledge base, and while it is impossible (and unnecessary) to keep up to date with every new issue or development, it is important to be well informed about issues of direct relevance to your teaching situation. This can better equip you for your work, give you greater confidence in your work and prepare you for new responsibilities).
✓ Expand your teaching skills (Teach classes of different levels, experiment, teach different kinds of classes, observe other teachers’ classes, team-teach with another teacher, attend a workshop, etc.).
✓ Review and reflect on your own teaching (Keep a journal, write narratives).
✓ Collaborate with other teachers (One of the greatest resources a school has is the teachers who work there. In any school there are teachers with varied experience, knowledge and skills, and both the school as well as the teachers who work there can benefit by learning from each other and collaborating in different ways. The school then becomes a learning community, and its members constitute a community of practice. It involves a group of people who have common interests and who relate and interact to achieve shared goals and it focuses on exploring and resolving issues related to the workplace practices that members of the community take part in).
✓ Arrange for peer observation (Observation provides an opportunity for a teacher to see how someone else deals with a lesson and copes with common issues and problems in teaching…Observing another teacher can also trigger reflections about one’s own teaching. For the teacher being observed, the observer can provide an “objective” view of the lesson and can collect information about the lesson that the teacher who is teaching may not be able to collect otherwise).
✓ Document your own teaching (Many teachers find it useful to collect information that gives a picture of how they approach teaching and that also provides a record of different aspects of their work. Such a record serves to describe and document the teacher’s performance; it can facilitate professional development; and it can provide a basis for reflection and review. A teaching portfolio is a useful way of assembling and using this kind of information).
✓ Research your own classes (Research in this context simply means collecting information to explore and better understand an issue. Lessons are complex events: many things happen during a lesson or a course. Some of the issues that arise may prompt questions such as, “Why did this activity prove to be too difficult?” “Why did my learners not appear to learn anything from this task?” “How can I make my classes more interesting?” “How can I help my learners learn to use authentic language?” “Why did this course not develop the way I had planned?” By examining questions like these more closely, it is sometimes possible to learn valuable information that can enhance understanding or that may trigger changes in the teaching strategies you make use of).

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) offers some tools and techniques which are similar and in line with the strategies proposed by Richards, 2015. They can be incorporated regularly in student teachers working practice since they help to engage them in their development in a more personal and professional way. These tools have proven to be effective for both experienced and novice teachers, and though these are similar in content to the strategies described by J. C. Richards, CPD tools help to reinforce the idea of what to do and how to use them in order to help teachers embark on the road of development. The suggested tools and techniques are the following:

✓ Reading ELT publications /exploring the internet (With the use of the internet, not only can we share opinions and views, but also search important websites and join the wide world teaching community).
Observation (For the last few years, teachers have come to understand that seeing one’s actions through someone else’s eyes is an indispensable tool for improving our practice as well as for our professional growth).

Team teaching (Team teaching should not be seen as “two or more teachers sharing a class for the sake of working together”. Teaching classes with colleagues or with a mentor will help explore issues, experiment with new ideas and plan changes and improvements).

Classroom action research (A discovery process where teachers explore aspects of classroom teaching or learning, solve problems or ask questions about everyday work. It can be done alone or with a colleague or group of colleagues. The aim is to improve or enhance your teaching and/or your students’ learning by gathering information, discussing, analyzing, reflecting and implementing changes; Research should be seen as the driving force for teachers’ professional development and should be integrated to pedagogy as a continuous endeavor).

Feedback (Using questionnaires, interviews, etc. to ask learners for opinions about the lessons, the materials and the methodology used will help to find ideas on what should be included, changed or improved; Engaging learners in discussions about teaching and learning is a very valuable tool to reflect on our practice).

Self-evaluation (Looking back at our teaching, reviewing lessons taught, analyzing what goes well and what does not in a reflective manner, will help set the goals for improvement in our daily practice).

Development diary (It is the place where you record and reflect, explore and review your experiences, interests and challenges).

Case study (It is done when you do some research with one of your learners, or a group of your learners. You investigate their learning experiences to find out how to help them learn better).

Most of these strategies and/or tools can be used while student teachers are still doing their practicum. Those which seem more advanced or difficult to employ could be included as topics to be discussed and analyzed in some of their Foreign Language Teaching Methodology lessons, thus student teachers become aware of their use and get a better preparation to try them out in their teaching practice experience and later as graduate teachers. By doing this, they are being helped to get a clear idea of what can be done towards long-life professional development.

Some of the suggested strategies and tools have been proven to be useful. Nevertheless, when we choose to include them in our teacher education program, they should not be implemented randomly. Some of them need the complement of others, as for example, when doing research. Deciding when and how to use these strategies and tools with our pre-service teachers will depend on the purpose and the stage the student teachers are going through. As beginning teachers still under a teacher education program, they will need support and guidance to actually do an effective use of these tools and/or strategies. Mentors and university teachers have the responsibility of preparing their mentees for them to really understand the impact these strategies will have on their professional development. The role of mentors and university teachers is crucial in this respect.

Conclusions:

Professional development is an ongoing process, one that evolves as we ask future teachers to assess and reexamine their teaching beliefs and practices. This process should be flexible, and will require from future teachers an attitude towards experimenting to solve the problems in the context of their practicum. It will also require from them to be reflective, cooperative and ready to face challenges.

What is relevant in this stage of their preparation as future teachers is that by using a developmental perspective, they will be able to discover the many options they have for directing their own learning about teaching. As a consequence, they will start to think on their professional growth with the motivation to become the best professionals they can possibly be. Helping them to find something that motivates them will help to pursue professional development to get them ready to continue their
growth once they start their careers as language teachers.

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