Action Research Topics and Questions in a Foreign Languages Teaching Practicum in Colombia*1

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Introduction: Preservice teachers identify topics and formulate research questions in action research under the guidance of advisors in the teaching practicum of an undergraduate foreign languages teaching program in Colombia. **Objective:** To examine preservice teachers' and advisors' beliefs about useful methodological strategies to identify the topics and formulate the research questions, and the roles they assumed. **Method:** In this case study, structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used with the participants. **Results:** This study shows that journal writing, collaborative dialogue, exploring and expanding one's theoretical base, delimiting topics, and demonstrating work were useful strategies. Though preservice teachers took ownership of choosing topics and formulating questions, some shared roles led advisors to participate more actively in this process. **Conclusions:** The methodological process used to identify the topics and formulate the research questions is associated with a reflective professional development endeavour with individual and group reflection.

Key words: Action research, undergraduate foreign language teacher training, research topics, research questions, teaching practicum, foreign language teaching methodological strategies

Introducción: los maestros en formación de un programa de pregrado en enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en Colombia, identifican temas y formulan preguntas de investigación en investigación-acción, guiados por los asesores en la práctica docente. **Objetivo:** examinar tanto las creencias de los maestros en formación y las de los asesores acerca de las estrategias metodológicas útiles para identificar los temas y formular las preguntas de investigación, como los roles que éstos asumen. **Método:** en este estudio de caso se utilizaron cuestionarios estructurados y entrevistas semiestructuradas con los participantes. **Resultados:** este estudio muestra que la escritura en un diario, el diálogo colaborativo, la exploración y la expansión de bases teóricas, la delimitación de los temas y el compartir el trabajo de investigación fueron estrategias útiles. Aunque los maestros en formación se hicieron cargo de escoger los temas y formular las preguntas, algunos roles compartidos llevaron a una participación más activa de los asesores en este proceso. **Conclusiones:**

el proceso metodológico utilizado para identificar los temas y formular las preguntas está asociado con el desarrollo profesional reflexivo que combina reflexión individual y reflexión grupal.

Palabras clave: investigación-acción, formación de maestros en idiomas extranjeros, temas de investigación, preguntas de investigación, práctica docente, estrategias metodológicas en la enseñanza de idiomas extranjeros

Introduction: Les étudiants d'un programme de licence en didactique des langues étrangères en Colombie, guidés par les conseillers pédagogiques de la période de mise en pratique, identifient des thématiques et formulent des questions de recherche. **Objectif:** Examiner les croyances des futurs enseignants et des conseillers pédagogiques concernant les stratégies méthodologiques utiles à l'identification des thématiques et à la formulation des questions de recherche, mais aussi à l'identification des rôles assumés par les participants. **Méthode:** Dans cette étude de cas, des questionnaires structurés et des entretiens semi-structurés ont fourni des perceptions à propos des stratégies méthodologiques utiles et des rôles que les participants ont assumés. **Résultats:** Cette étude montre que l'écriture d'un journal de bord, le dialogue collaboratif, l'exploration et l'enrichissement des connaissances théoriques, la délimitation des thématiques et le partage des travaux ont été des stratégies utiles. Bien que les futurs enseignants aient choisi la thématique et formulé eux-mêmes les questions de leur projet de recherche action, le partage de certains rôles a permis une participation plus active au processus de la part des conseillers pédagogiques. **Conclusions:** Le processus méthodologique utilisé pour identifier les thématiques et formuler les questions est lié au développement professionnel réflexif, qui combine réflexion individuelle et réflexion de groupe.

Mots-clés: Recherche-action, formation d'enseignants en langues étrangères, thématiques de recherche, questions de recherche, didactique de la pratique enseignante, stratégies méthodologiques de l'enseignement de langues étrangères

1. Introduction

Action research is a requirement of the student teaching practicum in the undergraduate Foreign Languages Teacher Education Program (English, French) at the School of Languages, Universidad de Antioquia, in Colombia. This research methodology is considered to enhance preservice teachers'[2] (PSTs') professional development as they engage in self-reflective enquiry to better understand their classroom practices and make improvements in their actions (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, reported in Burns, 1999). Notwithstanding, Larabee (2003) recognizes that learning how to teach and research at the same time is difficult for inexperienced teachers. Moreover, action research has a progression of stages (Selener, 1997),

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2   The term preservice teachers (PSTs) refers to students in our foreign languages teacher education program who are doing student teaching and classroom action research for the first time. During this case study, the majority of the PSTs were also working as EFL teachers with limited experience in public schools or language institutes in Medellín. This is common in our context due to the high demand for EFL teachers in the city.

and the initial stage to explore ideas for research, select a topic, and formulate a research question is challenging for new teacher-researchers (Johnson, 2005; Leedy and Ormrod, 2001; Sagor, 1992; Seliger and Shohamy, 1989). Poorly conceived research topics and questions can adversely affect the structure and development of the research and the results obtained (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989), which makes the two skills of identifying topics and formulating questions so important. Consequently, an examination of the methodology used by PSTs and their practicum advisors (PAs) for this purpose is important and would contribute towards a better understanding of how to guide these action research projects. For this reason, the present case study explored PSTs' and PAs' perceptions about which methodological strategies were useful in order to identify topics and formulate research questions, and the roles they assumed in this process.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In 1998, the Colombian government mandated the inclusion of a research component in foreign language teacher education programs at the undergraduate level. In 2000, the School of Languages introduced a modified five-year undergraduate curriculum to include this component that was approved by the Colombian National Accreditation Council (CNA) and the Ministry of Education. The curriculum is developed over two four-month semesters a year. The reform was considered a means to raise standards in the program by promoting a reflective approach towards professional development through action research (Gómez-Gómez et al., 1993).

The preparation of students in action research was based on guidelines written by Jiménez Bonilla, Luna Cortés, and Marín de Otálora (1993) for Colombian foreign language undergraduate programs. In terms of research skills in the modified curriculum, there are two important aspects. First, exercises using research activities in the lower levels of the curriculum help students to develop a range of skills before doing action research. These skills primarly include exploring topics in teaching and learning foreign languages, keeping journals, observing classes, designing and administering questionnaires, carrying out interviews, analyzing data, and reviewing the literature. In the eighth semester, students are introduced to action research theory and work collaboratively on exercises related to the first cycle of an action research project. In the final year

of the program, they begin their student teaching practicum and each student is placed in a school with a cooperating teacher[3]. During the first semester of the teaching practicum, the PSTs get to know their schools and observe their cooperating teachers' lessons. After one month, the PSTs plan and implement lessons based on the curriculum and reflect on their practice with feedback from the cooperating teachers and the PAs. The PSTs take two practicum seminars this first semester that are facilitated by the PAs. One seminar is focused on teaching and learning, and the other is about action research and requires the PSTs to identify an area to improve in their classrooms as part of an individual action research proposal. In the final semester of the teaching practicum, the PSTs implement and evaluate their projects while the cooperating teachers and the PAs observe them and provide feedback. At the same time, the PSTs take three practicum seminars related to teaching and learning, their research process, and how to write the action research report for their undergraduate thesis.

How well the students develop research skills up to the sixth semester of the curriculum has been explored in a program evaluation (McNulty Ferri and Usma Wilches, 2005). Results showed that the methodology to develop research skills in the course syllabi was not clear, and the professors' instructional approach affected this curricular innovation. This case study extends this exploration to the first semester of the student teaching practicum and focuses on the perceptions of the PSTs and the PAs about useful methodologies to identify an action research topic and formulate a research question, as well as the roles they assume during this process. In this contribution, the research inquiry was guided by 3 questions: What methodological strategies do the PSTs and the PAs perceive as useful for identifying topics and formulating research questions?, What roles do the PSTs and the PAs perceive they assume during this process?, and What are the topics of the action research projects?

3. Theoretical Framework

Where topics come from varies considerably in the literature. Concerning the choice of topics, De Tezano (1998, as cited in Quintero et al., 2002) suggests

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3   The cooperating teachers are regular teachers at the schools who provide supervision and orientation to the PSTs during their student teaching experience or practicum.

beginning with teacher-researcher perceptions. The topics may based on a personal interest, daily experience with teaching and language learning, and/or knowledge from readings in the field (Nunan, 1992; Seliger and Shohamy, 1989). Related to classroom instruction, topics can result from an unclear situation for teachers (Dadds, 1985, as cited in Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh, 1993), or a problem in teaching and learning (Johnson, 2005).

In contrast, Fletcher (2005) claims that starting with a classroom problem might be too threatening for school teachers and recommends that they begin with more general issues at the school related to development plans or a mission statement. While these problems or issues need to be related to the idea of school improvement according to Kemmis and McTaggart (1981, as cited in Hopkins, 2002), Altricher et al. (1993) add that they should be important for the teachers. Given these possibilities for identifying topics, Sagor (1992) and Johnson (2005) emphasize that a teacher's strong desire to work on improving his or her teaching and learning context is a prerequisite for this research.

Methodological strategies for identifying topics are present in the literature. Gebhard (1999), Hopkins (2002), Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), and the Madison Metropolitan School District Action Research Group (2004) provide questions and a list of starting points for teachers to complete during *an initial period of individual reflection on a teaching and learning situation (Altrichter et al., 1993). Using questions to promote reflection on teachers' practical experiences* is suggested by Altrichter et al. (1993) as a strategy for helping teachers analyze a situation. This strategy can be adapted for *group questioning and reflection* (Sagor, 1992). Teachers can engage in *reflective interviewing* (Altrichter et al., 1993) and *analytic discourse* (Sagor, 1992) in which they talk with colleagues about teaching and learning issues they are concerned about and have control over. With the former, teachers ask questions to colleagues to help them clarify their ideas and feelings about a situation or a new method to implement in class, thereby reinforcing that they are in charge of the research process. With the latter, *teachers evaluate their knowledge base* by talking about their issues and sharing relevant academic knowledge from their formal studies.

Reflective writing in teacher journals and reading them with others is another strategy for generating action research topics. Seliger and Shohamy (1989) advise teachers to write freely and review the journals to identify interesting

topics for research. Writing based on unanswered questions from class observations, teacher discussions, or readings is suggested by Nunan (1992). Nunan recommends that teachers describe teaching-learning interests and write a list of topics and problems to examine at the school or classroom level. *Rereading journals, analyzing content, and engaging in collaborative dialogue and informal discussions* about concerns is advocated by Gebhard (1999) as a strategy to help teachers identify topics and obtain more information about their issues. Altrichter et al. (1993) state that teachers can draw graphic representations of their issues in the journal to become aware of the contextual factors related to them.

Reflective learning from others is yet another strategy in which teachers listen to others who have had experience with research and reflect on it. Listening to former students as role models has been reported favourably by professors of qualitative research courses at the graduate level in the United States (Glesne and Webb, 1993).

Another strategy of *delimiting to one topic* can help teachers who have identified multiple issues (Altrichter et al., 1993; Mertler, 2006). Criteria such as usefulness, feasibility, and importance of the topics can be considered by teachers when choosing a topic (Burns, 1999; Nunan, 1989; Seliger and Shohamy, 1989). Altrichter et al. (1993) add the following criteria: a teacher's control over the issue, relevance, educational value, complexity, research knowledge and skills, and compatibility of the topic with teaching activities. Hernández Durango (personal communication, 2004), a former preservice teacher, highlights interest and commitment of the cooperating teacher as important considerations.

The formulation of the research question according to Nunan (1992) follows the determination of a general topic, and strategies to develop this skill have been suggested for teacher-researchers. A good question is open-ended and promotes exploration which makes it more than a yes-no question, according to Freeman (1998), Leedy and Ormrod (2001), and the Madison Metropolitan School District Action Research Group (2004). Also, good questions need to be focused and not broad (Van der Schee, 1998, as cited in Van der Schee and Rijborz, 2003) and have clear key concepts (Maxwell, 1996, as cited in Freeman, 1998). While Freeman (1998) suggests that teacher research questions

be written from a neutral point of view without bias, Frodden (personal communication, February 13, 2006) believes that action research questions may be worded to highlight expected improvement. Focusing the question on the learner and not the teacher has been suggested by Freeman (1998). Concerning this, Gebhard (1999:87) believes that the degree of experience of the teacher is influential and states that experienced teachers tend to ask more reflective questions about the students' learning process, while novice teachers choose more technical questions related to their practice.

Roles that PSTs and their PAs assume during the process of identifying topics and formulating questions have not been systematically studied at the undergraduate level in Colombia. However, in a graduate level foreign language teaching program at our university, Frodden (1999) identified roles assumed by research advisors while guiding students' action research projects which were: acting as critical friends, encouraging reflection and theoretical discussion about the topics, and providing guidance about the action research process. The case study will contribute towards this research.

4. Method

4.1 Type of Study

This qualitative case study enabled me to explore and understand aspects related to a phenomenon that I had only partial insight into, having had experience as a PA. Merriam (1988, as cited in Nunan, 1992) states that the case study provides an in-depth description and analysis of a phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon concerned how the PSTs' action research topics were identified, how their research questions were formulated, and the roles that they and their PAs assumed in this process. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992, as cited in Creswell, 1998), research follows a qualitative approach if the researcher plays a key role in collecting data, the research is focused on the process of a phenomenon, data analysis is inductive, and the participants' perspectives and meaning of the case are considered. Within this tradition of inquiry, the case study is included as an example of qualitative research following Lincoln and Guba's (1985, as cited in Creswell, 1998) case study structure: a problem, context, and what was learned within a limited time frame.

4.2 Participants

The participants of this study were eight practicum advisors, including myself, and 12 preservice teachers. One PST was registered in the original program that did not include development of research skills prior to the teaching practicum.

a. The practicum advisors

The PAs were five women and three men. Seven were Colombian and one was Canadian. They had between one and 10 years of teaching experience in the program, and one was a professor from the Faculty of Education. Two were permanent professors in the program, four had full-time status with renewable yearly contracts, and two were hourly teachers with renewable contracts every three months. Three held master's degrees in TESOL, TEFL, or Education from international universities, and one held a master's in Pedagogy from a national university. Three professors were candidates for a master's degree: two in TEFL from a national university, and one in TESOL from an international university. One hourly teacher had an undergraduate B.Ed. degree in teaching foreign languages from our program. Seven PAs reported several years experience carrying out action research. Four had between 1 and 2 years of experience as instructors of the research seminar in the modified program, and three had none. One PA who taught the seminar in the original program was a first-time instructor. Five PAs had received orientation to the teaching practicum and three had received none.

b. The preservice teachers

The 12 PSTs were Colombian, eight women and four men. They were between the ages of 22 and 42, with a median age of 26. Five had undergraduate degrees in unrelated fields from local universities or technical colleges. Nine were employed as EFL teachers with full-time, part-time, or hourly positions during this study. Three taught in high schools, two in primary schools, three in private language institutions, and one gave private classes. A few of these PSTs worked at our university as EFL teachers in a continuing education program for children and adolescents, one as a teaching assistant in our program and another as a full-time administrative assistant. Another PST worked in a program teaching

Spanish to foreigners. Concerning research experience, most PSTs reported having been exposed to qualitative research, specifically action research in the program. Two reported that their experience was limited to doing a literature review and using techniques to gather data. Two PSTs were members of the Action Research and Evaluation Research Group in foreign languages (GIAE) at the School of Languages, although they were not engaged in research at the time of this study. Eight PSTs attended an orientation session to the practicum, and most reported having received information about the beginning stages of action research.

Ten PSTs had their practicum placements in English classes in public high schools: three in grades 6 and 7, one in grades 8 and 9, and two in 10. Most of them had 3 periods of English a week; one had a 3-hour class. Most PSTs taught large classes with students numbering between 10 and 48, with a mean of 41. Another PST was assigned to a grade 4 EFL class in a public primary school with 27 students who studied English 4 times a week. The other PST carried out her practicum in a French class at a private language institute with 22 high school graduates who attended a 3-hour class weekly.

4.3 Data Sources and Analysis

Data were collected from two sources: a structured questionnaire that I designed and a 45-minute semi-structured interview. Twelve PSTs and eight PAs completed a questionnaire which had two sections: a demographic section to get background information from the participants, and a perceptions section with an attitude and rating scale of 82 items divided into 4 themes: a) action research in an undergraduate program and the practicum; b) seminar methodology to identify action research topics and formulate questions; c) roles for PAs and PSTs during this process; and d) the action research topics and questions.

I developed the items in the first theme based on concerns that former PSTs and PAs have raised in our program which related to the following: action research in preservice teacher education; identification with the role of teacher-researcher; preparation with the skills of picking a topic, and coming up with a research question; personal interest in the topic and question; scope of the topic and question; and duration of the seminar for these two skills. The items in the second theme were related to the methodological

strategies proposed by the scholars in my literature review. The third theme included items resulting from: an analysis of the first-semester practicum syllabi; findings of a research study in Colombia related to the role of the university advisor in facilitating graduate students' action research projects (Frodden, 1999); and from roles that I had assumed in my experience. For the second and third theme, an "other" response category was provided as recommended by Genesee and Upshur (1996).

When the questionnaires were returned and analyzed, the interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience. Eleven PSTs were interviewed in two groups of four and one of three.[4] Five PAs were interviewed individually and 2 together at their request. Participants received a guided interview template with questions about the research inquiry before the interview date. These questions explored their perceptions about the following: promotion of action research in the teaching practicum; their level of satisfaction with the two skills; the methodological strategies to develop the two skills; the roles they assumed and if these influenced the choice of topics and questions; and process improvement. Eight interviews were conducted in English, and one in Spanish. I took detailed notes during the interviews which were tape-recorded with permission and transcribed.

The data from both instruments were analyzed in the following way. The questionnaire was analyzed by recording descriptive statistics on a summary sheet. The interview data were analyzed inductively (Burns, 1999; Patton, 1990). Initially, I read the interview transcriptions a few times, underlined important and interesting information related to the themes of my research questions, and assigned codes to this information. I wrote the codes on small slips of paper which I laid out in order to identify patterns. These patterns were organized into categories that were based on the interview questions. This enabled me to compare and contrast data from the questionnaires and interviews. This analysis was shared with my master's thesis advisor, who is an experienced professor in this topic, and subsequently with the participants in order to find out if they agreed with my interpretations. One PST from the

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4   One PST dropped out of the case study after having cancelled the practicum due to health
    reasons.

original program agreed with the findings but thought that not all her experience was reported.

5. Findings

In this section, I present participants' attitudes towards their action research topics and questions, 5 useful methodological strategies with a few difficulties encountered, 10 shared roles, and the seminar methodology to identify the topics and formulate the research questions.

5.1 Attitudes Towards the Action Research Topics

Many of the PSTs' projects related to topic areas for action research proposed by Mertler (2006) and Richards and Lockhart (1994). The PSTs' topic areas were related to teaching methods, teaching techniques, syllabi, and classroom management, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. PSTs' Action Research Topic Areas
Task-based learning to improve students' participation and proficiency in English
Meeting ELLs' needs through collaborative learning
Developing FLLs' reading strategies for a global understanding of authentic texts
Developing students' reading comprehension in English with the teacher reading aloud
Increasing ELLs' oral production with creative thinking activities
Supporting fourth grade ELLs' writing process through planning thematic units
Increasing ELLs' motivation and participation with communicative game-like activities
Motivating ELLs to participate in class with instruction in English
Developing pro-social behaviours in ELLs with a framework of peace education
Keeping EFL students, including fast learners, engaged and interested in class

All participants thought that the topics were interesting and relevant ("strongly agree" and "agree" on the scale). One PA reported, "Students usually come out with very interesting topics, about what they have been observing." However, the PST whose project was directed towards keeping all students, including

the fast learners, engaged in class, thought that his topic was not as important as the others: "It is hard to not compare with others. Mine is very simple. It's something that we do every day. It has been worked on before... My topic is... not new." One PA believed that the topics can be related to common school issues: "The topics that they have... for example, I'm not expecting something like, very out of the ordinary, because our schools usually have the same problems... topics are very, very similar."

More PAs than PSTs (5, 1) disagreed with the statement that the research questions formulated were concrete and not broad. One PA commented: "There are students who want to do many things. If one looks at the questions, sometimes they are impossible to study in the time allocated for the action research project. So, I think that the topics are broad, the questions too."

5.2 Useful Methodological Strategies

The most useful strategy ("very useful" or "useful" on the scale), despite difficulties reported, was journal writing combined with collaborative dialogue. Four other strategies deemed very useful were evaluating and expanding one's knowledge base of the topic, delimiting topics with criteria, and demonstrating work on activities.

a. The journal

One PA thought that including class observations and writing comments in the journal served both research skills: "I wouldn't identify two different methodologies; one for the topic and the other for the question, because everything is very related." As the instructor for both seminars Practicum I and Integrated Seminar I she used the journal to promote reflection and share her perspective:

> I was aware of everything that was happening by reading the journals, the observations that they did. I insist a lot in observation, not only with the objective being the teaching that they are going to do or the students' learning, but also focusing on the research project. The comments I write in the journal are related to teaching as well as a possible future research question, and how I see this and the other.

The journal became a tool in which the PSTs could identify topics that were context-situated, had learning potential, and were related to their personal interests. This same PA believed that: "The problem or topic comes from the context, not the preservice teachers' personal interests... I don't put my interests or the topic that I like first, over what really happens in the classroom." Connecting the context to personal interests became an understanding for one PST: "When I was trying to find a topic, Dr. Susan Noffke came here, and I had a dilemma... Am I supposed to found [sic] a topic on my own interests, needs, the context, or me as a learner?...She told me that, 'Yes you are a learner, and part of the context, so mix them'."

Another PST recalled having written about personal interests prior to class observations and then, having matched those to the context. Similarly, another PST reported having written about personal interests but related to previous teaching experience. Two PAs also acknowledged this: "She immediately started to think on a topic of her interest... maybe because last year she had the opportunity to start teaching... ideas came to her easily."; "You would focus on certain things and not on others because of your experiences and what you believe in teaching. And from there, I know that they come to some ideas... for choosing the topic." In addition, another PST commented that personal questions based on a previous teaching experience which could be connected to her class observations helped with topic identification. An exploration of personal beliefs about foreign language instruction and the local context was also reported by a few advisors: "I begin exploring first... the teaching principles that each students has, their beliefs, and a critical look at those principles and those that they are observing in their contexts."; "I begin exploring teachers' beliefs... what they think and why."

b. The journal and collaborative dialogue

Collaborative dialogue about journal content during individual advisory sessions or the group seminars was effective for the participants. Two PAs conceptualized the seminar as a place for dialoguing: "The seminar is where you are going to share, engage in dialogue, and look at what is happening"; "I've been trying to have the process with students, a lot of sharing, a lot of comments, a lot of listening to the other and commenting on what the others are saying... so we all share and we try to understand."

This dialogue, when accompanied with questions, enabled PSTs to clarify their ideas, get support and other perspectives, identify other issues, and ensure their understanding of the topic. One PST confirmed: "We read the diary, our observations, reflections and opinions... our advisor asks us questions to clarify our ideas and give support." Other PSTs reported gaining insight with other perspectives: "We shared our observations, read our reflections... the advisor and classmates told me ideas and I could generate ideas on what they said"; "In your diary, you can miss something... the other sees... both reading and shared reading... the advisor reads everything and highlights, asks questions for further explanation of things that aren't clear... he identifies other aspects"; "My advisor's point of view was very important... he asked me to explain, to support what I am saying, to simplify... that helped me to find my topic... I was ignoring ideas, recurring issues." One PA emphasized dialogue with questions to check the coherence of the PSTs' discourse: "Research is an exploration of discourse somehow. It's to be discussing about something that has happened, about a phenomenon, about a situation." This PA used questions such as: "How can you support this? and Where are you getting your information from?" These questions confronted the PSTs' words and actions and their relationships with the cooperating teachers and students.

Notwithstanding these positive perceptions, the participants identified four issues related to the journal, and a fifth issue concerning group dialogue. The first issue was related to the PAs' knowledge of the context and journal content. One PST thought the PAs needed to know the schools better: "Maybe an advisor could be more helpful in that case, if he knows more of the context." Another PST believed that the PAs needed to read the journal regularly: "I expected our advisor to read all the journals. In our case, he read two or three entries during the whole semester." The second issue was a lack of sufficient description and reflection. One PA commented that: "The journals are not well written, without sufficient description, and sometimes it is very complicated for them to determine a research question or the topic based on the observations." One PST recognized this concern and a lack of reflection: "'Why don't you go deeper? Why didn't the learner answer?'... It was one of the aspects to improve. We were very descriptive. My advisor wanted us to reflect more. She wanted to help us with the reflection."

The third issue was related to observing another teacher and unstructured class observations. A few PSTs questioned the former: "I think that would be a contradiction, start observing another teacher, because you have to focus on your own teaching, so what about the other observations you did at the beginning"; "In my case, I think I wasted my time observing the cooperating teacher... I found the topic when I talked to students, when I started teaching, when I started reading the program, when I talked to the coordinator of the program." However, one PST believed that observing another teacher and one's own practice was helpful: "In my case, I found it useful to observe my cooperating teacher teaching, because I found two big topics while observing him, and while observing me [sic]." This PST perceived self-observations as challenging: "It is easier to observe someone, but it is not easy to teach and observe yourself and then be critical and remember everything, and take notes." One PST who believed the seminar methodology as not useful disliked having to write many observations: "At the beginning, I had my research question after two observations. 'Why can't we formulate the research question at that time?'... keep the observations in mind [sic], not on paper."

Concerning unstructured observations, a few PSTs felt that they lacked guidance: "Observe, What?, You are like lost, so I wrote everything."; "At least have a set of key factors or concepts to have when you are observing. Sometimes you just write down things, everything you see, just everything." One PST believed that observations focused on theory were more helpful: "We read articles and focused our observations on the article's topic, the teacher's principles... with the text, we could see the situation from a different focus... there were many windows to identify the main patterns."

The fourth issue reported by a few PSTs was analyzing the journal. One PST commented: "I also believe that in the process of identifying the topic and research question... you need to analyze the diary, so I believe that something that is missing here is how to analyze those events and those things that we observe... it has been very difficult for me to analyze those things and to know how." Another PST thought that more time to analyze the journal was required: "We need more time to analyze and to collect more data to identify the problem in a better way... more time to go beyond, see other things, and get other perspectives."

The fifth issue related to collaborative dialogue among PSTs at the same school with different topics. One PA perceived that the situation could compromise discussion: "Because it is their topic, sometimes they having difficulty sharing their question, their topic, because they think that it is not so relevant for the other... if I am interested in pronunciation, am I going to have a discussion about culture with another?" Yet, this PA recognized that common contextual knowledge was a starting point for dialogue: "What happens with French is something very particular... all preservice teachers are in the same institution, using the same methodology, following the same textbook; in other words, they can share a lot because their context is very similar, although one classroom is different to another."

c. Evaluating and expanding one's knowledge

These two strategies were discussing theory from previous courses in the program, and reading the literature about the topic. Evaluating previous knowledge about a topic was commented on by two PSTs: "We brainstormed ideas about the topics based on our observations and what you know about the topic"; "That topic called my attention since I read about it in previous courses of the program." One PA, likewise, thought this strategy was useful with PSTs: "When you talk to them... their beliefs, their ideas, their concepts, the information that they have collected from the other courses in the Licensure Program." Another PST reported that her choice of topic was directly related to a personal interest of hers with the principles of thematic teaching she had learned in one of the Methods courses in the undergraduate program.

A few PSTs and PAs commented that reading theory was useful for both research skills. They believed it helped the PSTs to identify and expand their knowledge about the topics, and to redirect and reshape the research questions. One PA and two PSTs stated: "We read the literature and this helped to find the starting point."; "It is good to have the preliminary question before reading the literature, then you can change it."; "Reading the literature and finding concepts helps to revise the question... I found one research question and I had to restate it. I changed a few details... tried to make it sound better in French, including new concepts... I didn't know what to call it." One PA thought that her PST was able to revise the question based on guidelines in theory: "I also gave her the tips Dr. Susan Noffke had share with the research group last year to formulate

the research questions. I asked her to formulate it and then revise it with Dr. Noffke's suggestions to see if it accomplished all those requirements." Another PA stated that putting theory read into practice was useful: "With this process of identifying a topic and then a research question, one process is related to... try to make that literature very practical... this is all done based on the interests and ideas and beliefs they have about what they have been observing. There is a lot of... reading and practicing... a lot of theory and examples."

d. Delimiting topics

A number of PAs recognized that they thought it was important delimit the PSTs' topics: "Identifying the problem... they want to do many things... They identify topics, many topics, and they come with lots of ideas... to work with, but then when they need to [sic] specific, that's when the problem comes."; "What really interests me is that the topic, whatever it is, is feasible... If it is really broad, I point out the time and the conditions for the project."; "I realized that the topic was still too broad... so I asked my student to delimit the topic and then polish the question, then I revised it."; "Sometimes we dream too much... the other preservice teachers help me to delimit too... question the preservice teacher what has been done about it, if they believe that they will find something about it, as to how feasible the work will be with the topic." Also, one PST commented on this issue: "I had a lot of ideas, questions. I went to my advisor to narrow down the focus... My advisor helped me to understand that it was a very big topic to develop in a short time. I had to change the question."

e. Demonstrating work

The strategy of demonstrating work was related to analyzing data in the journal and writing the research question. One PA commented: "We began analyzing the journals right away, inductive analysis... I helped with analyzing data and they could do this independently after, and they found their starting point." Concerning the research question, one PST stated: "The research question, we had many sessions, one time we wrote the research question on the board, discussed them, the wording, the verbs, modified them. This was very helpful, excellent, not just the advisor, but the whole group." One PA mentioned that she showed how to come up with the research question using a formula: "I decided I had to do it simple, I remembered the structure: how A affects B, and what A and B were."

5.3 Roles for the PSTs and PAs[5]

Most participants agreed that the role of the PST was to choose the topic and to write the question (6 PAs, 10 PSTs) with the PA showing them how. A number of PSTs stated that they themselves had identified their topics and formulated their research questions: "We defined the topics."; "Finally, I could work on what I wanted and my students."; "Our task is to do the research question."; "I defined my question."; "I formulated that question."; "I found one research question." Likewise, more than half of them believed that the role of the PST was to monitor their own teaching practice (5 PAs, 9 PSTs) and to use the feedback from the advisor and/or cooperating teacher to identify the topic and question (5 PAs, 12 PSTs). A number of PAs expressed that their role was not to influence directly the PSTs' choice of topics or research questions, but to promote autonomy and ownership of this research process. One PA commented,

> I try not to influence, with my knowledge, my personal interests, the identification of the topic and much less, the formulation of the research question... to tell the preservice teacher the topic to research, the type of question to formulate, is to take away the preservice teacher's responsibility. It doesn't matter that there are problems with the topic or question, because this is to be expected in undergraduate formation.

One PST acknowledged this: "We all had our topic and idea for the question, and our advisor was very supportive, accepted, open-minded." Another PA agreed: "The question has to be connected to the topic, and since I was not the one who chose the topic, I was not the right person to define the question." and pointed out that their role was to guide the PSTs through this process: "It is my student's research project... so what I had to do was to help her go through the research process."

Ten shared roles became apparent during this process (Table 2); four were related to identifying and understanding the topics, and six were associated with giving feedback on the topic.

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5   These are partial findings reported from my master's degree research thesis from Universidad de Caldas, Manizales, Colombia. Only those roles related to identifying and topics and research questions are presented in this article.

Table 2. Shared Roles for the PSTs and the PAs	
to take the initiative to identify the topic	6 PAs, 10 PSTs
to analyze the teacher journal	7 PAs, 9 PSTs
to engage in dialogue with others	5 PAs, 9 PSTs
to draw on theoretical beliefs about teaching and learning	5 PAs, 10 PSTs
to take a critical stance	6 PAs, 9 PSTs
to reflect on the quality of the research question	5 PAs, 10 PSTs
to redirect the topic or question	5 PAs, 8 PSTs
to discuss and critique other PSTs' action research reports	7 PAs, 11 PSTs
to act as a critical friend by listening to and questioning the other's research process	5 PAs, 10 PSTs
to take the initiative to discuss problems or difficulties with this process	8 PAs, 10 PSTs

A few comments from the PSTs were: "Our advisor's help is really helpful, useful."; "It was difficult at the beginning, but little by little, I received help from my advisor and overcame those difficulties."

5.4 Attitudes Towards Seminar Methodology

All but one participant thought that the seminar methodology was useful. More PAs agreed with respect to the topics (8, one "strongly" on the scale) than the research questions (6). Eleven PSTs agreed (7 "strongly") with respect to both research skills. Despite these perceptions, participants thought that these skills were difficult. Seven PAs and 10 PSTs disagreed (2 "strongly") that it was easy to identify a topic, and 8 PAs disagreed (1 "strongly") and 11 PSTs (3 "strongly") that formulating a research question was easy. Only 1 PST agreed for both questions. While more than half of the PAs (5/8) believed that they were prepared to guide the PSTs to identify topics and formulate research questions having done action research, more than half of them (6/8) thought that they did not have sufficient coaching skills, even though all the PSTs thought they did.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The types of the PSTs' topics indicate projects with a practical and technical orientation to action research, many of which are focused on issues of classroom

teaching. Action research that is practical in nature (Holly, 1994, as cited in Amal, Rincón, and Latorre, 1994) and that allows a teacher to choose the topic of inquiry and control its processes with the support of an outsider or critical friend is representative of our experience in the first semester of the teaching practicum. Feldman and Atkin (1995) refer to the role of outsiders or facilitators of other teachers' action research projects as one in which they do not influence the research focus. Likewise, Zeichner and Gore (1995:21) acknowledge the importance of maintaining "students' ownership of their research process" and minimizing "overdirecting students' choice of topics" so that the research inquiry can respond to the "classroom events and conditions" that PSTs encounter. In this study, the topics were derived from the PSTs' language teaching and concerns and not from outside educational professionals or disciplines.

The methodological process with which PSTs identified their topics and formulated their research questions is associated with a reflective professional development endeavour discussed by Crookes (2003) in the context of a graduate level teaching practicum. Teachers begin with an "intrapersonal means of reflection" by writing about personal interests, prior experiences and principles related to teaching and learning foreign languages, observing another teacher's class as well as their own, and their reflections in a teacher journal. Zeichner and Gore (1995:22) report that some of these tasks assisted their students in an undergraduate teacher education practicum to "understand and improve their situation and their practice." Teachers who focus on their own practice, according to Feldman and Atkin (1995:128), somehow become "the 'subjects' of their own research" which facilitates self-development. Although these projects were "individualistic and technical" similar to Zeichner and Gore's experience, interaction among the PSTs and the PAs during the seminar appeared to resemble what Crookes (2003) coins a teacher development group, which broadened the focus of these projects.

The seminar group discussions moved teachers towards a more "interpersonal means of reflection" (Crookes, 2003:22), which in this study was effective when combined with a critical dialogic questioning of the content in the teacher journal. Battagali (1995:75) places importance on asking questions about one's practice and the students' learning process, and changing one's viewpoint by listening to others. Gaining insight from other perspectives (Crookes, 2003), especially those of the students and teachers at the school, can give teachers

a better understanding of the topics. The notion of teachers meeting regularly in a professional community (Feldman and Atkin, 1995) in order to share and discuss teaching and learning experiences, concerns, and readings, and to receive and give feedback, is instrumental for professional development (Crookes, 2003). According to Stevenson, Noffke, Flores, and Granger (1995:61), these group sessions allow teachers "to share and critique" their "action research experiences." These strategies in action research can help PSTs to examine their teaching practices and classroom situations with the goal of making changes for improvement, and to develop professionally (Johnson, 2005).

The process in which the topics were identified appears to be heuristic or inductive and descriptive (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989:47) with an emphasis on unstructured class observations, with "no preconceived or *deductive* notion" of what to observe. Zeichner and Gore (1995) state that open class observations can help teachers to focus on broader social and cultural aspects of the schools. Given that Schuyler and Sitterley (1995:57) question whether action research "leads naturally towards a focus on contexts", PAs who are familiar with and interested in the school context can guide the PSTs in this direction. Zeichner and Gore (1995) further suggest that reading key school documents can be a starting point for observations and discussions. For teachers observing other teachers, Wajnryb (1992) proposes structured observation as a means to limit the focus of what teachers observe and make it easier for teachers to collect, analyze, and interpret data, which helps them to discuss and reflect on teaching and learning practices. In this study, it is apparent that many of the topics and questions were linked to "something observed" in a personal teaching and learning experience which led "to further questioning" and dialogue, and the research focus (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989:46-47).

In this study, the use of class observations, journal writing, and critical dialogic questioning helped the PSTs to identify the topics and questions for their action research projects. Notwithstanding, there was an interplay of other strategies perceived to be useful by participants which included exploring personal interests, principles, and experiences related to teaching and learning foreign languages and theoretical knowledge, and the narrowing down of the topics and demonstrating work during this process. While the PSTs were responsible for choosing the topics and the research questions, the PAs became active facilitators and provided guidance and support in this process.

Carrying out this case study has been an enriching experience for me. It has enabled me to become more aware of the methodological strategies that we, the participants, use, and the roles we adopt and how these are shared. It has also motivated me to continue reflecting on how university advisors can interact with their student teachers in an effective way. Sharing this report with others will hopefully raise awareness of the need for continued discussion of the methodologies used during this preliminary stage of action research. Noffke (1995:7, as cited in Noffke and Stevenson, 1995) concludes that "Action research must not be seen as only a staff development strategy; it must also serve as a means to make public the understandings of practitioners and the contexts in which they work." While I have learned a great deal about our practice, future study of this topic can provide greater insight into our actions promoting educational action research.

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