

Evaluating Research Skills Development in a Colombian Undergraduate Foreign Language Teaching Program* 1

Espec. Maria McNulty Ferri**

Lic. Jaime Usma Wilches***

The implementation of a research component in an undergraduate foreign language teaching program directed towards preservice development is evaluated in this research. Results show that factors such as course syllabi, professors' methodology, and administration leadership affect this curricular innovation. Despite difficulties, research skill development can be improved with the necessary training, support, and time for professors' understanding and collaboration.

Keywords: program evaluation, undergraduate foreign language teaching program, curricular innovation, developing research skills, research skills and methodology, preservice teacher education.

La implementación del componente investigativo de un programa de pregrado de lenguas extranjeras es evaluada en esta investigación. Los resultados muestran que factores como el programa del curso, la metodología del profesor, y el liderazgo de la administración afectan esta innovación curricular. A pesar de las dificultades, el desarrollo de habilidades investigativas en este programa puede ser mejorado brindando el entrenamiento, el apoyo y el tiempo necesario que garanticen una efectiva comprensión y apoyo mutuo de parte de los profesores encargados de la implementación del nuevo plan de estudios.

Palabras clave: evaluación de programas, pregrado en enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, innovación curricular, desarrollo de habilidades investigativas, habilidades investigativas y metodología, formación de docentes.

L'implantation de la composante « recherche » d'un programme de premier cycle en langues étrangères est évaluée dans ce projet de recherche. Les résultats relèvent que des facteurs tels que le programme du cours, la méthodologie du professeur et la primauté de l'administration affectent cette réforme du curriculum. Malgré les difficultés, le développement des compétences de recherche dans ce programme peut être amélioré en offrant de l'entraînement, du soutien et du temps nécessaire, et ce afin de garantir une compréhension efficace et un soutien mutuel de la part des professeurs chargés de l'implantation du nouveau plan d'études.

Mots clés: évaluation du programme, premier cycle en enseignement des langues étrangères, réforme du curriculum, développement des compétences de recherche, composante « recherche », formation d'enseignants.

* Recibido: 31-05-05 / Aceptado: 02-08-05

1 Grupo de Investigación Acción y Evaluación en Lenguas Extranjeras (GIAE). Escuela de Idiomas. Universidad de Antioquia. This research study was financed by the School of Languages of the Universidad de Antioquia. A version of this paper was presented internationally at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Montreal, Canada, and nationally at the 2005 Conference of the Colombian Association of French Professors (ACOLPROF) in Bogotá, Colombia.



INTRODUCTION

Educational curricular innovation is the starting point of a long process towards educational change (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1997). This innovation may result from external factors such as international educational policies or from internal needs such as identified educational values and goals of a group of people (Lewin, 1976, reported in Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1997). In the School of Languages at the Universidad de Antioquia, the accredited five-year undergraduate foreign language –English and French–teaching program recently changed its curriculum to include a research strand. This recognizes that the field now considers research preparation essential in preservice development for future teachers. A teacher candidate profile constructed by professors of the undergraduate curriculum committee recognizes effective teachers as critically reflective, and capable of developing research skills through pedagogical exploration in different educational sites and confronting theory, prior to doing action research in the teaching practicum. This study evaluates the implementation of this research component.

This paper will present: First, the theoretical framework; Second, a background of the context of this evaluation; Third, the methodology used, including participants and procedures; Fourth, the findings and interpretations; and Fifth, a discussion of considerations for similar curricular innovations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teacher education has been traditionally based on what Schön (1983, 1987) calls “technical rationality” and Wallace (1991) calls the “applied science model” (Wallace, 1991). Future professionals acquire first, in a formal context, a body of knowledge to be applied later in their daily practice. However, teachers need the opportunity to engage in the systematic exploration of their practice in order to develop knowledge and awareness from their practice, and to create theory. That is why Schön states that professional education should be as close as possible to the work site so as to fill the gap between theory and practice. With this idea in mind, and supported by Crookes (1993 and 1994), Altrichter, Posch and Somekh (1993), Richards and Lockhart (1994), Doff (1988) and Wallace (1991), an undergraduate research component was adopted in which preservice teachers develop research skills while



studying pedagogy, before doing action research in a practicum. In the practicum, preservice teachers try out new teaching approaches with the help of their practicum advisor and cooperating teacher, who also benefit professionally discovering “the theory implicit in daily life” (Schratz and Walker, 1995) and integrating theory and practice in their daily work. In our program, we want preservice teachers to not only apply and adapt theoretical findings of others, but also to develop their own theories based on practice (Van Lier, 1994). Allwright and Bailey (1991) state that our students do not need the “the latest” method, but rather a better comprehension of the classroom and what goes on there. That is why we believe that our preservice teachers need to explore and reflect on their practice and not follow prescriptions.

The teacher’s role in research skill development has not been explored much in the literature. Glesne and Webb (1993) administered questionnaires to professors of qualitative research graduate courses in the United States, and analyzed research course programs of universities to identify successful practices. They found that the professor, acting as a facilitator, creates the atmosphere and provides opportunities for students to be more critical and open-minded—valued and useful qualities for the qualitative researcher. They also found six methodological strategies that contribute to research skill development: field work, content relevance, peer debriefing, reviewing, role modeling, and knowledge construction. Glesne and Webb (1993) highlight the importance of students nominating a topic according to their own interest to explore through research and becoming aware of their own process. Course content related to research should be culturally relevant, and important in their future roles as educators and citizens. The authors also recommend that students need opportunities to share their fieldwork with peers, and value their peers’ comments and judgements about their work. Writing critical reviews of research studies can encourage students to contribute to others’ work. Having teachers and students from previous semesters present their research can give students confidence to complete the research process and to understand the complexity of qualitative research. Through class discussions, students can build knowledge, develop alternative perspectives, learn to value what they say, and contribute knowledge.

In Colombia, Frodden (1999) inquired about a research advisor’s new roles concerning action research in a one-year foreign language teaching graduate program at the Universidad de Antioquia. While teachers researched their own practice, the



advisor acted as their critical friend and fulfilled different functions, such as: challenging them in a positive way to focus and reflect on their research projects; creating dialogue and theorizing with them about their topics and research practice through reflective questioning; creating and maintaining a harmonious relationship where constructive criticism is exchanged and positive attitudes developed; guiding teachers with technical aspects of research such as revising their original research plan, data collection and monitoring actions; giving bibliographical and internet resources; and, reviewing and giving feedback on content and foreign language skills in their research reports. These findings can inform our practice in the undergraduate program.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Ministry of Education first mandated the inclusion of a research component in Colombian undergraduate teacher education programs nationally in Statute 272, in 1998. This measure changed the role of future teacher educators to include research in their daily teaching practice. The Universidad de Antioquia has included this research component in its academic development plan for all professional programs. In 2000, the School of Language's modified undergraduate curriculum proposal to include an investigation component (see Appendix 1) was accepted by the Colombian National Accreditation Council (CNA) and the Ministry of Education, and began to be implemented. In the basic cycle, integrative seminars to develop research skills are related to general pedagogical corequisite courses, and are primarily taught by professors from the Faculty of Education in Spanish. In the advanced cycle, the integrative seminar, three pedagogical projects and two research courses develop research skills along with foreign language acquisition and the study of teaching methodology in corequisite courses, prior to the teaching practicum. These latter courses are taught by professors of the School of Languages, in English or French.

As a framework for reforming the curriculum to include research, results of a nationwide project, the Colombian Framework for English (COFE), were considered. This five-year joint project between Colombian universities and The British Council intended to raise standards in undergraduate teaching programs by promoting a reflective approach towards professional development and action research. Professors and preservice teachers are encouraged to undertake action research based on an understanding of their teaching practices, which can lead to improved teaching practices and teacher education.



To prepare our preservice teachers in action research, guidelines to implement an action research component in Colombian Language Undergraduate Programs, proposed by Jiménez et al. (1993) (see Appendix 2), were referred to. In our program, preservice teachers are exposed to different data gathering techniques from the first semester on through fieldwork, before they are introduced to action research and begin to carry it out. In the first semester of the modified curriculum, they are given practice with the diary as a research tool, which is written in Spanish. They are encouraged to reflect on their foreign language learning and the language learning strategies used in their language classes. In the second semester, they continue keeping a diary and do classroom observation to study classroom interaction and foreign language acquisition, either in their foreign language classes or in other educational institutions. Whereas Jiménez et al. (1993) proposed guidelines for preservice teachers to begin their initiation of action research practice after the third semester, in our program, they continue to work on previously acquired research skills as they develop others while gathering information about teaching and learning practices. When our preservice teachers reach the eighth semester, they are introduced to action research, and in the final two semesters they plan and carry out an action research project. We believe that by the time preservice teachers reach the teaching practicum, they should have already acquired research knowledge and skills while reflecting on pedagogy, foreign language acquisition and methodological practices.

To design the research component programs, the Undergraduate Foreign Language Program Committee decided that a small group of its members – one as coordinator, two others having experience with the original curriculum reform, and another with extensive academic preparation– would work in collaboration with a few professors from the Faculty of Education. Basic cycle seminar programs and the first advanced cycle seminar program were initially designed by these professors from the School of Languages according to their interests and experience, and later modified with the Faculty of Education professors. Each advanced cycle pedagogical project program was designed by the professor of the methodology corequisite course. Faculty of Education professors did not collaborate directly on the design of these pedagogical project programs.



These course programs were revised by the undergraduate program committee, and approved by the School of Languages' Council. When these courses were offered, professors from either Faculty were given the programs, and asked to meet with colleagues who would be responsible for instructing either pedagogical or methodology corequisite courses. In some cases, the same professor taught both the seminar and the pedagogical course. The coordinator of this process met with some of these professors to discuss the research component and the relationship between these courses.

The importance of research preparation for professors and the need to evaluate this process was highlighted in the COFE project, and emphasized by a group of practicum advisors in the program. Advisors recognized that preservice teachers would be better prepared to carry out research, and we identified our need for professional development in action research. We decided to do evaluation research on this research component, which is part of a larger investigation that focuses on advisors' autonomous development through action research. This study began in August, 2003, with preservice teachers having studied up to six semesters in the curriculum. The following questions frame this study: What research skills are identified in the seminar course programs? What research skills have preservice teachers developed? What methodological strategies have supported the development of these skills? What are preservice teachers and professors' attitudes towards this research component?

METHOD OF THE STUDY

To analyze and improve the research skill development in this curriculum, we decided to conduct a participatory program evaluation that is formative in nature. Nunan (1992) regards program evaluation as: first, determining what learning has taken place in a program through information collection procedures, making judgements as to whether instruction has been effective or not, and second, taking action in order to improve the curriculum. Actions implemented during the delivery of the program make the evaluation process formative. The author argues that program evaluation is research when it involves questions, data and data interpretation. According to Correa (1996) in a participatory evaluation, internal users of a program are actively engaged in decision making throughout the evaluative research process. We wanted the members of the educational community under study to understand



the complexity of the different situations that affect the implementation of the new program, to become active agents in the qualification of the program, and finally, to contribute solutions to the issues identified as problematic in the program.

This process falls in line with the principles and procedures of action research, which is what we have promoted in our program. This model aims at the empowerment of the educational communities to generate changes (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Burns, 1999), due to its applicability for the professional development of teachers (Wallace 1991, cited by Rainey 2000; Altrichter et al. 1993), and because teacher-researchers lead the research project and involve the educational communities in order to improve their reality (Selener, 1997). Thus, for the data collection, we used methods such as documentary analysis of course programs, questionnaires completed by professors and preservice teachers, and group interviews with professors, preservice teachers and other key personnel, to gain a broad understanding of a range of factors influencing teaching and learning processes. This evaluation involved three types of data—course programs, questionnaires, and group interviews. The major analysis activities for the researchers involved documentary analysis of the course programs of the research component up to the eighth semester, and data-driven analysis (Burns, 1999) involving comparison and contrast of the questionnaire and group interview data. For data analysis and validation of findings and interpretations, we included participant meanings of the issues studied (Kincheloe, 1991). We believe this research design to be flexible, as interaction and reflection between the research group and the community may lead to changes according to the difficulties encountered.

RESEARCHERS

Researchers were the Teaching Practicum Coordinator/Advisor of the teaching practicum, three practicum advisors, two practicum cooperating teachers, and two preservice teachers—one in the third semester and the other in the fourth semester of the basic cycle. The cooperating teachers discontinued their participation in the project prior to the data collection phase due to excessive academic workloads at their educational institutions. We formed a “teacher research group” (Birchak et al., 1998) where all members participate in all stages of the project, from data collection to data analysis. The Practicum Coordinator and advisors had some experience



with action research and almost none with evaluation research. The two preservice teachers had no prior research experience at the School of Languages. Two practicum advisors had instructed a seminar course in the research preparation component. During this study, we received guidance and feedback from a senior professor who had considerable experience with the COFE project, the design and implementation of this curriculum, and action research at the undergraduate and postgraduate level.

PARTICIPANTS

Ten professors participated in the study, six from the School of Languages (two are researchers in this study and authors of this paper), and four from the Faculty of Education. Nine have postgraduate degrees in education or foreign languages teaching, and one has an undergraduate degree in teaching foreign languages. Four professors have action research experience, and the others have research experience with literary, ethnographic, and evaluative research. Ten completed a questionnaire and six participated in interviews.

Sixty-four preservice teachers (including the two preservice teacher researchers) completed a questionnaire, and seventeen did group interviews. They ranged from having completed a minimum of one to six semesters in the program. Three of the preservice teachers are members of other research groups in the School of Languages.

PROCEDURE

This evaluation had five overlapping stages. First, we analyzed seminar course programs to identify research skills to be developed in the curriculum. We reviewed the curriculum reform proposal in order to have a general understanding of the philosophy and methodology for these seminar courses. Second, we presented a proposal for this study to the academic community at the School of Languages, in order to raise awareness about this research component, and to motivate people to participate in the evaluation. Subsequently, we visited all seminar classes, repeated this information, and invited professors and preservice teachers to participate in the study. We held brief discussions about their attitudes towards this research component, what research skills they had developed and how they viewed this process. Interested participants were given a research ethics form and a form where



they committed to certain research activities and to prepare the questions to guide the interviews. Third, researchers designed and administered questionnaires to professors and preservice teachers in order to identify their attitudes towards research, research skills developed, and methodology used to develop these skills. This information was used initially to organize participants for the group interviews. Fourth, we prepared ourselves for the group interviews by reading theoretical articles, listening to researchers' previous experience with group interviews, and designing semi-structured interviews. Two researchers observed the first group interview and gave feedback on this process.

Researchers in pairs facilitated the group interviews, which were conducted in Spanish. Six professors comprised four different groups, and 17 preservice teachers formed five groups. Professors were grouped as follows: one professor was the undergraduate program committee coordinator; two professors taught similar courses in the advanced cycle; two professors—one from the Faculty of Education and one from the School of Languages—had promoted a lot of off-campus fieldwork in their seminars; and another professor had instructed numerous seminars in the basic cycle. Preservice teachers were grouped accordingly: Two were researchers in this study; four had taken the first seminar; four had taken at least five seminars; three were researchers in other projects; and four had taken seminars not according to the order in which they are presented in the program. Group interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

In the last stage, we read about data analysis and followed Burns' (1999) recommendations. We read the questionnaire and interview data and coded the data first individually and then as a group. Codes were stated in few words, and conceptualized as close to the data as possible. Consistency of judgement was checked by reviewing our codes over a number of research meetings and by discussing them and comparing them as a group to gain multiple perspectives (Boyatzis, 1998). A list of preliminary emergent categories was compiled and four important themes were identified and defined: preservice teacher and professors' attitudes towards research, research skills developed, teaching methodologies related to research skill development (including the role of professors), and administration. Categories were reduced in number by revising codes, and discarding less significant ones concerning our research questions and four themes. These were compared to



data from the course programs. Then, we interpreted the data and themes and related them to theory in the literature. To validate the findings, participants were invited to a meeting where we presented them with the background, findings and interpretations of the study, and gave them the opportunity to give their impressions about the information, and to engage in a discussion about the issues (Bonilla and Rodríguez, 1997; Taylor and Bogdan, 1994). Sixteen preservice teachers and three professors attended—one from the School of Languages and two from the Faculty of Education. Thirteen other preservice teachers, as well as the academic head of the undergraduate teaching program, observed this process. Previously, we had held two meetings with seminar professors and administrators from the Faculty of Education and the School of Languages, to share preliminary findings and discuss this research component with them.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings and interpretations of this study relate to the documentary analysis of the seminar course programs, and to the four themes identified—research skills developed, methodology related to the development of research skills (including the role of the seminar professor), administration, and preservice teacher and professors' attitudes towards the research component in the undergraduate curriculum.

DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS OF SEMINAR COURSE PROGRAMS

Documentary analysis was guided by two aspects: whether preservice teachers are introduced to different data gathering techniques in the course programs before the practicum, and whether research skill development is progressive in the programs. The seminar course programs and the first pedagogical project program include different data gathering techniques, for example, the diary, observations, interviews, questionnaires, documentary analysis, data collection, identification of categories, and reflection (see Appendix 3). However, certain research skills necessary for action research, such as problem identification, critical reading and summarization of research reports, literature review, design of action research proposals, planning action strategies, interpretation of data, and writing an action research report are not present in course programs prior to the eighth semester. Preliminary reflections on the implementation of the COFE project, reported in the *COFE NEWSLETTER*



(1994) highlight the need to develop literature review from the beginning of the curriculum. Whereas the original COFE guidelines include data collection in the fourth semester, so that preservice teachers can identify a problem to study in subsequent semesters under the guidelines of action research, the research skills development in our course programs up to the sixth semester is related to different types of classroom research, such as life histories, ethnographic research, and case studies.

I liked the life history a lot. It was really a piece of research that we did. (preservice teacher)

Perhaps the introduction of action research with research skill development in the basic cycle seminar programs may prepare our preservice teachers better in action research. Concerning the progressive nature of skill development in the course programs, our analysis reveals that certain research skills, such as the diary, observation, the interview and the questionnaire, are introduced gradually in the basic cycle seminar course programs, and continue to be present in advanced cycle course programs. Preservice teachers' use of the diary, for example, has different purposes across the curriculum. In Seminar I, preservice teachers' foreign language learning experiences are recorded in it.

In my diary, I kept all the activities that I did in class as well as out of class. (preservice teacher)

In the fifth semester, the diary is used to record data collected, analyzed and interpreted for a case study on a teacher, and in the seventh semester, it is used to record their lesson planning, instructional experience and reflections on this.

They have to plan and reflect on how they plan, and after they evaluate their classes they have to teach four classes, two in a private context and two in a public one, and finally they have to analyze the decisions that they made as a teacher... This analysis is written in the diary. (professor)

However, as stated above, some skills needed to carry out action research are not as recurrent across the curriculum. For example, reviewing the literature and reading



research reports are skills that are introduced in the eighth semester Investigation I course program. These are important skills and require preservice teachers to be critical readers.

If we consider increased skill complexity, this is evident, in part. On the one hand, the more basic data collection research skills are introduced before the more complex ones in these programs. On the other hand, while the COFE proposal focuses on open observation before focused observation, we found the opposite to be the case throughout our programs. Focused observations, which usually require the use of schedules, appeared earlier on in our programs, while general observations, which require less preparation, came later. Despite this finding, course programs appear to prepare preservice teachers to reflect on their own as well as others' learning and teaching practices with research skill development, while they engage in fieldwork prior to the teaching practicum.

What happened, according to what I remember, is that the seminar is about how to reflect on one's learning process. (preservice teacher)

For example, in the Institución Educativa, we did observations, interviews, questionnaires, and read the educational institution's pedagogical project and teacher's handbook. We filmed and later sat down and analyzed the institution. (preservice teacher)

In the El Educador...I liked the life history a lot because it was really a piece of research that we did. We chose an educator, interviewed him, transcribed the interview, and we filmed and recorded him. In each group, according to the observations we had done, we identified a theme, for example, methodology, and we did a questionnaire to address this topic. (preservice teacher)

Methodology related to the development of research skills in the seminar programs varied according to theoretical content, inductive or explicit instruction, and feedback for and assessment of pertinent skill development. Although most programs promoted preservice teacher conceptual development, and active participation and reflection, programs revealed a lack of clarity concerning a methodology for research skill development.



RESEARCH SKILLS DEVELOPED

Most preservice teachers and seminar professors reported the following skill development: writing a diary, planning and doing class observations, planning and conducting interviews, designing and administering questionnaires, analyzing data and reviewing the literature in the undergraduate curriculum.

A few of these skills, characterized by Miller, Marsch & Vagliardo (2002) as being technicalities of research, seem to not require much creativity, resourcefulness, and higher-level cognitive processing skills. Although the diary was used to record observations and initial reflections on pedagogy, analysis and interpretation of this information, which are associated with critical thinking, was not reported. A few seminar professors questioned the development of these skills.

In their process of formation, students are prepared to gather information, but they are not ready or able to analyze and interpret information. (professor)

Students can share information they have in class discussions, but reflect on pedagogy? (professor)

All these skills are important and can be used in the initial phase of research, involving data collection.

The more complex research skills necessary in action research, such as writing a report of a problematic educational issue, writing a research project proposal, defining action strategies, interpreting data, and disseminating findings, were not reported by preservice teachers in the data. At the time of this study, the seventh semester course in which these research skills are developed, Investigation I, was in progress.

We didn't develop research skills like gathering data, collecting data, analyzing data, no, nothing like that. Posing a research question, a little bit. (professor)

These skills are important because preservice teachers are supposed to become reflective practitioners capable of researching their own actions in classrooms to improve educational conditions in the program.



Concerning the progressive nature of skill development, once preservice teachers were introduced to skills in the first semester, many continued to develop them in most seminar courses. Yet, there was evidence that this was not experienced by some students. For example, whereas the diary was introduced in the first semester, one student reported that they did not continue developing this skill.

We had to keep a diary for that class. The following semester we didn't have to keep a diary anymore. (preservice teacher)

Skill development, in terms of increasing complexity, was not reported by preservice teachers or seminar professors. These issues were not given opportune discussion among the undergraduate program committee members or professors responsible for seminar course design and instruction prior to this evaluation study. It appears that many may not have been aware of this characteristic of the curriculum reform. Once this feature is stated clearly in the programs, and understood by professors, they may be better prepared to direct their instruction towards this research objective.

HOW ARE RESEARCH SKILLS DEVELOPED?

Many of the seminars did not follow a seminar methodology. Courses were traditional in nature or teacher-fronted, where professors took a very active role initiating and leading discussions based on pedagogical readings and fieldwork, while preservice teachers were more passive. Sometimes, this role was reversed when preservice teachers explained topics in class. One professor explained that many preservice teachers were passive because they either do not read and go to class unprepared, or lack an understanding of the readings, and therefore have difficulty participating in class discussions.

One preservice student said that they begin their university studies with limitations related to reading comprehension in their native language, interaction skills, and study skills, and that they need guidance and direction to be more participative. Another reported that preservice teachers may not be used to taking advantage of the opportunities to engage in seminar discussions, or may lack an understanding of the seminar methodology, and because of this, professors should explain this to them in class. This notion has been raised by Crookes (2003) as to how that people



participate in a group can be influenced by their different expectations, which may result in some speaking, while others remain quiet.

Another professor reported that lack of participation and exchange of information could be a result of preservice teachers only studying the prescribed pedagogical content of the course, and not formulating questions that they find interesting to explore and research, which is a good strategy in developing teacher-research identities (Marsh, Miller & Vagliardo, 2002).

As many seminar course programs lacked clear methodology to develop research skills, the role of the seminar professor became a deciding factor.

Apart from the course program, all the professors need to know what the objective is of the seminar, where it is headed, what to work on. This depends a lot on the professor. I think that this depends one hundred percent on the professor, the ability he has, how he focuses things, and how he is as a professor. (preservice teacher)

Although most professors have prior research experience, many lack experience teaching others to develop the skills necessary for research. Professors differed in the degree to which they followed the seminar programs. Some instructed the course according to the program, while others adapted the program. Not all professors presented the original seminar program or a modified one to the preservice teachers at the beginning of the semester.

I like to negotiate with the students and sometimes in the negotiation you change certain things, right? But I tell them "We are going to work on these projects" or "We are going to do this" and I tell them and ask them "What do you think if we do this?" Or "What do we do as a final assessment?" I negotiate everything with them, but within the framework of the course program. (professor)

It seems that there are professors who know the curriculum, the purpose of the research component and the seminar objectives, and they appear as models promoting reflection and motivating preservice teachers towards research, while others may not have this understanding, and do not promote these characteristics. Professors' identification with this research component is significant, as one student



reported even having developed research skills in a foreign language class in the basic cycle. While the administration requests that professors guide their instruction according to course programs, professors are quite autonomous in the implementation of these seminars.

While the purpose of the seminars was to integrate theory and practice through research practices, many preservice teachers thought the seminar courses were directed towards pedagogy, for example, interviewing a school administrator to get information about the school's Proyecto Educativo Institucional (Institutional Educational Project), and not research. As research skill development was not usually part of the course content to be learned, or connected to a research project, but rather part of the course methodology to explore pedagogy, preservice teachers did not see that the course was aimed at research.

We worked a lot on our practice as teachers but not as researchers. I mean, I don't know if it is enough to reflect on the role of the teacher; I don't think that is research. (preservice teacher)

Another preservice teacher reported sharing teaching and learning practices from fieldwork in educational institutions in class discussions, and contrasting this with theory. This information was sometimes shared with the educational institutions, and the academic community at the School of Languages. This pedagogical exploration and reflection was understood as research.

The most important thing to me was that we didn't just hand in the questionnaire we had administered and that's it, but we shared and saw the stories we all had and the experiences we had had, and we drew some conclusions or things for ourselves, things that one is going to take into account in the future. So that was the purpose of the research. The teacher also helped us by saying, "Look at how the teacher is formed according to the education she received, where she studied, the social stratum, whatever, look how she guides the topics, look how she deals with students," so the relationship was established quite well. (preservice teacher)

However, during the validation of findings, one preservice teacher believed that some professors, from the fifth semester on, were able to integrate research skill development while exploring pedagogy in their seminar courses.



I saw the research component in the seminar 'El Educando' and the other pedagogical project seminars, but I did not see the research component in the earlier seminars, just pedagogy. I liked the content of the pedagogical project seminars. (preservice teacher)

Another preservice teacher also believed that the Pedagogical Project seminars integrate research better with the corequisite methodology courses, because the programs are designed well, and the professors, who have a good understanding of the research component, are usually the same for both courses. With these beliefs, one professor concluded that as some preservice teachers are being prepared to gather pedagogical information, but not to do research, research competencies need to be explicit in all seminar programs.

Although the revised curriculum document (Facultad de Educación- Escuela de Idiomas, 1999) recommended an inductive approach to the development of research, this approach was not stated clearly in the seminar course programs and appears to have not been understood by many seminar professors. Professors told preservice teachers to do research activities and to gather information, but they did not give explicit information concerning the research skills, for example, the definition and purpose of an interview, how to design and conduct it, etc.

They never explained to me how to keep the diary. (preservice teacher)

So it was really annoying... you didn't know where to start because they don't give you any guidelines. They don't tell you anything, but just "Go to a school and find out about this"...and they didn't give you any feedback, except for once in a while they would ask you "What did you do? Bring it," but they didn't tell you anything else. It was just what you could do with your bare hands. I think that is very complicated. (preservice teacher)

The importance of preservice teachers having theoretical background about research skills and reading in class, before they do research or early on in their studies, has been cited as good practice (COFE NEWSLETTER, 1994). Bell (1993) advocates that time and energy can be saved with good preparation. In addition, reading about research skills can give preservice teachers the knowledge they need to be able to



do classroom research, and help them to conceptualize their actions in theoretical terms (Nunan, 1992).

Related to the instructional approach, most preservice teachers did not receive feedback from the professor or peers concerning their process of constructing and using different instruments to gather information, and analyzing this information. Feedback was primarily related to pedagogical information gathered and discussed in class. Few professors promoted the discussion of guidelines related to the use of the interview and questionnaire prior to fieldwork.

Each one studied how to do an interview, (the teacher) also told us how, and then in groups we discussed what is OK to ask, what isn't OK to ask. And we were given the type of questions to ask...and we were told to take these as a basis and add some others to enrich the questionnaire. We were following the guidelines we were given. (preservice teacher)

Feedback on technical practice as well as on linguistic aspects can help preservice teachers understand topics and theory (Glesne & Webb, 1993; Frodden, 1999). Discussions with preservice teachers about how they develop research skills, implement actions, and construct meaning (Ponte, 2002; Wertsch, 1978 in Miller Marsh & Vagliardo, 2002) can help them to gain a better understanding of their actions, and to be able to conceptualize them. In this study, it was not surprising that seminar professors and preservice teachers reported a lack of conceptualization related to research skills.

Without this explicit orientation, feedback, and the socialization of these processes, it appears that significant learning experiences were lacking. Although professors may have had previous research experience, many didn't monitor preservice teachers' fieldwork related to the skills and analysis of this data, which indicates that they may not be aware of methodology related to the development of these skills.

Concerning assessment, preservice teachers reported that professors often used summative, not formative assessment to assess their pedagogical knowledge, and often, professors' assessment criteria were not clear, and often irrelevant.



The activities that we carried out were part of final papers in the seminars. The professor introduced them, but there was no orientation, follow-up or feedback for the activities that we carried out. (preservice teacher)

Knowledge of the theory and documents that we read was evaluated by an exam. (preservice teacher)

For me, I don't think the way the diary was evaluated was very productive. It was like, whoever had the nicest looking diary got a higher grade. (preservice teacher)

These issues clearly cite the need for an understanding of and preparation with methodology to develop research skills.

ADMINISTRATION

There were difficulties with the process of designing and approving the original curriculum proposal and seminar course programs, and the implementation of these courses. Of the reduced group of professors who designed the curriculum reform, only a few were full-time professors at the School of Languages, and only one of these had considerable experience working in the undergraduate program and with the COFE project in Colombia. Although these professors reviewed the proposal by Jiménez et al. (1993) to incorporate a research component in the curriculum, their discussions focused primarily on the weight of the two foreign languages in the curriculum, and the lack of Spanish in it. Other undergraduate program committee professors knew of this proposal, but discussions about its importance, and how it could inform their practice in the existing curriculum as well as for the upcoming reform, was lacking in committee meetings. What professors at the School of Languages may have gained at that time was their role in administering a foreign language teacher education program that had previously been the responsibility of the Faculty of Education. Not only did professors have to provide instruction for didactic and practicum courses, they also had to anticipate a curricular reform with the inclusion of a research component that they were not well prepared for.

Professors from the School of Languages who designed the seminar programs had some awareness of the original curriculum reform and the COFE project, but those



from the Faculty of Education did not. Most professors lacked understanding and experience with methodologies to develop research skills. These programs were approved by full-time undergraduate teaching program committee members, who also lacked such understanding and experience. Faculty of Education professors responsible for instructing the four basic seminars were not present at these meetings. Absent as well, were instructors who teach these seminars and who are contracted hourly by the School of Languages.

Work conditions which would permit ongoing communication and collaboration between professors from the School of Languages and the Faculty of Education have not been put into place. Many professors who instruct in this research strand are contracted hourly, and are not able to meet regularly with colleagues and have advisory sessions with students. This has affected how professors understand and identify with this research component, as well as how they implement it. Some professors have not received an adequate orientation to the curriculum reform and/or seminar programs, and a few have received the seminar program from the secretary without contact with the program coordinator.

Despite the fact that several seminar professors said that they were aware of the research preparation strand and the research objectives of their courses, many preservice teachers said that the programs were adapted without a clear understanding of this research component. They expressed a lack of clarity in terms of the research objectives in the seminar programs and courses.

All teachers should know what the aim of the seminar is. What is done, that depends a lot on the professor. I think that depends 100% on the professor, the capacity they have, how they approach things and how they are as professors. (preservice teacher)

The integration of the seminar course with the corequisite courses proved difficult across the curriculum. In general, preservice teachers reported that the relationship between the seminar courses and the pedagogical courses through research was weak, whether these two courses were instructed by the same teachers or not. Sometimes, when both courses were taught by the same professor, preservice teachers reported that the seminar was used to expand the content of the pedagogical course.



Classroom Interaction, and Epistemology were taught by (Teacher X), while Contemporary Pedagogical Currents and The Educator were taught by (Teacher Y), so there was a lot of integration both in the theoretical and practical parts.
(preservice teacher)

When these courses were instructed by different teachers, preservice teachers tended to question this corequisite status more. They said that there was a clear lack of integration of the content and objectives of both courses, clearly due to a lack of communication between professors.

One semester, I had the pedagogical course with one professor and the seminar with another, and it was very complicated, because even though the two professors tried to go at the same pace, it was very difficult, because the students were different and the teachers too. (preservice teacher)

This issue was apparent in both the basic and advanced cycles, as many of these professors are not full-time and have difficulties meeting with colleagues to review programs and discuss the development of these courses.

Preservice teachers also questioned the prerequisite status for these courses as they did not experience a progressive development of the research skills. Some preservice teachers, who did not attend the seminars in the basic cycle according to their sequence in the program, later reported that this lack of order didn't affect their learning process. They believed this was a result of professors not having a comprehensive understanding of the research component. One professor stated that this problem could be rectified if preservice teachers had to begin the action research process from the beginning of the curriculum.

The scheduling of the two-hour seminars weekly on Mondays was also problematic for professors and preservice teachers, as many Colombian holidays coincided with this day. Additionally, they believed that the seminar courses required more instructional time.

Is thirty hours really enough to develop research skills. Aren't the programs a little ambitious? (professor)



Another professor felt that this lack of time could generate anxiety among professors and preservice teachers as professors have to promote the idea of research to preservice teachers first, then design activities to develop the skills and to generate research questions, etc.

According to Hall and Hord (2001), curriculum innovations should include interventions at the individual and institutional level, such as the provision of the necessary resources and training for the implementers to understand the innovation and be competent in the new proposal. Also needed are well-defined policies concerning favorable working conditions for people to do the different tasks. In our case, this change was assumed to be an event, as everyone lacked awareness of the complexities of this innovation. Despite having a written proposal for the new program, professors, students and administrators were not aware of the challenges that the new proposal implied for them.

PRESERVICE TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE RESEARCH COMPONENT

Preservice teachers were motivated towards seminar courses that were instructed in the foreign languages, perhaps because of the opportunity for them to continue to develop their foreign language skills. This positive attitude was also present in seminars instructed by professors from the School of Languages who had participated in discussions about changes to the curriculum, and who were aware of the purpose of the different courses in the curriculum.

I started to see (the research strand) differently because the professor was not from the School of Education but from here, from the School of Languages, and so Pedagogical Projects, Research, everything changed completely. Because at the beginning the professors were from there and were not well-connected, I don't know, and then we had professors that we knew well, I think. (preservice teacher)

Most seminar professors viewed this research component positively.

The seminar courses need to have both pedagogy and research skills, where students can study foreign language acquisition, pedagogy, and investigation. (professor)



Likewise, preservice teachers believed that they, as future educators, could improve the social and academic conditions in foreign language teacher education in Colombia through research preparation, which is one graduate profile characteristic (Facultad de Educación- Escuela de Idiomas, 1999).

The development of research skills makes professional practice richer and improves educational practice. (preservice teacher)

I think that research is vital for educational progress and process. Research is necessary for any teacher who wants to revolutionize education. (preservice teacher)

...It is important as future teacher educators to be prepared to deal with difficulties that will be present in our classrooms, and also, to generate knowledge, new knowledge. (preservice teacher)

Also recognized was the fact that teachers can continue to develop professionally through research.

The role of the educator can be further enhanced as investigation helps the educator to continually develop both professionally and personally. (preservice teacher)

DISCUSSION

Educational innovation is a systematic process to improve students' learning conditions and to achieve goals more effectively. It may include changes in the approaches, materials and values that are perceived as new by members of an educational community (Wijesundera, 2002 and Markee, 1993, in Daoud, 1999). Conceptual and structural changes have been introduced with our research strand. Preservice teachers are being initiated in the use of research techniques (diary writing, observation, interview, and questionnaire) as they carry out fieldwork in educational contexts, in order to prepare them in general educational research. During this process, the importance of preservice teachers having the opportunity to share data gathered through this fieldwork as well as discussing what they have learned throughout this developmental skill process, needs to be highlighted (Webb and Glesne, 1992, in Rodríguez Gómez et al., 1999). Prior to the teaching practicum in the advanced



cycle, preservice teachers are introduced to action research, where they are given theoretical knowledge, and during the practicum, they have the opportunity to use research skills developed under a new approach, in order to study and improve an educational issue. Reconceptualization of our undergraduate program concerning the proposed guidelines by Jimenéz et al. (1993) to implement an action research component in a Colombian Language Undergraduate Program would require discussion of the degree to which preservice teachers could have direct teaching practice with the accompaniment of another cooperating teacher's practice and engagement with action research, and whether adopting action research as the sole research approach in the undergraduate curriculum would be recommendable, given our educational context and interest in establishing diverse research communities. This challenges the administration and participants to define and apply new pedagogic strategies in research skill development so that the action research projects carried out during the practicum will have more impact.

This innovation was complex and generated inconsistencies between what was initially proposed in the curriculum reform and what was detailed in the seminar programs and carried out in the classroom. A myriad of issues influenced the process of developing different research skills and the results attained. The difficulties that were revealed in this study require attention and planning from community members, so as to minimize these inconsistencies. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1997) recognize that educational innovation may take up to five years, so there is time for the educational community to better understand and learn how to carry out and improve the curricular reform.

Problematic situations described in this evaluation relate to the type of top-down change that the National Ministry of Education has traditionally adopted in our country. Professors from the Faculty of Education and the School of Languages were not well-prepared. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1997) report that curriculum reform may be started by individuals or groups, but administrative leadership is needed to support and oversee that the process of change lasts. In our context, administrative leadership is required to create new conditions for participants to fully understand the meaning of the innovation and be successful in its



implementation. A comprehensive induction for all professors concerning this research component and time to engage in collaborative discussion throughout the semester is needed. As the community becomes more aware of the new reform, discussions about what the innovation implies for everyone and how each participant may contribute to its successful implementation are important. Researchers are becoming agents of change as we integrate members of the community with this innovation and raise issues to be resolved.

Implementing curriculum reform represents challenges and opportunities for all the members of the educational community, and that is why the role of the administration as well as professors and preservice teachers in leading and sustaining the innovation becomes paramount.

CONCLUSION

In our foreign language teaching program, the implementation of the research component requires new roles and actions for administrators, professors and preservice teachers. Most participants view its inclusion positively. They perceive this as an opportunity to relate and contrast concepts studied in their seminars with the reality observed during fieldwork, and to share this information with their professors, peers and educational institutions. Despite the many issues related to seminar course methodology to develop research skills, professors and administrators need to consider future actions that will improve preservice teachers' learning experiences.

The evaluation of the research component in this undergraduate program has been an enriching experience for the researchers and participants. It has become an effective strategy to raise awareness about the curricular innovation in this institution. Researchers have had the opportunity to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the program and the process of developing research skills throughout the curriculum, which will empower them to lead the process of change. The educational community has realized that the new program implies a myriad of new roles and challenges that have to be addressed. We hope this study will contribute to the improvement of this curriculum innovation.



REFERENCES

- Allwright, Dick, and Kathleen M. Bailey, 1991, *Focus on the language classroom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Altrichter, Herbert, et al., 1993, *Teachers investigate their work, an introduction to the methods of action research*, London, Routledge.
- Bell, Judith, 1993, *Doing your research project*, Buckingham, Open University Press.
- Birchak, Barb et. al., 1998, *Teacher study groups: Building community through dialogue and reflection*, Urbana, National Council of Teachers of English.
- Bonilla-Castro, Elssy, y Penélope Rodríguez, 1997, *Más allá del dilema de los métodos, la investigación en ciencias sociales*, Santafé de Bogotá, Norma.
- Boyatzis, Richard, 1998, *Transforming qualitative information: thematic analysis and code development*, California, SAGE Publications.
- Burns, Anne, 1999, *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Correa, Santiago, 1996, *Paradigmas-enfoques-orientaciones y modelos evaluativos*, Medellín, Universidad de Antioquia.
- Crookes, Graham, 1993, "Action research for second language teachers, going beyond teacher research", *Applied linguistics*, 14, (2), London.
- Crookes, Graham, 1994, "Action research: a process for teacher development", In: Centro Colombo Americano, *Memoirs of the ELT Conference*, Medellín, Centro Colombo Americano.
- Crookes, Graham, 2003, *A practicum in TESOL: professional development through teaching practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Daoud, Sada, 1999, "Approaches to Classroom Innovation for Teacher and Learner Autonomy", [electronic document], New York, AUTO-L (Autonomy in Language Learning Forum), <AUTO-L@ycvax.york.cuny.edu.> [consult: 25 Jan 1999].
- Doff, Adrian, 1988, *Teaching English: a training course for teachers*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Facultad de Educación- Escuela de Idiomas, 1999, *Licenciatura en enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras*, Medellín, Universidad de Antioquia.
- Frodden, Cristina, 1999, "Action research in a graduate foreign language teaching program", *Íkala, revista de lenguaje y cultura*, 4 (7-8), Medellín.
- Fullan, Michael y Suzanne Stiegelbauer, 1997, *El cambio educativo*, Mexico, CES Impresores.
- Glesne, Corrine, and Rodman Webb, 1993, "Teaching qualitative research: Who does What?", *International journal of qualitative studies in education*, 6 (3), Texas.



- Hall, Gene, E., and Shirley, M. Hord, 2001, *Implementing change: Patterns, principles and potholes*, Boston, Allyn and Bacon.
- Jiménez Bonilla, Sonia, Myriam Luna Cortés and Myriam Marín de Otálora, 1993, *Action research guide*, London, Overseas.
- Kemmis, Stephen, and Robin McTaggart, 1988, *The action research planner*, Geelong, Victoria, Deakin University Press.
- Kincheloe, Joe L., 1991, *Teachers as researchers: qualitative inquiry as a path to empowerment*, London, The Falmer Press.
- Miller Marsh, Monica, and Margot Vagliardo, 2002, "The commingling of teacher research identities: a mediated approach to teaching action research", *Educational action research*, Wallingford, 10 (2), Oxford.
- Nunan, David, 1992, *Research Methods in Language Learning*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Ponte, Peter, 2002, "How teachers become action researchers and how teacher educators become their facilitators", *Educational action research*, Wallingford, 10 (1), Oxford.
- Rainey, Isobel, 2000, "Action research and the English as a foreign language practitioner: time to take stock", *Educational action research*, Wallingford, Oxford.
- Richards, Jack, and Charles Lockhart, 1994, *Reflective teaching in foreign language classrooms*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Rodríguez, Gregorio et al., 1999, *Metodología de la investigación cualitativa*, Granada, Aljibe.
- Salamanca, Aida et al., 1994, *COFE NEWSLETTER*, Santafé de Bogotá, Universidad Pedagógica Nacional.
- Schön, Donald, 1983, *The reflective practitioner*, New York, Basic Books.
- Schön, Donald, 1987, "Educating the Reflective Practitioner", [electronic document], proceedings of the 1987 Meeting of the American Educational Research Association Conference, Washington, D.C., <<http://educ.queensu.ca/~ar/schon87.htm>> [Consult: 2 may 2003].
- Schratz, Michael and Rob Walker, 1995, *Research as social change*, London, Routledge.
- Selener, Daniel, 1997, *Participatory action research and social change*, Ithaca, Cornell, University.
- Taylor, Steven J., y Robert Bogdan, 1994, *Introducción a los métodos cualitativos de investigación*, Barcelona, Editorial Paidós.
- Van Lier, Leo, 1994, "Features of a theory of practice", *TESOL Journal*, Alexandria 4 (1), Virginia.
- Wallace, Michael, J., 1991, *Training foreign language teacher: a reflective approach*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.



THE AUTHORS

- ** Professor, school of Lenguajes, Universidad de Antioquia. Diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language, University of Toronto, Canada. Honours Psychology Degree, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada. Graduate student at the Universidad de Caldas, Colombia. E-mail: mariam@idiomas.udea.edu.co
- *** Professor, School of Languages, Universidad de Antioquia. B.Ed. Foreign Languages. Graduate student at the University of Northern Iowa, on a Fulbright scholarship. Member of Grupo de Investigación Acción y Evaluación en Lenguas Extranjeras /Universidad de Antioquia/ Colombia. E-mail: jusma@idiomas.udea.edu.co



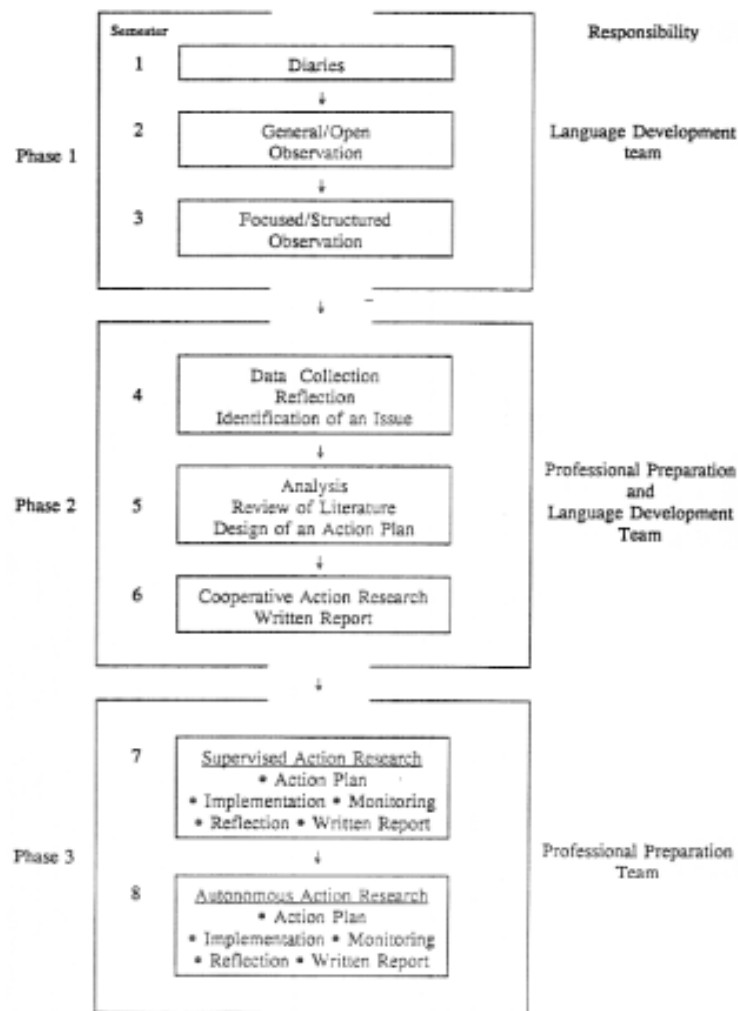
Appendix 2

Action Research Component for Colombian Language Undergraduate Programs Jiménez, Luna, & Otálora (1993)

136

Phase 2 as part of the Professional Preparation strand to reflect upon the teaching-learning process and

Phase 3, parallel to their teaching practice to help them build confidence in using action research for their professional development.



Appendix 3

List of Research Skills in Course Syllabi of the Undergraduate Program

SEMINAR COURSES	STUDENT RESEARCH SKILLS
1 st semester <u>Mi Aprendizaje</u> (My Learning)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≠ self-observation: learning styles, preferences, and strategies ≠ research diary ≠ reflection: individual learning process + target language acquisition
2 nd semester <u>Interacción en el aula</u> (Classroom Interaction)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≠ self + peer observation: class interaction + role of teacher and student(s) in learning ≠ research diary ≠ reflection: individual + group; interaction, roles + target language acquisition
3 rd semester <u>El Educador</u> (The Teacher)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≠ analysis of a teacher's life history: roles + tasks of an educator in an educational institution ≠ analysis of course readings + reflection based on guided questions ≠ focused class observations with instruments ≠ teacher interviews with format: teacher's beliefs + attitudes about foreign language teaching practices ≠ research diary ≠ analysis + categorization of information from different sources ≠ reflection: individual + group; teachers' roles + tasks
4 th semester <u>La Institución Educativa</u> (The Educational Institution)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≠ ethnographic study: school organization, culture + relationships ≠ documental analysis: course readings, P.E.I., Manual de Convivencia, etc. ≠ observations with tools: school organization + functions, approach to foreign language instruction + interpersonal relationships ≠ research diary ≠ guided interviews ≠ reflection: individual + group; school culture
5 th semester <u>El Educando</u> (The Learner)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≠ case study: individual variables that affect a student's foreign language acquisition process with grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation + the relationship between the teacher and student ≠ focused observations ≠ guided interviews ≠ questionnaires + tests: learning styles, motivation, multiple intelligences, brain dominance ≠ research diary ≠ analysis of data from different sources ≠ reflection: individual + group; individual learning variables
6 th semester <u>Proyecto Pedagógico I</u> (Pedagogical Project I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≠ case study: description + understanding of a teacher's foreign language methodology ≠ documental analysis: teacher's course program ≠ unfocused class observations ≠ research diary in English ≠ guided interviews: teacher's beliefs about classroom actions + principles and students' attitudes towards methodology ≠ student questionnaire: personal information, expectations and beliefs about course + methodology ≠ analysis of data from different sources ≠ reflection: individual + group; a teacher's foreign language methodology
7 th semester <u>Proyecto Pedagógico II</u> (Pedagogical Project II)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≠ self-observation and reflection on teaching experience ≠ diary to record and analyze information about the educational context, lesson plans and evaluations of classes ≠ interviews to gain information about an educational context
7 th semester <u>Investigación I L2/L3</u> (Investigation I L2/L3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≠ identify themes and problems to study in an educational context ≠ select appropriate methodology to research these themes and problems ≠ write a preliminary design for a research proposal ≠ read qualitative research studies comprehensively, analyze them and write critical summaries ≠ carry out interdisciplinary bibliographic searches in groups ≠ reflect on previous research experiences ≠ interview research professors about their prior research experience ≠ work collaboratively on the above tasks
8 th semester <u>Investigación Acción Educativa</u> (Educational Action Research)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≠ definition of a problem to be investigated through action research ≠ group work to diagnose an educational problem ≠ promotion of participant involvement in research ≠ group work to carry out interdisciplinary consultation ≠ plan of research activities/action strategies ≠ group work to collect and analyze data ≠ adapt or design instruments: questionnaires, observation and interview formats ≠ diary to record research problems and reflections

