

# Supporting Student-Teacher Researchers' Quest for Their Voice

## Apoyando a estudiantes-investigadores en la búsqueda de una voz propia

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This article deals with teacher identity development of students enrolled in the teacher training program. The authors, who advocate inquiry-based teaching practices, propose reflective and organizational strategies to support these. In order to gain insights into the experiences and values of student-teacher-researchers (STRs here on) to shape a professional teaching identity, a pre-service teacher and a professor in a second language (L2) program joined efforts to share their reflections on the process of inquiry and on the quest to find a voice when conducting and reporting their inquiry.

**Key words:** Academic writing, agency, classroom research, L2, teacher education, teacher identity

Este artículo aborda el tema del desarrollo de la identidad de estudiantes de una licenciatura en L2. Los autores, que abogan por prácticas de enseñanza que se basen en la investigación, proponen estrategias organizacionales y de reflexión que apoyen dichas prácticas. Con el objetivo de presentar perspectivas sobre las experiencias y los valores de los estudiantes-investigadores de un programa de licenciatura en L2 para desarrollar una identidad como profesional de la docencia, una estudiante de licenciatura y un profesor unieron esfuerzos para reflexionar sobre el proceso de investigación y sobre la búsqueda de una voz propia cuando se realiza y se reporta su investigación.

**Palabras clave:** agenciamiento, escritura académica, formación de maestros, identidad del maestro, investigación en el aula, L2

### Introduction

Student teacher-researchers (STRs) often struggle to find their voices to feel represented when they narrate their understanding of the complexities of the classroom and when they attempt to share their reflections and contributions to instruction. In this article a student's

voice and a professor's voice (He has a major in L2) reflect on the professional identity development (Gilmore, Hurst, & Maher, 2009) of a class of pre-service teachers involved in narrating the stories of their data-based research.

Learning to do research and report on it presents challenges of many kinds: validity, rigor, impact, relevance, language use, and conciseness, among others (Castillo, 2000). To support the STRs' work it is necessary to implement strategies that allow them to strike a balance among understanding of issues, organization of the literature, data management, and academic writing to produce a coherent and cohesive report (Peterson & Hagen, 1999) while keeping their voice. This paper hopes to be useful to research seminar teachers since some of the strategies included may help undergraduates to approach teaching, reflection, and inquiry.

## **The Background and Rationale Behind L2 Teacher-Research**

The history of language teacher studies based on empirical evidence is not very extensive. For example:

A recent survey by Bernhardt and Hammadou (1987) revealed that the entire population of published documents dealing with foreign language teacher education since 1976 consisted of only 78 articles. Of these articles a mere eight reported empirical data. Bernhardt and Hammadou conclude that the research base in foreign language education consists of "the perceptions of experienced foreign language educators...rather than (of) a principled collection of data and information" (p. 293) on effective teacher education. In other words, the research base consists of "craft" knowledge learned by trial-and-error experience. (Jarvis as cited in Jarvis & Bernhardt, 1987, p. 1)

These authors reporting for The Eric Clearing House on Language and Linguistics affirmed then that the components of teacher education needed revision. From 1987 to today, teacher education curricula in general have changed considerably. The processes of accreditation and other factors such as funding have ignited an interest in including research as a component of the formation of educators. Today, local journals (CALJ, HOW, PROFILE, Gist) or international ones (TESOL Quarterly, ELT Journal, Modern Language Journal, among others) register the trend of studies with more solid quantitative and qualitative data produced by college teachers, in-service and pre-service teachers.

Student-teacher research based on empirical evidence makes up part of the regular pre-service language teacher program subject of this article for it intends to prop up innovation by focusing on the intersection of teaching and research. Inquiry-based teaching, as part of the professional identity development of pre-service L2 teachers, comes from the conviction that today's teachers ought to recognize learner-centeredness. For empowering students, teachers must find out what learners do to cope with learning or study their beliefs

and perceptions. The results of such inquiry aim at enlightening teaching practices and at promoting Agency, understood as taking an active role in the learning process. As Leo Van Lier (2008) puts it:

The main principle involved in agency is that learning depends on the activity and the initiative of the learner, more so than on any “inputs” that are transmitted to the learner by a teacher or a textbook. This does not, of course, diminish the need for texts and teachers, since they fulfill a crucial mediating function, but it places the emphasis on action, interaction and affordances, rather than on texts themselves. Although this is nothing new if we take seriously the writings of Comenius, Vygotsky, Montessori, Dewey and many other educational thinkers over the centuries, it is good to remind ourselves of the wisdom of this fundamental pedagogical principle. (p. 1)

Thus, it is claimed here that student-teachers need to conduct an inquiry to better understand Agency and to make attempts at creating learning environments favorable to its emergence and development. In keeping with the abovementioned premise, this article presents the STR's voice and then the professor's voice regarding how they work toward this endeavor.

## **The Student-Teacher-Researcher's Voice**

Ms. Díaz had almost completed her course work when she and two classmates collected data to identify a problematic situation where they were doing their teaching practicum. Ms. Díaz's voice of student-teacher will be presented in first person.

“When I started my inquiry it seemed like an endless task that involved library and data base search (Science Direct, Proquest, DOAJ, Redalyc, etc.) plus preliminary data analysis, and drafting chapters of the monograph. It took me a lot of reading for narrowing down the topic and a lot more for making decisions on the research methodology (Freeman, 1998; Mills, 2007; Yin, 2008). I struggled to find a style that would meet the conventions of academic writing and that at the same time would represent my voice.

“For narrating the story of my inquiry on *creative writing to promote tolerance* (Bohórquez, Díaz, & Wilches, 2012) I found the strategy of analyzing examples of other studies related to my topic valuable. I could get a better idea of what I wanted on how others had conducted the study and if the topic was worth it. The familiarization with a large number of publications related to my topic helped me find my style. Journal articles, books, thesis and monographs, in that order, inspired me as to what to include, what to discard, and what language to use.

“For finding my voice, I realized that I needed to balance conciseness and completeness continuously relating ideas to my assumptions and to my experiences. At first, I wrote a lot about the same idea, like going in circles. Strategies of peer editing, pondering other studies in class, synthesizing concepts in diagrams, and proofreading enabled me to learn how to get my point across. For example, using Wordle™ to obtain a visual representation of my different

drafts proved very useful to know if my writing reflected my main points. As an example, in the Appendix, you can find a representation that ranks the concepts of this article in a visual display.

“For pursuing my work and not to give up trying, I learned to accept my classmates and my professors’ feedback graciously. At the start, I was so involved in my project that I would be annoyed by comments I did not want to hear about its scope or about its limitations. In retrospect, I can say that with feedback I learned to be humble to accept my limitations and proud to position myself when I felt I had the evidence to back up my claims. Similarly, laborious toil with the APA style allowed me to integrate the feedback on the formal aspects of the report while the constant review of the literature permitted me to address the issues of scope and validity (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Merriam, 1998).

“In addition, I reminded myself that the report had to be as self-contained and as comprehensible as possible. I also learned from my peer’s work; I took note of what they included or discarded and how they presented their project.

“I can also say that being engaged in an inquiry helped me grow as a person and as a professional. I was able to learn about the complexities of the classroom and of doing teacher-research. I not only got a better picture of what it takes to engage in such a demanding task but I became aware that good teaching must be accompanied by inquiry.

“To wrap up, I learned to make decisions on relevance. I sometimes got carried away with a topic and included long discussions that lost the reader. I had to learn to make sure that all the pieces fit together in a coherent way (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004) and for attaining that coherence I realized, for example, that reading journal reports helped me refine the question; and in turn the question fed my data analysis and vice versa. This cyclical process is expanded in the next section.”

## **The Professor’s Voice**

To provide context for the reader, the research component of the major in TEFL is briefly described, followed by a more detailed discussion of the procedures and strategies used to help STRs to reflect on teaching and to have their voices heard in their reports.

In the first four terms of their TEFL studies, the importance and contribution of philosophy, psychology, and other disciplines to education is highlighted. In fifth semester, students learn to build the state of the art of a topic in pedagogy. From this term on, the writing and presentation of their projects are done in English. In sixth semester, learners contrast research paradigms within reports of published studies. In seventh semester, they identify a problem that is worth studying. They also determine the type of data they should collect and how they plan to do it. In eighth semester they should be ready to decide on a

research design as well as defend a detailed plan of their pedagogical intervention that would hopefully solve the problem identified. In ninth semester, they implement their pedagogical intervention, in the form of an instructional design, and start analyzing the data. In tenth semester they refine their report with the assistance of their director and three other professors.

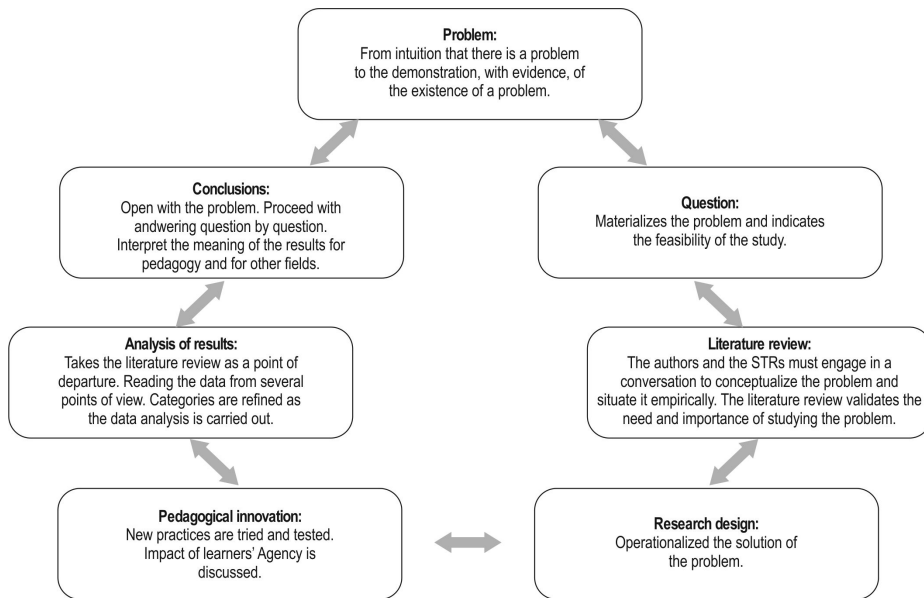
Although such description seems linear, the process is actually cyclical; the novice teacher-researcher refines the problem, the questions, and elaborates on their constructs as they progress as was stated by the student's voice above. Commonly, STR's written and oral reports fail to make explicit that they are seeking some sort of learner agency in the classroom although they are concerned with aspects such as participation, learner autonomy, language development, etc. In addition, reports tend not to include the STRs' investment in the issues under discussion, for example: What motivated them to do the study, what assumptions did they make, or how did the topic connect to their own experience? So the course strategies aim at assisting learners to write a monograph which makes explicit why the topic was chosen and how it connects to their interests and life experiences.

Adjusting writing to be consistent, to meet academic standards using APA, and at the same time project their teacher's voice becomes fundamental; and so is the search for correspondence between what STRs claim and the evidence. The relevance of the literature review to the project and the authority of the sources constitute another issue. In addition, weaving the constructs and weighing the results of related research reports are considered.

From my involvement in teacher education I have realized that certain strategies contribute to providing spaces for reflection and for STRs to find their own voices. For example, moving from the parts to the whole and vice versa so that, for instance, as STRs concentrate on a section of their report they stay focused on the inquiry, on the questions and on the concerns of validity as well. This dynamic is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 illustrates how the work on each component informs the other components. The definitions included are talked over to enhance comprehension. For instance, to address the STRs' knowledge on the topic and on the problem, in their complexity, they are encouraged to read the literature to develop an understanding of how these relate (Barboza, 2004). From the start, attempts are made to encourage STRs to discuss with empirical evidence and support of the literature the existence of a problem that can be researchable with the resources required. It is hoped this practice will enable participants to refine their posing of questions and to debate or discuss the constructs of the literature review.

Similarly and as a strategy, in the pedagogical innovation STRs put on paper how they understand learning, how they understand teaching, and how they understand language supported by the literature reviewed.



**Figure 1.** The Cyclical Nature of a Research Project

In-class data analysis gives STRs the opportunity to frame and assign meaning to the evidence they found. The display and verbalization of patterns and categories help to clarify the meaning of the issues under scrutiny.

Another strategy to enrich their reflections and voices involves talking to scholars from other communities who come to the campus or who present their studies away from the campus. STRs also receive support to deal with the “invisible challenges of presenting and publishing” as Pearson and Vandrick (2003, p. 5) call it. They are invited to present their project in the school where the pedagogical intervention was carried out and likewise on and off campus.

The strategies and mechanisms described above guide STRs to recognize agency in the L2 class. These tools help them become aware of their investment and of the need to use their own voices to meet the challenge of moving from inquiry to understanding (Freeman, 1998).

Participants evaluated the strategies used in the course very positively. They concurred that they build their self-confidence and shape their professional teaching identity. However, as the saying goes: *with duty comes responsibility*, and at the start of the courses some of the

learners' work is not quite up to par. So, provisions are made for individual advising to help some students catch up. Communication and feedback constitute the backbone to support the academic progress.

In sum, to shape a professional teaching identity the strategies used may offer an opportunity to acknowledge “the kinds of investment individuals need to make in order to sustain and develop quality teaching over the course of a career” (Minott, 2006, p. 4). The procedures described guide the acknowledgement of the L2 learners' Agency and the STRs' personal investment in the project. The dialogs between theory and practice, claims and evidence, STRs and peers, and between professors and STRs promote venues for reflection and for expression of the STRs' voices. The process can be facilitated when a collaborative team of professors, the advisor included, meet to listen, evaluate, and provide feedback on the progress of the reports.

A limitation that has been identified is that, in general, although the majority of undergraduate projects demonstrate with evidence that the pedagogical innovation made a difference on the learners, most have difficulty demonstrating any other impact. This aspect requires consideration; conceivably, a closer institutional connection needs to be made between the university and the schools where the teaching practicum and the projects are conducted. Further studies and actions would be needed to engage STRs, the school teachers, and the administrators to seek collaborative action research (Burns, 1999) as a path to enrich classrooms. In this way the STR's voice would have a more resonant echo.

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