Recommendations to Implement in Language Programs

Edmundo J. Mora
Aaron Scott Rogers
University of Nariño, Pasto-Colombia

Basically when a foreign language is being learnt, one must work with three components (the component of methodology, research and language) in the programs designed to prepare language graduates. This paper is designed to help the teacher and the student in how to include these elements within the classroom and therefore as a consequence enrich the learning experience while at the same time improve the quality of the program in general.

1. The Component of Methodology

It is useful to remember that a curriculum for foreign languages must be holistic, dynamic, flexible and have integration, and whose function has to proceed toward forming autonomous teachers. This concept has serious complications for the component of methodology, as well as for other components of the curriculum. In the field of methodology it means that the two central concepts of this focus are the praxis and the dialogue, the first consists in reflection and action concerning the changing of the world (Freire, 1976), the second deals with the educational context, the place where the practice takes place, whose purpose is to stimulate new ideas,

opinions, perceptions, rather than just changing existing ones. That is to say, that the productive element must be encouraged, this obviously implies creativity, instead of the simple mechanical reproduction of pre-established models, that have produced undesirable results in some cases.

In this way of thinking, as much for teachers as for students, it is necessary for them to look at their own role and that of others from a different perspective. "Students cannot be considered simply as receivers of knowledge. The opposite, in fact, they provide a great understanding of the world and of their role as students in different contexts. They must see themselves as autonomous and investigative people and as apprentices." (Richards, 1998). In this order of ideas it is important to take into account the observations of Gattegno (1986) concerning students, when he indicates that these are systems of learning, powerfully motivated by situations of learning. These are situations that deal with intelligent and imaginative people that recognize the weaknesses of the mechanical memory, but are also conscious of the influence of the cognitive processes involved in a learning

task, like recognition, association, generalization, deduction, etc. That is to say that the students must realize that they can do a lot from a little, making something functional in which they must put effort, desire and energy in order to learn. In the same way a teacher must not only be considered as a provider of knowledge, whose only function is to transmit and tell the students what to do and how to do it.

"In this sense, the teacher fulfils a variety of functions, as well as being a provider, he/she is also considered as a guide, a support, an organizer of knowledge and a presenter of alternatives. In other words, someone who stimulates the students so that they produce what they already know, so that they become aware of the processes that they are using, so that the areas that must be studied are emphasized, so that reflection is provoked and so that he/she guides them to use their knowledge as a base for future development." (Wallace, 1991).

In the component of methodology, the new role of the teacher and the student and the concept of input must take place through the preparation of teaching techniques that relate knowledge of experience to the knowledge received. These must be conceived in terms of learning results. That is to say, one must consider what the teachers will do and what is expected from the students – teachers.

It is also important to promote different ways of grouping the students in the class. In this way, Harmer (1997) makes some

important points. Traditional distribution occurs basically in activities controlled by the teacher. Generally, this distribution is apparent in the reproduction phase of the class, in which the teacher fulfils the role of controller and assessor. This group organization has its advantages and disadvantages. Among the most prominent, one can see the following, that in these cases all the classes are dedicated to working, so therefore it will not necessarily be like this; the teacher has control over all the individuals in so much as he decides what to do and how to do it. For their part the students do not feel pressured in participating, this situation provides security and comfort, unless the teacher decides to make personal contact. Nevertheless, the disadvantages of this kind of work can be summarized in this way: the students do not feel the obligation to give all in their learning due to the fact that they are content to just receive from the teacher; the time given to participation per individual is limited given that the groups generally outnumber 20 students, a situation that complicates personal attention by the teacher and also could cause other students to dedicate themselves to doing activities which are not related to the topic. This grouping does not allow the advanced students to work at an appropriate rhythm for their level, neither does it allow them to carry out communication exercises.

* **Working in Pairs**

This kind of work is interesting because it increases the amount of time left for practicing by the students and it also

intensifies the time for cooperation among them. Naturally this distribution also presents some difficulties. For example, one can intensify the use of the native language in monolingual courses; thus in the same way problems of discipline can be increased; and as a consequence this depends on the control that the teacher exercises in the class. Also, one should have in mind that pair work works better in certain phases of the class, e.g. for an activity of creative and active use, like reproducing dialogues with small modifications.

• **Working in Groups**

Like working in pairs, this grouping intensifies the time for practicing the material. This setting is much more dynamic because there are more people participating, a situation that increases confidence and cooperation among its members. However, this grouping also presents similar difficulties to those of working in pairs. Furthermore, in this particular case it is not convenient to form groups of 7 or 8 people. It is more advisable to have up to 4 or 5 members in any one group. Even so, it is difficult to group students of similar characteristics and level. To not make this a problem one can recur to the flexibility of groups. That is to say, students rotate from one group to another, at the same time as the activity is being developed.

The preparation of teachers must point to the achievement of four results: the acquisition of knowledge; reflection concerning this knowledge; the putting into

practice which implies an active and deep process; the application of the knowledge and the evaluation of the content and process followed in the previous phases. This last phase is of special importance since it offers the possibility to detect problems and take corrective measures, with the aim of redoing the work so as to be able to attain the proposed objectives.

It is pertinent to establish the difference among practices so as to wake up the conscious and experience. The first must stimulate what the student brings to class. In this category class observation is included, this can be general / open and focused on precise aspects, with a particular purpose. "For its part, the practice of experience has to be seen as an appropriate technique to develop reflection concerning their own experience before being a technique to mould behaviour." (Wallace, 1991). Thus, in this way these practices contribute in forming autonomous and critical students.

The observation must consist in a source rich in opportunities to analyze, discuss and select, so as to be able after to carry it over to a real context in the practice. In the same way, the first must not only become a learning towards the professional but also a psychological training that allows the student – teacher to provide him/herself with the best conditions for his/her later professional function.

a. **Activities for the Preparation of Future Teachers.**

• **Videos of real classes:** These are rich sources of information, as they give

examples of real scenes of teaching. The analysis can be centered on key aspects like class administration, correction of errors, etc. Ideally, these must be accompanied with manuals that suggest different follow-up activities. The videos can concentrate on complete classes or on specific sections, i.e. motivation, presentation of material, etc. The activities with these tips can be developed in conceptual classes like Methodology and Paradigms of Pedagogical Research, Linguistic and Pedagogic Ways of Thought, Micro – teaching or similar courses.

• **Printed Lessons:** These are another important source to provide information. They allow for a more detailed inspection and analysis and an easy way in which one can develop other material. This activity can be implemented in the courses mentioned in the previous point.

• **Class Observation:** It must be general / open and then directed. This activity must be followed up with activities that help focus on fundamental aspects of TESOL. Among these are mentioned socialization, forums, workshops, interviews, etc. These have the purpose of guaranteeing consistency and objectivity in observation, as they must be handed in written in formats that have been designed for this purpose by experts in the field.

• **Micro – teaching:** This is carried out in a real context, with class plans designed through the understanding of models and theories examined in the courses of Didactics. Micro – teaching will take place in such subjects as Theories and Models of

General and Specific Curriculum for the Learning of the English Language and in Didactics, Evaluation and Pedagogic Materials for the Learning of English, Pedagogic and Curricular Theories in Foreign Languages or similar courses. This activity should be complemented with debates, forums, among others.

• **Text Material:** Samples of good and bad material, appropriate and inappropriate can be used as an important information to stimulate consciousness among the students in the learning process of foreign languages. In the case of deficient material, you can ask the students to note the weaknesses and then get adequate material to replace them.

• **Class Plans:** In addition to preparing class plans, the students can develop different themes based on authentic plans or on plans designed to illustrate specific points. This activity will take place in the courses indicated in the section of micro – teaching. It is suggested to check various class plans from different authors, with the aim of agreeing upon one that joins all the possible aspects together and that must include a well structured and trustworthy plan.

• **Case Studies:** These are another important source of information. They can be studies of specific classes of a particular teacher or a student or of complete classes. These studies can take place in courses like Paradigms and Methodology of Pedagogic Investigation, Micro – teaching, TESOL Methods, etc.

The next list includes several operations that will make the students apply the aspects previously mentioned.

- **Comparison:** Ex: "Look at the two class plans and decide which you prefer and why, taking into account the different phases of a class."
- **Preparation:** Prepare a marking system to correct the written work on the verb 'to be'.
- **Evaluation:** After watching the extract of the video, evaluate the effectiveness of the treatment applied by the teacher in the dealing with oral mistakes, for the presentation of the topic using the criteria studied in the Methods class.
- **Improvement:** Read the following case of a lecture program, paying particular attention to the author's own evaluation. What suggestions can be made to improve the program?
- **Adaptation:** Adapt the following exercise to introduce an 'information gap'.
- **Lists:** Look at the class plan and make a list of the different kinds of mistakes that the students make in the assimilation phase.
- **Selection:** With the list of mistakes form the class plan, decide which you would choose to correct if you were the teacher, say why?
- **Classification:** Examine the material and then grade it according to its criteria, in so much as the amount of "communicative activity" that it causes.
- **Addition and Complementation:** Review the article, and make a list of the principles needed to teach the reading, Would you like to add more?
- **Re – ordering:** Look at a video of a teacher organizing work in groups. Make a

list of the steps that he follows. What changes would you make to the order observed.

As you can appreciate in the previous considerations, the different activities "make the pedagogic practice integral and investigative which is useful as a channel for becoming more familiar with the characteristics of a future professional of education. Also it helps him understand more the educational reality in which he/she will be working every day. He/she must become a true medium of application, dissertation, example and analysis of educational experience who widens the development of communicative skills" (Document of the Faculty of Education, University of Nariño, 2001).

The case studies and class observations, will be valuable sources in detecting possible research problems that at the same time become pieces of work that are useful for their thesis that can also be validated in the exercise of teacher practice in the final semesters.

2. The Component of Research

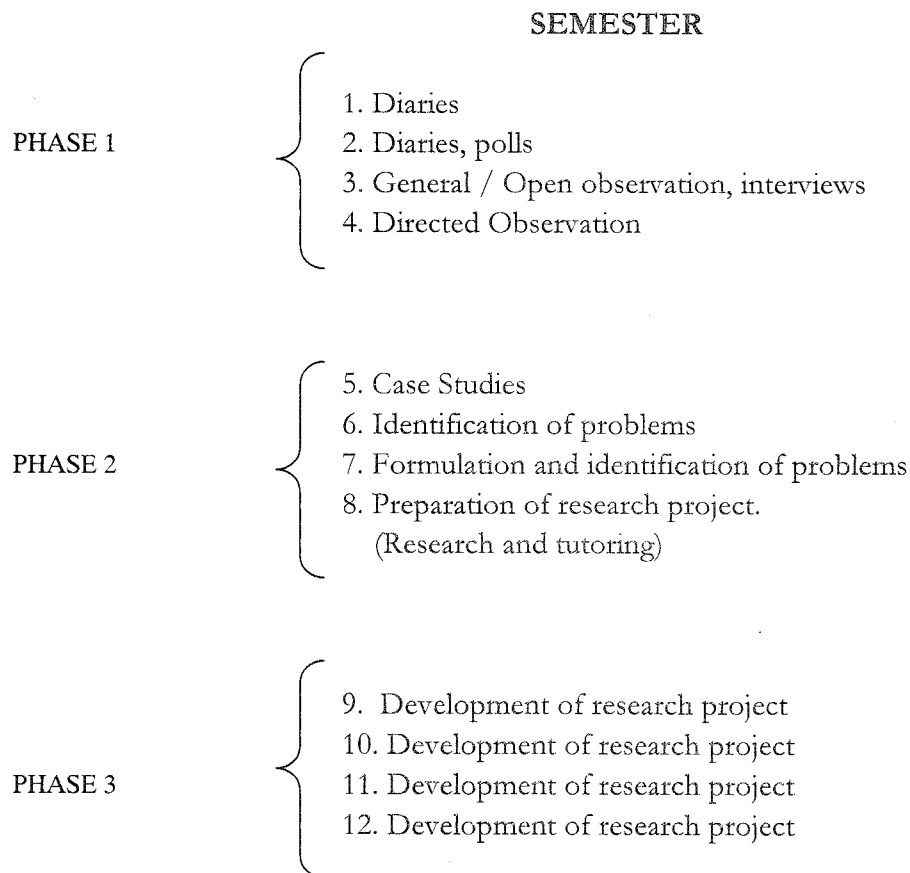This component should be developed through a continuous cycle of reflection, within a systematic spiral framework, that allows the students to think about and form more exact research projects. The following outline sums up the way in which one can include and work this component in language programs.

Phase 1: It hopes to increase the awareness of the students towards their own behaviour in the classroom.

Phase 2: This is designed for reflection concerning the teaching and learning processes.

Phase 3: This leads towards the development of trust in the use of different models of research for the professional development and for the elaboration of a final piece of work.

SEMESTER

PHASE 1
1. Diaries
2. Diaries, polls
3. General / Open observation, interviews
4. Directed Observation

PHASE 2
5. Case Studies
6. Identification of problems
7. Formulation and identification of problems
8. Preparation of research project.
   (Research and tutoring)

PHASE 3
9. Development of research project
10. Development of research project
11. Development of research project
12. Development of research project

The distribution of these phases should be arranged depending on the number of semesters offered by each university.

PHASE 1: During this stage practice will be dealt with in the form of diaries, surveys and observations. These will be used to collect information. What is important in this exercise is to familiarize the students with observation and reflection so that they benefit from this activity and use the diaries as a kind of important tool in their professional training.

PHASE 2: The acquired experience in the elaboration of the diaries and observation will be a starting point for the identification of concrete problems that deserve later study and dedication, for the development of a research project.

PHASE 3: Once the work plan has been designed, its execution will be carried out, so that the student can finish his/her research at the same time as the regular courses in his/her study plan. This has to be a major concern due to the fact that in some institutions the students finish their classes and then have to spend years so that they can finish their research project. This obviously is un-motivating and hinders the development of the future graduates.

With the phases previously indicated it is hoped that the students become familiar from the beginning of the degree program with the component of research and that they acquire in this way a solid foundation, driven by a high degree of motivation, information, practice, reflection and objectivity.

To achieve the aforementioned, all the teachers, in their respective lessons must create spaces and activities, according to the corresponding phase, so as to give the adequate training and therefore, develop skills in the students that take them toward the development of a serious and systematic piece of work.

The reflection and self – evaluation will be maintained through the component of research. The following guide, adapted from the work of Jones and Bray (1986) will be used in different moments of the component. A copy of this should be filed as a record of progress of the students. The original is returned with recommendations. This procedure enriches the knowledge and experience obtained by the student in his/her reflection.

GUIDE OF SELF – EVALUATION

Name:

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1. Doing this activity, I learnt:

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2. Doing this piece of work, I had these difficulties:

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3. I think I could improve if:

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4. The strategies used for this were:

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5. The aspects that I liked about this exercise were:

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6. This exercise helped me to improve my learning and learning strategies in:

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7. The new ideas that I added to my work were:

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8. I asked for support from my teachers for:

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9. I asked for support from my classmates for:

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10. To do my work I obtained evidence of:

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11. I think the quality of my work comes from:

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12. I would like to comment that:

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The previous appreciation concerning the component of research allows us to establish the following:

-   If we demystify the idea that research can be carried out only by scientists, we will be able to contribute in forming researchers with a base in daily experience generated in the classroom.
-   A strategy of research experience can turn us into teachers ready to think in order to improve our work.
-   When we tell the students about the results of the research process we can make them take note of their capacity to continue with their projects.
-   Research helps us to grow professionally.

3.   The Component of Language.

The component of language is the central focus in the implementation of the general framework of a program in foreign languages. In addition to striving for 'proficiency' and creating consciousness of how the language is formed; this component must promote awareness of how the students learn and how they are taught. In the same way a sense of responsibility on behalf of the students, as well as a respect and understanding of a foreign culture must be strengthened.

This component highlights three goals:

-   'Proficiency' of language.
-   Understanding of language.
-   Cultural and affective goals.

a) Proficiency of Language.

One understands 'proficiency' as the capacity to understand and use the language correctly. Naturally the final goal is to train the students to communicate in English. That is to say prepare them so that they can be competent users of this foreign language. The level of 'proficiency' will become apparent in terms of capability to manage the four abilities in an integral way, that is to say, listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Undoubtedly one way to determine the level of 'proficiency', is through the capacity for the person to speak. Generally, this capacity is underestimated, maybe because nearly all of us humans can talk. Speaking is thought to be a popular form of expression that involves a colloquial register because it requires improvisation. Speaking, however is a skill that deserves attention just as much as the literary abilities, be it in the mother tongue or in a foreign language. Our students often need to speak with security so as to carry out the most basic functions. It is the ability through which we are judged. It is a mechanism of social solidarity, professional advance and business. It is the means that leads learning around the world to different contexts. Therefore, the teaching of this

ability deserves more analysis and dedication.

b) Understanding of Language.

A methodological principle in languages states that a language must be taught and not talked about and that grammar must be taught as means to an end – the communication. This affirmation has its justification. The students of language programs will be teachers in the future and for that reason they must have a clear vision of the language as a system. Therefore, knowing Syntax, Morphology and Phonology of English will equip them with the necessary tools to understand the language and thus be better teachers.

c) Cultural and Affective Goals.

A teaching program would be incomplete if the language dimension was ignored. One of the most important goals of the modern study of foreign languages is to emphasize understanding and respect for other cultures. Therefore a positive attitude in the students must be developed towards the communities where the language that is being studied is spoken, and at the same time towards customs and cultural demonstrations.

Taking as a foundation the previous appreciations, some complementary activities should be developed as mechanisms for the intensification of language practice:

- **Conversation Clubs:** These are informal spaces that give rise to a

relaxed and safe atmosphere to practice English.
- **Laboratory Sessions:** These are designed for the purpose of listening to various tasks and the subsequent filling out of correctly structured guides, according to the purpose of the activity.
- **Interviews:** The assistance to interviews with teachers during their office hours by students.
- **Computers:** The assistance to the computer room in order to carry out free or programmed activities, under the supervision of monitors and teachers.
- **Resource Center:** Free or programmed study in the resource center. This center must rely on a good stock of videos, cassettes, magazines, newspapers and books properly used and under the supervision of monitors and teachers.

Among the activities to be developed in the office hours of the teachers and in the classes of English, the following is included:

Exercises in the style of the TOEFL must be carried out, concerning reading, listening, grammar, vocabulary, etc. so as to improve their level of English. In this way they will be prepared for the real test, which they will be able to take in the middle and at the end of their programs. This suggestion has been put forward in meetings by English teachers of the University of Nariño.

The purpose of this test is to evaluate the proficiency in English among the people whose native language is not that of this language. In 1998 – 99, more than 300,000 people around the world took this test in

its computerized version. More than 2400 universities in the USA and Canada demand as a minimum score, 550 in the written TOEFL and 240 in the computerized version from foreign students that want to be admitted to these institutions. This test is also administered by institutions in other countries where English is used as the main language of the institution. Moreover, governmental agencies, scholarship programs, certificate and job agencies internationally require a satisfactory score form this test to be able to judge the person's ability in English.

The test has four compulsory sections:

LISTENING: This measures the ability to understand English just as it is spoken in North America. This part tests understanding of main ideas, secondary ideas, important details and inference.

STRUCTURE: This measures the ability to recognize the most appropriate language within what is denominated standard written English. The language tested is formal instead of conversational. When the topics have a national context, these are referred to in a historical way.

READING: This evaluates the ability to understand short passages similar in style and content to academic texts used in North american universities.

WRITING: This values the ability to write in English with discussion and coherence on topics of general interest.

Each university should establish within their study plan the official application of the TOEFL test to students of the foreign language degree programs. The previous suggestions could be considered to contribute in some way to bettering the standard of English teaching in Colombia.

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