# Promoting research in the teaching-practice of the modern language licenciatura programs

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a research process that should be applied by teacher-trainees and advisors for their own educational activities. The most relevant aspect of a quantitative or qualitative research process is to identify personal meanings about pedagogical contexts in which educators are situated. The teacher as a researcher would identify educational needs in order to improve and qualify his/her action. Teachers and students may be able to identify the broad problem areas that are most closely related to their interests and professional goals. Research becomes more than informing; it is in fact transforming.

The present project refers to an innovation that the advisors of the Modern Languages Licenciatura Program of the University of Caldas have made to solve some deficiencies presented during the teacher training process. Such innovation is geared to help both advisors and trainees to improve their actions by transferring research processes into practice in order to understand and qualify classroom life. Taking into account that the teaching practice at the University has two main requirements, the teaching-learning process and a research project, we consider that the teaching practice I and II is a research process in itself consisting of institutional diagnosis, identification of a problem, execution, and evaluation.

The work presented here fits into the following Research Lines: Pedagogy and Culture, and Methodology and Strategies for Language Teaching.

The research design has been carried out in three phases:

-An experimental stage in which a sample of eight students was chosen to be prepared as researchers. This group applied qualitative and quantitative tools in their classroom and wrote pedagogical knowledge in which they were able to reflect over their daily experience in the classroom.

-A study group of advisors was formed to read, discuss and write documents about the research methods transferable to practice, as well as to publish pedagogical papers.

-A third phase is being developed to implement and evaluate the whole process in an integrated body with both advisors and trainees.

## RATIONALE

Educational research has become a very important issue since it helps teachers confront new perspectives of education

related to human development as well as the advancement of science, technology, society, culture, learning and teaching. Thus, teacher training formation plays a crucial role in the quality of education.

Colombia has a multitude of socio-economic, political, pedagogical and technological problems to solve. Research and educational goals have changed substantially since the beginning of the twentieth century. Many different types of research are applicable to educational practice. Weinert (1997: 266) says: "The practical application of research consists of more than the instrumental use of research findings. In addition, science and research have an educational function; that is, they provide individuals with knowledge about themselves and the world, and allow individuals to act rationally".

How can research be made more useful to English teachers? How can science actually contribute to solve practical problems in the English classroom? The relation between research and educational practice is complex and difficult. Most research projects in education are conducted with the purpose of improving pedagogical practice. The primary goal of classroom research is to improve the conditions of learning. The required theoretical insights and the ways that scientific findings should be transferred into teaching practice to attain pedagogical goals are issues that have not yet been understood in our Licenciatura program. The applicability of educational science for educational practice is limited.

Serving society is the ultimate objective of educational research. A successful practical application of educational research has not been made. Therefore, English teachers can contribute to improve the quality of education by transferring research into practice. Research can be used not only to improve existing educational contexts, institutional organizations, and teaching-learning conditions, but also to innovate new models for schooling.

Although there are no general rules or strategies for transferring research into practical solutions, it is possible and important to transfer research findings into the language of the teacher-trainees. Theoretical discussions and practical proposals are available in education.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

The fact that educational research is not carried out as fast as it should to adapt to changing teaching-learning demands is the main problem to which this project responds. Quite often isolated theoretical research courses do not give the teacher-trainees elements that are easily transferable to new situations in their teaching practice.

For years, we have been preparing "Licenciados" who should undertake the responsibility of teaching high school or elementary students in Colombia. However, we consider that this preparation should be improved in order to form citizens who can face the challenges of modern education.

Previously, students were engaged in the teaching practice for the last two semesters of their study program in which they devoted most of their time teaching students something about the language. The advisors focused their attention just on the methodological procedures developed by their trainees. Later on, the directors of

the teaching practicum involved the trainees in carrying out work projects which somehow could solve some problems in the classroom or in the institution. Most of the projects took care of the weaknesses students presented in reading and writing . Such projects did not really involve either teachers or students in a reflection of their teaching learning processes.

Recent reform efforts that challenge the traditional teaching practice call for change. The following practical limitations have been observed:

1. The lack of model classrooms where the teacher-trainees can observe appropriate research processes.

2. The lack of academic policies related to the role of educational research in the graduate programs at the University.

3. The lack of resources, equipment, facilities and time both for teacher-trainees and advisors to carry out systematic and appropriate innovations during the teaching-practice.

4. The marked lack of relationship between previous training and the field of practice.

5. The English teachers' work is not organized under unifying principles associated with research concepts.

6. Sometimes, school administrators, teachers, and parents don't understand research projects. They are doubtful of educational research and are likely to be critical in their appraisal.

7. Additionally, certain adverse conditions impede implementation of a good research project in public institutions such as overcrowded classrooms, deficient funds, lack of incentives, and limited emphasis on scientific enquiry.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There are four main questions to be answered with the present project: If young teacher-trainees transfer research processes into their classrooms,

- will they be able to identify educational problems?

- will they improve and change the teaching-learning process?

- will they transform their actions as educators?

- will they be able to produce pedagogical knowledge?

## PURPOSES

The main purpose of this project is to introduce a new potential of young researchers of the Modern Languages Licenciatura Program to the concept and practice of educational research in order to improve and qualify their actions as educators. Teacher/trainees will be able to transfer scientific knowledge to real situations in their field of practice.

This project intends to transform, to a certain extent, external advisor (supervisory) methods used especially in the last two semesters in order to promote self-reflection and decision making by the young teacher-trainees.

## OBJECTIVES

### General Objectives

To enable young teacher-trainees to transfer research processes to new situations in their field of practice in a meaningful way.

To qualify the teacher-trainees in order to apply research processes as a way to help them to reduce the gap between theory and practice and to develop a deeper understanding of the real-world experiences in the classroom.

### Specific objectives

To formulate relevant problems for the advancement of the pedagogical practice as a particular field of study oriented to improve specific changes, to transform and to innovate their action as educators.

To collect, analyze and interpret data according to a systematic plan in order to write pedagogical texts grounded in the real practice in the classroom and the school.

To introduce new ways of innovating the advisor observation tasks in the seventh and eighth semesters of the Modern Languages Licenciatura Program according to the scientific principles about the teaching-learning and formative processes as a whole.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Educational research

While studying the theories, this research group has noted a better understanding of our field of pedagogical knowledge. Scientific literature has been analyzed in order to illuminate new pathways that lead toward new educational goals. Scientific issues related to the formation of teachers as researchers have concerned some theorists and approaches all over the world: Kemmis and McTaggart (1985), Stenhouse (1975), Schön (1983), Elliott (1993), Howe (1988), Campbell (1974), and Kuhn (1975). The following statements were derived from theory: What does educational research mean? Does educational research play a crucial role in the quality of education? What is the role of educational research in the teacher training Licenciatura program?

Educators as research workers must have a thorough, clear and detailed research framework. Educational research applies different paradigms borrowed from the social and physical sciences. It is difficult to elaborate a more precise classification because of the multiple and sometimes confusing terminology used by the researchers. However, the most common names are: Epistemological paradigm, scientific paradigm, humanistic paradigm, positivistic paradigm, experimentalist paradigm, interpretativist paradigm, critical-reflective paradigm, action research, classroom research, emergent paradigm, grounded theory, ethnometodology, ethnography, ethnolinguistic paradigm, hypothetical-deductive paradigm, explanatory-comprehensive paradigm, and so on. This long list can be reduced into: positivistic paradigm and interpretativist paradigm (quantitative/ qualitative).

The research enterprise in education employs a wide variety of approaches. Social sciences use the qualitative paradigm while physical sciences apply the quantitative paradigm. The quantitative paradigm is positivistic, hypothetical-deductive, experimentalist, objective,

outcome-result-oriented. In contrast, the qualitative paradigm is phenomenological, hermeneutic, inductive, holistic, subjective, process-oriented and social anthropological. Explanation versus comprehension, stable versus dynamic, multiple versus single case study, verification versus discovery are the fundamental distinctions between the paradigms.

The traditional debate demands the rejection of two or more paradigms of inquiry. Traditional researchers advocate rivalry. They believe that the compatibility is merely apparent. The quantitative-qualitative distinction operates within the four basic components of research practice: data, design, analysis, interpretation of results.

Beyond the qualitative versus quantitative approaches for conducting educational research, the aim is to show that the quantitative-qualitative distinction is a false argument. It is a fallacy that can result from the vague and ambiguous nature of the debate. The article *Against the quantitative-qualitative incompatibility thesis* is a new contribution of Howe (1988). He argues that no incompatibility between quantitative and qualitative methods exists at either the level of practice or that of epistemology. Howe's paper offers an alternative view: the 'compatibility thesis'. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods in educational research is often required. The compatibility thesis holds that there are important senses in which both methods are inseparable. The research activity has a unity of purpose and a unified epistemological basis. As a consequence, no distinction is necessary. The knowledge generated by research activity must be discussed, stored and structured in a coherent body to be used by teachers.

**Teachers are active thinkers**

As a human being, the teacher is a thinker. Knowledge, science, learning, thought and language are human activities. Problems and ideas do not germinate in barren brains. They germinate in active minds enriched by varied experiences. Problems are neither discovered nor solved by passive people. Knowledge is advanced by curious and creative minds. Creative thought is not a step by step procedure following mechanical directions. A successful research worker or a scientist may appear to solve problems magically. But, months or years of patient study are necessary. A long continuous period of arduous intellectual effort may ensure an adequate and successful flow of ideas. According to Souriau (1881:17) "even genius has need of patience. It is after hours and years of meditation that the sought-after idea presents itself to the inventor. He does not succeed without going astray many times; and if he thinks himself to have succeeded without effort, it is only because the joy of having succeeded has made him forget all the fatigues, all of the false leads, all of the agonies, with which he has paid for his success".

The teacher as a thinker refuses rigid routines and conformity. He adopts a critical attitude toward the information, generalizations, and assumptions. He maintains an insatiable curiosity about the world. He keeps asking questions: Is it true? Is there a better explanation for this phenomenon? Are the new approaches the best approaches? An intelligent investigator always explores questions. Pedagogical practice comes alive as teachers decide

what kinds of activities they will try and how they will reflect about what happens in the real world.

Human beings are always solving problems. During a research process, something puzzles or disturbs the researcher. In the field of education, the teacher as a knower will be able to recognize difficulties. His alert mind, sensitively studying classroom situations, can discover whether problems can be solved. Fruitful ideas flow when he is trying to put disturbed thoughts into some meaningful order. Marvelous ideas also flow unexpectedly while the teacher (as an investigator) is talking with friends, listening to a lecture, teaching a class, reading a book, or relaxing. Problems in education are multiform and multipurpose.

Research is concerned with the processes of inquiry. A few years ago, writing a scholarly paper as well as taking an elementary statistics course were the main research experiences that many educators received. In the research-oriented world of today, a world of revolutionary developments in science and technology, universities must train a new generation of researchers. The gap between educators and scientific communities has to be closed.

## METHODOLOGY

**Design:** This project assumes the principles and features of the Action Research Approach (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1985) which are linked in the spiral cycle: observing, questionning, reflecting, decision-making, planning, acting, reflecting, writing... and beginning again.

- **Target population and subjects:** teacher-trainees of the Modern Languages Licenciatura program. This group is developing the professional teaching practice at Basic Education institutions (public High Schools and Primary Schools in Manizales).

- **Instruments and techniques**: according to the requirements of pedagogical practice, we need to use qualitative and quantitative instruments and techniques: class observations, case study, life histories, autobiographies, diaries, records, transcripts, documents, interviews, pedagogical files, attitude scales, questionnaires, surveys, descriptive statistics, experiments and quasi experiments.

## *PARTIAL FINDINGS*

When we first started introducing our teacher trainees to develop research work at the institutions where they do their teaching practice, we noticed a great anxiety because they did not know how to approach the problem to investigate.

They neglected the simple happenings of the school life. They did not find meaning into these events. They were vague in asking research questions. They drew false clues, fruitless ideas, collected irrelevant data and they had a hard time setting their objectives. Moreover, they found their writing task very difficult, the ideas did not flow easily and whatever they wrote they considered was not relevant enough. They depended a lot on the advisors' suggestions. They were not aware about the fact that any research project constantly changes because of the complexity of human beings who are the main participants in this type of research –action research.

As they advanced in the research process through several workshops given by the advisors, they were able to bring their problems into a clearer focus by identifying intervention points. As a result, they started to ask more specific questions. They became more reflective about their own teaching and they were more assertive in making their decisions. They finally began to comprehend deeply the reality of the school life. They became more critical, analytical and were able to draw better conclusions. Their writing improved a great deal, not only in the way they expressed their ideas, but they were also more profound in their descriptions as well as in the interpretations of the data collected. In short, they developed a better ability to be more coherent in the way of thinking, feeling and acting.

As far as the advisors are concerned, a culture of team work has been enhanced. A lot of ideas are being shared throughout the study sessions we had periodically. We grew up as an academic community and started to take our first steps in writing pedagogical knowledge based on research processes.

At this point of the research process, we are verifying that the reflective experience produces knowledge.

## EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- A pedagogical diary as a didactic material.
- A set of articles to be published. (Pedagogical writings).
- A book or a handbook to be published aimed at teachers, students and researchers.
- A structural framework about educational research as a guideline to transform the teaching practice I and II in the curriculum of the Modern Languages Licenciatura program.
- A group of new graduate research-teachers which will be able to design projects and to transform pedagogical processes by transferring research into practice.

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