



## STEPS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING SKILLS

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**ABSTRACT:** This article summarizes and analyzes the findings of one aspect of a research project that explored a proposal mediated by ICT, for the professional development of a group of teachers of English. The general objective of the project was to analyze the effect of the proposal on the development of the listening skills, Intercultural Competence, and professional development itself of a group of sixteen English teachers from several public schools in Bogotá. One part of the study focused on the teachers' perceptions of the proposal. The other one deals with the aspects that could possibly have an influence on the implementation of the proposal on the daily teaching practice of the participants. The data were gathered through surveys, interviews, and logs, which evidenced that even though teachers value the proposal for its meaningfulness and usefulness, they face various kinds of difficulties and tension in its application.

**Key words:** language transfer, semantic groups, linguistic clues, intercultural Competence

### **Introduction**

In regards to the training of learning strategies, they were taken from the extensive research done by Oxford (1990). Each of those strategies serves a special purpose and therefore, provides the teacher with very helpful tools to improve their listening comprehension skills. Let us now turn to a brief description of them.

**Reasoning deductively:** this strategy deals with phonetic aspects of the language such as stress and intonation which help to determine if the speaker is producing new or given information.

**Language transfer:** the focus of this strategy is on the semantic aspect of the language through instruction on both true and false cognates.



Semantic groups: this strategy is also related to semantics and it deals with the ability to relate words that belong to the same semantic family. It in turn helps to activate already learned vocabulary or acquire new one as well.

Linguistic clues: this strategy facilitates learning of vocabulary by using prefixes or suffixes to understand word formation, and also through the use of synonyms and antonyms, the identification of the order of adjectives, and inference of ideas.

Getting the idea quickly: by using this strategy, learners can reflect upon the processes they go through when understanding general ideas. Some of these processes are: focusing on key words, identifying the kind of discourse, understanding ideas quickly without comprehending the whole text, identifying the speakers intention, etc.

Thought groups: this strategy is directly related to grammar and it focuses on the relationship that exists between different types of clauses, in order to improve comprehension.

The learning strategy training provided teachers with food for thought in terms of reflecting upon new and very important tools they can offer students in order to make their learning process more effective, enjoyable, dynamic, and interesting. Unfortunately, students do not always count on the most useful tools to explode their learning process to the fullest, so it is worthwhile to incorporate this important concept in the language classroom.

#### - Podcasts

According to Fox (2008), Podcasts originated as audio files that were uploaded to the internet and that people downloaded onto a cell phone, mp3 player, or to a computer. They represent a valuable pedagogical tool in the field of language teaching due to the authentic source of exposure to the target language they provide learners with, as opposed to text-based activities.

Since the focus of the present study was to provide teachers with some tools mediated by ICT, podcasts posed a very interesting, authentic, and handy resource to use in order to achieve the main objective. The first step was for some of the researchers to create their own podcasts about topics such as the Intercultural Competence. Thus, teachers had the chance to listen to them and discuss about their contents. The purpose of this activity was to provide teachers with an example that could illustrate the process to design a podcast so that they could emulate it to create their own. Unfortunately, this objective could not be fully achieved due to the fact that only a minority



of the participants in the study actually did it. Nevertheless, teachers expressed their satisfaction about being introduced to this technological tool.

#### **- Workshops and use of videos**

As mentioned earlier, teachers were guided toward the exploration of some of the learning strategies proposed by Oxford (1990). They worked collaboratively most of the time and with the orientation of the teacher-researchers. The interaction that emerged in the meetings was significant as it helped teachers grasp the content of the sessions. Besides working on learning strategies and after receiving instruction on how to design podcasts, teachers were shown some videos taken from YouTube. Based on their comprehension of these visuals, they designed lesson plans to use them as additional sources in their English classes. Teachers who did not do this task were given some tips on how to incorporate the concept of Intercultural Competence in their classes and help student develop their listening skills as well.

#### **- The research question**

Although the project examined different aspects of the implementation of the methodological proposal mediated by ICT and those aspects are reported elsewhere (Vera, Olaya & Pérez, 2010), an area of inquiry that was of particular interest to the researchers was the perceptions teachers had of the proposal and how they transposed the knowledge acquired about ICT to their pedagogical practices. Consequently, the following questions were formulated:

#### **Teachers' Pedagogical Knowledge and ICT**

Schulmans (1987) seminal work on teachers' professional knowledge highlighted six categories: content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, curriculum knowledge, knowledge of the learner and knowledge of educational goals and philosophy. The categories are enriched by teachers' insights and experiences, which in turn, assign the knowledge base of teachers a dynamic character (Pineda, 2002).

Pedagogical content knowledge is a distinctive feature in Schulman's model and one of paramount importance in ICT application. It refers to the ways teachers represent and communicate knowledge so that students can comprehend it. It "underpins a teacher's ability for pedagogical reasoning and action. The transformation of knowledge takes place when teachers actively grasp, probe and comprehend ideas in order to shape and tailor them in representations



which are appropriate for learners" (Loveless, 2007, p. 510). Such representations, in the ICT field applied in education, imply high levels of complexity as they demand sound pedagogical reasoning from teachers (Webb and Cox, 2004).

Learning environments that include ICT offer affordances that require from teachers reflecting upon the what, how why of a content area as well as the what, how and why of the technologies they can use (Hudson, 2007). An affordance refers to opportunities and limitations in ICT based learning environments that involve interactions between hardware, software, different resources and humans, in this case teachers and students (Webb, 2005). In synthesis, affordances refer to the characteristics and uses of technology. McCrory (2004) clearly illustrates what they are with the following example:

- tracking changes is a feature of a word processor on a personal computer. Editing documents is a use probably conceived of by designers of word processors. Engaging in a writing process is an affordance of a word processor for teachers and students of writing: The technology provides a means to draft, edit, and revise; to keep track of the process; and to share documents (McCrory, 2004 pp. 451-452).

Webb (2005) states that the selection a sound pedagogical practices require that teachers comprehend the links between different ICT affordances and deep knowledge of subject matter content in of a discipline. "Pedagogical reasoning leads to: teachers producing lesson plans and schemes of work that incorporate affordances for learning; and teachers' behaviors during lessons that enable students to benefit from these affordances" (p. 727). For the foreign language teacher this means reflecting upon opportunities and constraints offered by ICT and devising representations of knowledge to facilitate the learning of a language.

### **Teacher professional development**

Research shows that teacher quality is significantly and positively correlated with student attainment and that it is the most important within-school aspect explaining student performance. Its effects are much larger than the effects of school organization, leadership or financial conditions (Hattie 2009, 2012; Meiers and Ingvarson 2005; Veen et al. 2010).

Hattie (ibid.) indicates that six sources influence a student's achievement: 50% is what the student is capable of bringing to the table himself. Other sources are home situations, schools, peer



influences and principals, which altogether make up 20%, leaving a staggering 30% to teachers. So investing in teachers is the most important external key to influence students' achievements.

Laurillard (2012) and Mor and Mogilevsky (2013) see the teacher as the initiator of defining an educational challenge and of the conceptualization of its solution. This, however, means that certain conditions at a teacher's workplace should already be met before this first step can be taken. School leaders should have already facilitated teachers in a way that they are able to devote time to thinking about an educational challenge they would like to address, without being hunted by the school's curriculum and short-term students' achievements. For most secondary school teachers in the Netherlands the situation of the day-to-day practice of teaching (and the curriculum) leaves no room for in-depth research and design initiatives.

In this study we explore the process of teacher professional development and the effect of implementing a new teaching design on the behavior of teachers. This takes place in the context of teaching English pronunciation to secondary school pupils (who from now on we refer to as students) and students at schools for intermediate and higher vocational education (universities of applied sciences).

### **Conclusion**

Researchers and those responsible for education in general, who sometimes have a better overview of existing educational challenges, should always take into account that perfect teaching conditions are never met and that there is a significant number of teachers not able, capable or willing to define educational challenges, design a new pedagogy and get involved in a full cycle of design inquiry. Involving smaller groups of teachers who are able to test and adjust a new pedagogy, might lead to a well-tested and classroom-adjusted pedagogy, which could influence a broader network of teachers and which could even reach those teachers who lack the motivation to get involved in a cycle of design inquiry. The stronger the new pedagogy and the easier to implement it, the more chance of reaching teachers who find it hard to change their classroom practice.

Although the outcome of this intervention demonstrates improved teacher skills and student achievement, we realize that for further studies it is equally important to provide information on



the sustainability of the Teacher Professional Development (TPD)-intervention. What happens if the necessity for active participation in the intervention program is absent, the researchers and program leaders are no longer visiting the workplace and there is no request for pre- and post-intervention data on student achievement and teacher skills anymore? It is important to find out how certain effects of TPD-interventions are embedded in a teacher's day-to-day classroom practice or school organization. We need to detect proof of sustainability of any professional development program and focus on which contexts for promoting professional development influence the sustainability of a TPD-project the most. For this purpose, we plan to revisit all the teachers who were involved in the TPD-intervention program 1 year after the final post-intervention test in test phase 2, in order to research which elements of the TPD-intervention are still present in the day-to-day teaching practice of the teachers. For this, we will not only depend on the teachers' narrative by means of interviews and questionnaires, but also on student classroom experience concerning practicing English pronunciation.

Some of the concerns included in this article about teachers' professional development are shared by other researchers all over the world. One of them is that there should be more support from the government to provide language teachers with professional development programs that include courses that improve both teachers' communicative competence in the foreign language and training on the use of ICT. Moreover, these programs need to be on going for reasonable periods of time, so teachers can go beyond the "Where is the ON Button" stage (Schibeci et al., 2008) and actually transpose the knowledge they acquire to their daily teaching practice. It was noticeable in this project that when teachers were provided with enough opportunities to reflect upon their own learning process, they were more prone to start reflecting on their teaching practices.

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