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EPI-Classroom as an in-service training methodology to improve teacher
performance and professional development

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1. Introduction

This article analyzes the impact of the Inter-Learning Pedagogical Encounter (EPI¹ in Spanish) as an in-service training (INSET) methodology for teacher performance and professional development. EPI is a workshop that involves disciplinary and methodological elements related to content programming (MINED, 2018). It is important to note that EPI is a reform of the Evaluation Programming Workshop and Educational Training (TEPCE² in Spanish). In that regard, researches about TEPCE found that it had bad organization of the time – focused on content programming; not too much on exchanging of strategies-, need for more expert support, and limitations in the access to didactic material (Renta, et al., 2016; Romero, 2017).

In EPI's case, it does not count on previous studies that prove if EPI meets the objectives proposed by MINED, and what is EPI's impact on the performance of the English teachers. Thus, it considered relevant to understand the place where the teachers are trained, and the classroom where they implement the knowledge and skills acquired during the training. This is because many international studies have remarked that INSET is connected with the quality of the teacher performance in the classroom (Mohd, 2014; OECD TALIS, 2009).

Consequently, the research sites selected are: EPI- Classroom for high school English teachers in Estelí, and Santa Cruz National Institute. The institute is located in the countryside of Estelí. It counts with two high school English teachers. The classrooms have the basic material (book, markers, also whiteboard) to develop an English class, but they still face limited access to information and communications technology (ICT) to provide a different input to the students. In contrast, EPI-Classroom has more access to ICT, and more variety of didactic resources than the one observed in the institute.

On that subject, MEIRCA (2012) mentions that one of the challenges Central American English teachers may face, during their professional development, is the contrast between the reality in the training and the classroom. Some other difficulties may be a large amount of students, different

¹ Encuentro Pedagógico de Inter-Aprendizaje.

² Taller de Evaluación, Programación y Capacitación Educativa.

learning styles, student misbehavior, a lack of access to didactic material, teacher demotivation, a lack of expert support, etc. However, Richards & Farrell (2005) claims that well-designed INSET supports the overcoming of any challenge. Concerning this, Darling-Hammond (2017) mentions some components to include in the INSET design, such as content focused, active learning, collaborative work, feedback, pedagogical features, etc. Counting with these elements EPI-Classroom could be considered beneficial for the teacher due to most of those components help teachers to develop their teaching skills.

Observing the challenges teachers face, and the preparation they need to overcome those difficulties, the essence of this study is to show the reality of training in Nicaragua, to provide the educative community an idea about what the real training needs for teachers are, and expecting that as a responsible governmental institution, MINED will continue reforming the system to construct a productive and effective training, where teachers may acquire the professional development to enhance the quality of their performances inside and outside the classroom and to get a significant learning for their students.

To show this reality, and to analyze the impact of EPI in the teacher performance and professional development, we consider the following research question:

- To what extent are EPI related to the performance of the English teacher in the classroom?

2. Literature review

2.1. Teaching-Learning Theory: Social Constructivism and Active Learning

The methods and techniques used during a teacher training can be supported by a wide variety of learning theories, such as the case of the social constructivism and active learning theories which claim that a teacher involved in a training increases his knowledge and skills by interacting with his colleagues. These theories also describe the teacher participation as active in which he designs his own strategies, didactic material, and some other elements to include in a classroom with students (Jordan & Carlile, 2008; Westwood, 2008).

2.2. Reflective and Collaborative Approaches

Following the importance of social interaction in teacher education, the reflective model, reflective teaching, and lesson study support the idea that teachers do not learn in an isolated manner but collaborating to construct their knowledge, and to improve their teaching skills. They need to interact with colleagues to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of some of their teaching methodologies, and as a group to look for solutions to difficulties presented in their classrooms (Wallace, 1991; Lewis & Hurd, 2011; Tice , 2004; Wood & Rawlings, 2017).

2.3. Language Learning Approach: Communicative Approach

In training for English teacher the development of the communicative competence is required. A teacher with a high English level, and with an adequate methodology facilitates the acquisition of the language in his students. For illustrative purposes, we can refer to the communicative approach, in which the learner is able to express his ideas in various real-life situations, for example, making suggestions, invitations, complaining or expressing the time, the weather, etc. Importantly, the teacher should be prepared to develop a class and create an environment in which students express all those ideas as they would do in a real conversation (Richards, 2006, p. 3).

2.4. Effective INSET for English teachers

Darling-Hammond (2017) mentions some elements training should have to impact teacher performance. These are: content centered on teaching strategies related to the curriculum but adaptable to different contexts. Active learning in which teachers design their teaching strategies (pp. 1-4). Additionally, collaborative work between colleagues creates positive changes in the teaching process since teachers exchange and support their ideas. Knowledge of teaching models is also useful for teachers to identify the best pedagogical practices. Besides, feedback and reflection must be present in INSET.

2.5. Evaluation of Teacher Performance

To analyze the impact of an in-service-training program in the teacher performance, it is necessary to observe the whole environment in the classroom and the actions taken by the educator.

Evaluation of job performance includes looking for aspects like lesson planning, student-teacher interaction, group control, understandable instructions, students' performance of the activities, records maintained by the teacher, etc. It is important to notice that this is a procedure followed in most of the educational systems, and it is developed in order to provide some feedback to the teacher about strengths and weaknesses in the performance of his or her job (Danielson, 2014).

3. Materials and Methods

The study sites are Santa Cruz National Institute and EPI-Classroom in Esteli. The population for this research are thirty-two high school English teachers (seventeen from public, nine from private, and six from semi-private schools) that attend to EPI-Classroom in Estelí, and it took a sample of seven teachers to have an overview of their backgrounds. Out of these we chose two teachers belonging to Santa Cruz National Institute to carry out the non-participant observation of their classes.

In relation to the instruments to gather information, it implemented participant observation, non-participant observation, and semi-structured interview. To design each instrument, it took into consideration some features taken from the research theoretical framework. In this regard, Darling-Hammond (2017) claims that reflection, feedback, content focused, collaboration, and pedagogical contribute to the effective implementation of a teacher training. For this reason, the participant observation guide identifies these aspects during EPI-Classroom. Besides, this instrument allowed us to observe the interaction and participation of the thirty-two high school English teachers during the training.

Next, it was relevant to observe the classes to relate EPI-Classroom with the performance of the teachers in their classrooms. For this, we implemented a non-participant observation of the classes. Because we did not have time and resources to observe the thirty-two classrooms, we only took a sample of two teachers belonging to the same institute, in this case, Santa Cruz National Institute. This non-participant observation was based on the model of Charlotte Danielson (2014) who explains the possible features that well teacher performance should include. Once the two sites were observed, it implemented a semi-structured interview to seven teachers, the two teachers whose classes were observed, and five more English teachers from the population.

4. Analysis and discussion

Research Question: To what extent are EPI related to the performance of the English teachers in the classroom?

Jordan & Carlile (2008) states that in social constructivism, social interaction is relevant and it is there where knowledge is built (p. 59). Usually, workshops as EPI include teachers learning by interacting with their colleagues (inter-learning). Supporting this idea, the collaborative approach explains that group work is fundamental to solve the tasks presented in INSET (Wood & Rawlings, 2017). That construction of knowledge through collaborative work allows teachers to increase their teaching skills by learning from other teaching practices. Skills that productively will be applied in the classroom.

Besides, a training that includes reflection between the participants allows them to observe -usually as a group- a specific issue in the classroom. To create a plan to solve the problem identified, they implement the lesson with the students, and it is observed the effectiveness of the plan to solve the problem identified (Wallace, 1991; Lewis & Hurd, 2011; Tice, 2004). During feedback and reflection, teachers point out good and positives aspects of their performance, and look solutions for those problems presented (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In that regard, in EPI-Classroom, feedback occurred during the moment for pedagogical reflection in which teachers reflected on their practices in the classroom, and how to improve them.

Another relevant part of EPI is the exchanging of strategies. Although most of the time, the teachers at Santa Cruz National Institute used the English book as a guide in their classrooms, there were some moments in which they included similar strategies as the ones presented in EPI. For example, it observed activities like information gap, short interview, sharing opinions by brainstorm, elicit information from flashcards, and others. All these activities are included in the communicative language teaching approach (Richards J. C., 2006). So it can be said that both EPI and teachers are connected to develop students' communicative competencies.

During the semi-structured interview, the English teachers expressed that these exchanging of strategies is something beneficial for them since they have the chance to practice and improve those

new resources before applying them in the classroom. They also considered that this practice allows them to learn from the experiences that some other teachers have experienced and during the reflection time, they discuss what problems their colleagues presented in the classroom and how they overcame them. So EPI is considered as a space to prove and put in practice new strategies and resources before presenting them in the classroom, and as they receive feedback from the rest of the teachers, that helps them to improve their teaching skills.

In conclusion, the impact of EPI is that modifies and guides the actions and decisions that teachers take in their classrooms. For this, it considers relevant to continue working on improving this space as a way to provide modern methodologies and updated resources to the teachers. Continuous professional development for educators help them during the achievement of their professional competencies, and hence they present an effective job performance facilitating the construction of knowledge from the students.

5. Final words

This research taught us that training has an important role in the professional development of language teachers. And no matter how many years of experience the professors have, they will always have to work on updating their knowledge and skills to become qualified teaching practitioners. During this search of improvement, the educator may count with support from colleagues or experts. This help will provide more knowledge, improvement of skills, and new experiences to prepare teachers to possible challenges in their classrooms.

Teachers all over the world will always have to challenge the use of more attractive methodologies centered on students learning. EPI is an INSET which counts with reflection, feedback, collaborative work, teaching strategies centered on developing communicative competencies, content programming, critical thinking, attractive didactic material, and so on. Those elements are proved to be relevant during the search of professional development and improvement of teaching skills. However, it recommends to include more expert support from external participants as a complement of the help provided by the EPI's coordinators, the facilitators of the exchanging of strategies and the experiences and knowledge that high school English teachers already have.

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