

Lesson co-planning: Joint Efforts, Shared Success¹

Planeación Conjunta de Clase: Esfuerzo Colectivo,
Éxito Compartido

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Abstract

The present article reports the results of a qualitative research study conducted at a higher education institution in Bogotá Colombia. The study aimed at examining the lesson planning practices conducted by English language teachers at the proficiency program of the institution. The participants were a mix of the mentors in charge of each level and teachers who agreed on being part of the study. Data was collected through two online surveys and one semi-structured interview; three categories were obtained from the data analysis; they focus on the planning stages, the impact of co-planning on teachers' performance and the role of resources for lesson planning. The findings suggest that lesson planning collaboration among teachers provides them with the opportunity of improving their practices, and helped participants identify professional strengths and weaknesses.

Key Words: Lesson planning, teacher collaboration, professional development, planning resources, teaching practices.

Resumen

El presente artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio de investigación cualitativa realizado en una institución de educación superior en Bogotá, Colombia. El estudio tuvo como objetivo examinar las prácticas de planeación de clase de los profesores de inglés de la institución. Entre los participantes se incluyeron los mentores a cargo de cada nivel y los profesores que aceptaron ser parte del estudio. Los datos se recopilaron a través de dos encuestas en línea y una entrevista semiestructurada; se obtuvieron tres categorías del

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¹ Received: November 1st 2017/ Accepted: January 15th 2018

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análisis de datos las cuales se centran en las etapas de planeación, el impacto de la planeación conjunta en el desempeño de los docentes y el papel de los recursos usados para la planeación de las lecciones. Los hallazgos sugieren que la colaboración entre los docentes para la planeación de lecciones les brinda la oportunidad de mejorar sus prácticas además de identificar sus fortalezas y debilidades profesionales.

Palabras clave: planeación de clase, colaboración docente, desarrollo profesional, recursos de planeación, prácticas de enseñanza.

Resumo

O presente artigo reporta os resultados de um estudo de pesquisa qualitativa desenvolvido em uma instituição de educação superior em Bogotá, Colômbia. O propósito do estudo é examinar as práticas de planejamento de aula realizadas por professores de inglês no programa de competência da instituição. Foram obtidas três categorias da análise de dados, as quais se enfocaram nas etapas de planejamento, o impacto do planejamento coletivo no desempenho dos professores e o papel dos recursos para o planejamento de aula. As descobertas sugerem que o planejamento de aula colaborativa entre os professores os provê com a oportunidade de melhorar suas práticas, e ajuda os participantes a identificar suas fortalezas e debilidades profissionais.

Palavras chave: Planejamento de aula, colaboração docente, desenvolvimento profissional, recursos de planejamento, práticas de ensino.

Introduction

Lesson planning is a demanding task that language teachers embark on every day. For this reason, the question as to whether this task should be done individually or in teams, has puzzled the teaching staff of the Languages Department (LD) at a higher education institution for quite a long time. But, why is it that English teachers, find it difficult to plan their lessons and are constantly re-thinking their practices? Authors such as Richards and Bohlke (2011) argue that:

Language teaching is not only a field of practical activity but also a discipline that draws on a considerable body of knowledge and practice. There are long traditions of theory, research, and practical experience to support contemporary approaches to language teaching (p. 3).

Lesson planning is an essential component of teaching. Independently from what is taught, lesson planning gives teachers a ‘route map’ which guides their actions in the classroom. Harmer (2001) highlights that “Planning helps, then, because it allows teachers to think about where they’re going and gives them time to have ideas for tomorrow’s and next week’s lessons” (p. 21). However, lesson planning is not an easy task. There are many factors such as students’ specific needs, time allotment, equipment or resources needed and possible problems; among others, that have specific roles in the planner teachers write for every single lesson; lesson planning is not only about listing a series of activities that provide teachers with ideas on how to develop a session.

The proficiency program offered by the LD has devoted more than 20 years to finding suitable language teaching methodologies and to improving teaching practices that help university students reach the language level they need. These efforts are made not only for students to comply with requirements set by their faculties, but also to have access to better work and study opportunities once they graduate. The program has specific parameters which teachers should bear in mind while teaching their classes; and, for teachers to get familiar with those parameters, the LD offers continuous training and a mentoring system that supports teachers all along the semester.

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In this system, mentors are teachers who coordinate all the administrative details related to the correct functioning of the level they are in charge of. They also provide teachers with lesson-planning and evaluation items and support both, teachers and students whenever issues arise. Given that mentors provide weekly lesson-planning, each teacher is assigned with two weeks a semester to help mentors enhance

or create class planners. For this task, teachers and mentors use the textbook and the planner used in the previous semester as a way to guide the planning to be done for the current semester. Planning is supposed to be done as a team, this means, teachers and mentors are not supposed to just split sections and decide who is in charge of each component and then put everything together; however, because of time constraints, this is what used to happen before a co-planning strategy started to be implemented.

The co-planning strategy proposes that teachers and mentors come together to analyze the resources available, evaluate how useful they were in the previous semester (in case they have already taught the level) and sit down together to brainstorm new ideas. They also need to consider the current needs of the level to come up with an improved final class-planner which would be the result of joint efforts made by the mentor and the teacher in charge of the weekly co-planning.

As stated by Smith and Scott (1990), “collaboration depends inherently on the voluntary effort of professional educators to improve their schools and their own teaching through teamwork” (p.2). This is the main intention of having LD teachers planning together, since they are the ones who are using the planners, they are the ones who know what works best and how their practices can get better every semester.

Literature Review

Lesson Planning & Planning Resources

Planning lessons might be a matter of personal choice for teachers; but, is lesson planning a relevant component for students' academic success? Even the most experienced teachers might consider important to have a general idea on what the objectives and outcomes of a lesson might be. A lesson plan should not become a straitjacket that forces teachers to strictly follow the plan; on the opposite, teachers must be ready to adapt their teaching to the conditions and demands of the lesson.

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There are many factors that could prevent teachers from strictly following the plan they had, factors such as “equipment not working, bored students, students who have done things before, students who need to ask unexpected questions or who want or need to pursue unexpected pathways, etc.” (Harmer, 2001, p. 121). Therefore, teachers cannot be expected to follow the plan and stick to it even if they notice that something might not be going as it was planned.

Lesson planning does not only benefit teachers. Students are able to notice when a lesson has been planned; they can realize when teachers know where they are going and the time they have devoted to planning the lesson. In the end, as stated by Woodward (2001), “the students we work with are the real reason for the whole learning/teaching encounter” (p. 16). Therefore, we cannot ignore the fact that our students will definitely be the first to judge the quality, effectiveness and efficacy of the lesson we plan, and then, execute.

It is also important to consider the role of lesson-planning resources. Teachers and mentors in the LD use three main resources when planning their lessons: the course syllabus, the course textbook and the planning format. Of course, there are other resources included (ICT, worksheets, etc.), but these are the core elements that guide teachers every week.

In the case of the syllabus, it presents the general content that students in the level should learn and an exit profile that describes the abilities that students should count on by the end of the course. In addition, the course syllabus includes the description of the project tasks that students must carry out along the semester to complete the final product (group work). The course syllabus is available for all students and in general, for all the academic community of the university to have an idea of what the course offers. Ur (2009) asserts that “Underlying this characteristic is the principle of accountability: the composers of the syllabus are answerable to their target audience for the quality of their document” (p. 177).

The author (Ur, 2009) also suggests that a syllabus should at least contain “content items (words, structures, topics), process items (tasks, methods), also; it should be ordered (easy, more essential items first), have explicit objectives (usually expressed in the introduction)”. This certainly aligns to what is stated as the philosophy of the LD for language teaching and learning. (Ur, 2009) adds that a syllabus is a “public document that may indicate a time schedule, a preferred methodology or approach, and may recommend materials”.

For the LD, the syllabus plays a crucial role for class planning. It lets teachers know about the grammar structures, vocabulary and book units that must be covered in each term. Without a syllabus, it would be impossible to keep track of students expected outcomes. Besides, the syllabus shows the progress of students in alignment with the Common European Framework (CEF). In the same manner, the syllabus aligns to the type of teaching methodology that the LD takes as the basis for its proficiency program. In regards to this matter, Saraswati (2004) states

that “it is impossible to think of any course of study which has no pre-specified syllabus or curriculum. In fact, syllabuses play a significant role in pedagogy.” (p. 45).

Another important resource is the textbook used in each level. Usually a single textbook is used for 2 levels; it means that if the textbook has ten units, then each level covers half of the book. This is done with the purpose of allotting a pertinent amount of time to studying each of the units in the book. Textbooks for the LD are not the core component of the course, therefore, as Ur (2009) suggests, they are used “selectively, not necessarily in sequence, and they are extensively supplemented by other materials” (p.183).

Many professionals in the language teaching field find themselves having mixed feelings regarding the use of textbooks for their courses. Among the positive aspects that a textbook can offer to language teaching are: clear framework, ready-made tasks, economy, guidance, and autonomy. However, there are also negative aspects such as inadequacy, limitation, variety of levels of ability and knowledge, and over-easiness (Ur, 2009). All of these factors have been considered by the LD and given that it has not been possible to find a ‘perfect’ textbook that adapts to all the requirements of the program, the LD has opted for using the textbook as a complementary resource, which guides students’ autonomous work and which also, serves as practice material during the class. Accordingly, teachers adapt the activities offered by the textbook to adjust the level of difficulty, the type of task they want students to work on, etc.

Teachers’ Mentoring & Team Work

Mentoring and team work have become core aspects of the proficiency program at the LD. Ever since the beginning of the program, the LD has considered it important to count on academic coordinators (now level mentors) who can be visible heads in each level. Of course, the program has a general director who supervises all the details regarding the correct academic and logistic functioning of the program itself. Mentoring contributes to the improvement of several aspects of the program, and especially to teachers’ professional development in terms of the implementation of new teaching strategies, evaluation of such strategies, reflection upon teaching practices and experiences and identification of professional assets and shortcomings (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004).

Accordingly, level mentors do have a supervising' role in terms of operational matters, but most of all in terms of academic matters. Level mentors are supposed to be familiarized with the core aspects of the program to guide the team of teachers in his/her level. But learning how to teach is not a one-way road in this institution; by mentoring, level mentors also learn from their colleagues who might even be more experienced professionals who just happen to be devoted exclusively to teaching at the moment. However, mentoring is not an easy task and it may lead to controversy or disagreement at times, Diaz-Maggioli argues that "because mentor as well as mentee must scrutinize and reflect on one another's attitudes, beliefs and behaviors while simultaneously building trust and respect, the process can be difficult to many" (p. 48, 2004).

Randall and Thornton (2005) cite varied definitions regarding the word 'mentor'. Among these definitions, it is mentioned that mentors are people who should be either older or more experienced, but it is not the case of the LD. Mentors are people who have demonstrated enough skills as to be able to perform the tasks expected from them, either academic or operational. For the LD, mentors should be people who "advise younger or newer colleagues" (Smith & West-Burnham, 1993, p.8) and people who "support, facilitate and coach new teachers" (Earley & Kinder, 1994, p.79).

For this mentor-teacher relationship to work, it is crucial, that the atmosphere created be a warm, welcoming one. Mentors in the LD are the ones who guide teachers all along the semester, and teachers plan lessons along with mentors on a bi-weekly basis; therefore, communication and closeness play a key role in the success of the whole process. Randall and Thornton (2005) exemplify how for many institutions this system has been a successful one. In this regard, they highlight:

Heads of Departments and Directors of Studies generally work with their teachers as "teams" i.e. they operate as a group to provide lessons and often teach alongside the colleagues that they supervise. Thus, there tends to be an atmosphere of shared responsibility for getting a task done (i.e. teaching) in which there is generally not a great distance between the manager and the worker" (p. 18)

Shared responsibility for the LD is core to the process. Teachers and mentors are in charge not only of lesson planning, but also of all the duties that are part of a successful teaching-learning experience. Teachers and mentors also design and validate evaluation items, solve

students' inquiries and face any kind of difficulty that might arise along the road. This is the main reason why the LD is concerned about motivating its team members to create and maintain a comfortable and rewarding working atmosphere. In this sense, the LD has also thought of providing teachers with constant support and professional development opportunities, and as part of this process, class observation is conducted and conceived as a moment of self-evaluation and reflection regarding teaching practices. The class-observation process should then benefit all the professionals involved, as argued by Randall and Thornton (2005):

The very act of observing and offering advice should benefit not only the one being observed but also the one observing. Being able to discuss lessons with young peers in a non-judgmental and open forum is seen as an essential step along the road to being an autonomous and reflective practitioner". (p. 20)

Although the class-observation process entails a high level of formality and teachers might feel that their weaknesses and flaws are put on the spot, the LD uses this process as a way to enhance the quality of the proficiency program offered to students and as an opportunity to encourage teachers to become better professionals. The LD counts on specific items assessed in each class-observation, which are included in a checklist that is presented to teachers at the beginning of the semester. In this way, teachers are expected to become familiar with the aspects to be taken into account when their classes are visited.

A checklist contains a list of different features of a lesson, which you complete while observing a lesson. Checklists provide a clear focus for observation; however, they can only be used for certain aspects of a lesson, such as features that are easy to count. There are several published checklists; alternatively, you and your cooperating teacher can develop your own checklists (Richards and Farrell, 2011, p. 94).

Once teachers have been observed, both the observer and the teacher complete reflection formats and later they meet and discuss the class observed; their conversation should be surrounded by an atmosphere of confidence and respect. This is an opportunity for the teacher to reflect about his/her teaching practices and experience; and for the observer to provide feedback on the positive and negative aspects of the lesson as well as to see if there is progress in case the teacher has been previously observed.

It is crucial to highlight that although class observation is a formal process and all teachers are observed at different stages, the LD does not rely on this process only when assessing a teacher's performance.

For the LD, teachers are integral professionals who perform a variety of tasks that are taken into account when making decisions. The LD teaching staff has a low turnover, and is increased by few teachers (3-4) every semester in response to the continuous growth of student population at the university.

Methodology

Research Design

As stated above, the main intention of the present study is to describe the implementation process of a planning strategy that was intended to help both teachers and students to reach their goals. In order to illustrate how the strategy was planned, implemented and then analyzed, a basic qualitative study (Merriam, 1998) was designed.

According to Merriam (1998), a basic qualitative research study is conducted in order to understand “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 23). For this study, the researchers intended to find out what the experiences of co-planning language lessons had been like for teachers at the LD.

Interpreting teachers’ perceptions regarding co-planning was of great importance given that such strategy was implemented thanks to a previous diagnosis in which teachers were asked regarding their preferences when planning their lessons. Therefore, it was necessary to evaluate how useful the strategy was for teachers and for the program itself to take actions, either to continue improving the strategy or to re-think the way it had been implemented.

Context and Participants

The present study took place at a higher education institution in Colombia, South America. The study was conducted at the Languages Department with the English proficiency program.

The English proficiency program is one of high importance given that the university has specific requirements regarding the language level students must have to be able to graduate. To fulfill the language requirements, students must pass all the levels of the program and must take an international exam (TOEFL, IELTS, and FCE) that certifies their language proficiency. For years, the LD has made big efforts to offer students a high-quality program that can prepare them to use the target

language in different contexts; preparation of students for international tests is only one of the objectives of the program. As stated by Benson and Nunan (2005), “Effective learners not only develop a high degree of autonomy but the development of autonomy is associated with a view of language as a tool for communication rather than as a subject to be studied in the same way as other school subjects” (p. 28).

Initially, 13 teachers and mentors were selected and invited to participate in the study in order to answer a survey and respond to an interview that intended to find out their co-planning experiences and insights. The teachers and mentors were selected following the criteria underlying purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002); “purposeful sampling is about selecting information-rich cases to study, cases that by their nature and substance will illuminate the inquiry question being investigated” (p. 265). The sample of teachers and mentors was chosen taking into account the time they had worked with the LD, that is to say, participants who had been able to experience both the previous planning methodology (mentor in charge of class-planners), and the new co-planning strategy implemented (mentor-teacher every week).

In total, 5 teachers and 5 mentors answered the survey. 7 out of 10 participants have a master’s degree in areas such as Education, Linguistics, and Learning Environments, among others. The other 3 participants have a bachelor’s degree in Languages. On average, the participants have worked with the LD between 1.5 and 4.5 years. This fulfills the most important requirement established to participate in the study. The levels teachers and mentors have taught are not relevant given that all levels must follow the same guidelines for lesson planning and evaluation. This in accordance with what Patton (2002) described as credibility concerns which deal with the necessity of finding “the kind of arguments that will lend credibility to the study as well as the kind of arguments that might be used to attack the findings” (p. 308).

Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

For this particular study, data were collected from two surveys and one semi-structured interview conducted with the participants who were a mix of the mentors in charge of each level and the teachers who agreed on being part of the study at the end of the semester 2016-1. The first survey was conducted right after the strategy had been implemented for the first time. In this survey, teachers and mentors shared their views on how this new strategy had worked for them and the differences (if any) they had perceived.

In a preliminary phase of the study, a survey was conducted to ask teachers and mentors what their roles during the first stage of the implementation had been. In previous semesters, only mentors were in charge of structuring weekly planners for each of the levels, that is to say, mentors planned by using the textbook suggested and the planners from previous semesters; then, planners were shared with the teaching staff in charge of carrying out the activities suggested in the planner. Based on the results of the first survey conducted, it was decided that some changes needed to be included in the structure of the strategy and the class planning methodology.

In the analysis of the first survey some teachers claimed that they did not feel comfortable by receiving and following a lesson plan designed by one person (the mentor in charge of the level). This feeling was caused by the fact that they constantly saw themselves in the need to adapt and, in some cases change the different activities proposed by the mentor. Teachers argued that at times, they did not feel comfortable developing the activities suggested, simply because they considered the activities proposed in the planner did not help their students accomplish the objectives established.

In a second stage, and to find out teachers and mentors' perceptions regarding the co-planning strategy which had already been implemented for over 3 semesters by that time, a survey was designed. As stated by Seliger and Shohamy (1989), surveys offer several advantages such as anonymity of the participants, which allows for more honest responses regarding the phenomenon under study; also as surveys are responded by participants on their own, the time allotted for data collection reduces, which results in a more efficient data collection process. Separate surveys were shared with the participants given their roles in the program; however, the questions had very similar intentions regarding the type of information being collected. The survey had 3 main sections: 1. Background information, 2. Co-planning experience and perceptions, and 3. Teachers and mentors' roles.

The first section asked the participants to provide very specific information regarding their academic background and degrees obtained. The second section asked the participants to describe the co-planning process they had followed in their particular levels; the aim was to identify differences even though all the levels were supposed to follow the same procedures for class-planning.

The third section of the survey asked teachers and mentors to portray the strengths and weaknesses they had found along the process; this was done to identify successful aspects and possible

areas of improvement in the future implementation of the strategy. In the next section, teachers and mentors described the roles they had performed along the process, to know how they saw themselves, as they were active participants of the different stages of the process. Finally, the participants were asked to express their feelings regarding the strategy, more specifically, to say how they felt while being part of the implementation and their preferences regarding the continuation of the strategy.

To gather complementary data to that collected from the survey, a round of semi-structured interviews was planned with the 11 individuals who accepted the invitation to participate in this second phase of data collection. The use of semi-structured interviews is usually highly informative due to the nature of the instrument. “The researcher develops an interview protocol that includes a list of questions or topics to be addressed in the interviews with all participants (...) it helps guide the collection of data in a systematic and focused manner” (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 301).

Although an interview protocol was written, each interview varied according to the insights provided by each participant. What is most interesting about this instrument is that it is an opportunity to discover unexpected perceptions that emerge from participants’ spontaneous views. Regarding semi structured interviews, Zohrabi (2013) highlights that:

This type of interview is flexible and allows the interviewee to provide more information than the other ones. This form of interview is neither too rigid nor too open. It is a moderate form in which a great amount of data can be elicited from the interviewee (p. 255).

The interview conducted was a great opportunity for teachers to open themselves, they were able to contribute to the improvement of a process that had been implemented for over a year and a half, and which had brought a great deal of advantages that had remained unexplored and which emerged from what teachers could share by using this data collection instrument.

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By using semi-structured interviews, it was possible not only to broaden the views collected in the survey but also to empower the participants by showing them how valuable their views were since they were the ones who were actually present in all the stages of the implementation of the strategy.

All data were analyzed under the parameters of the grounded theory approach, which allows researchers to go from specific characteristics to more general features that are then grouped to find commonalities that portray the nature of the data collected. Charmaz (2006) asserts that “Grounded Theory Coding consists of at least two phases: initial and focused coding; during initial coding, we study fragments of data – words, lines, segments, and incidents – closely for their analytic import” (p. 42). This method was chosen given that it allowed the researchers to explore data and start identifying repetitive features that were used to understand the phenomenon of study.

Results and Discussion

During the data analysis process, several aspects regarding the co-planning strategy experienced by mentors and teachers emerged. In figure 1 below, a display of the categories that resulted from the data analysis carried out is shown.

Categories	Sub-categories
Following Steps: The Path to a Successful Co-Planning Experience	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pre-Planning Stage 2. While-Planning Stage 3. After Planning Stage
Co-Planning as a Way to Empower Teachers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Mentor as Guide 2. Tailoring the class-planner 3. Teachers as active participants 4. Teacher-mentor Communication
Co-Planning Resources	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Standardizing Teaching Practices through the Class-Planner 2. The Role of the Syllabus 3. The Role of the Textbook

Figure 1. Categories and Sub-Categories

In this study, the data analysis process was carried out taking into account the parameters suggested by Creswell (2009), who mentions how in grounded theory “there are systematic steps which involve generating categories of information (open coding), selecting one of the categories and positioning it within a theoretical model (axial coding), and then explicating a story from the interconnection of these categories (selective coding)”. (p. 184).

Bearing this in mind, the researchers opted for a systematic analysis that aimed to identify repetitive patterns of information that showed participants’ views and insights regarding the focus of the study. The categories shown before are the result of the patterns that predominated in the data analysis and that focused on several aspects that were key for a thorough comprehension of the co-planning phenomenon in the particular context where the study took place.

During the analysis process, each of the researchers analyzed specific portions of information and then gathered the patterns obtained to compare and merge the resulting codes. However, it was revealing to see that the patterns identified by each of the researchers coincided and it was more a matter of agreeing on the names of the codes to be used to label data. Each of the stages suggested by the grounded theory approach was followed and as a result, 3 categories and 11 sub categories were obtained.

Category 1: Following Steps: The Path to a Successful Co-Planning Experience:

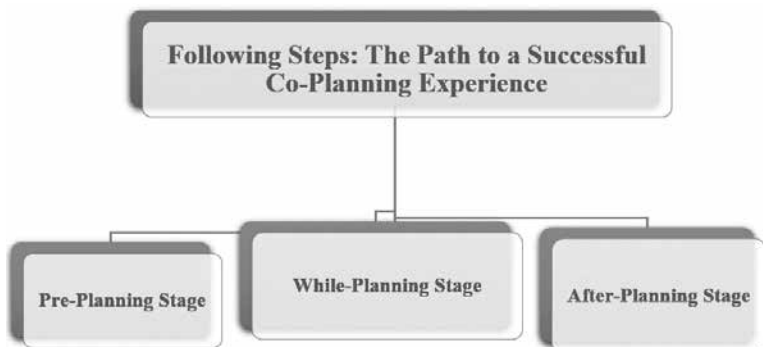


Figure 2: Category 1

The first category is called “Following Steps: The Path to a Successful Co-Planning Experience”, this category is devoted to the analysis of teachers and mentors’ perceptions regarding the co-planning strategy, its advantages and disadvantages.

In this category, it was identified that the co-planning strategy was divided into 3 main stages that made-up the whole process: a pre-planning, a while planning, and a post-planning stage. During the ‘pre-planning’ stage teachers had to think of the necessary components to create a planner that could fulfill the needs of the level, and which helped teachers and students reach the objectives proposed in the course syllabus. For this ‘pre-planning’ stage, teachers were aware of how important it was to follow certain steps that led to a successful co-planning experience.

First, level mentors were supposed to share the planner used during the previous semester; in some cases, the planner used coincided

with the week and topic to be covered in the current semester. This step was meant to help teachers and mentors know what had been done and to avoid starting from scratch; however, it was expected that teachers would propose new activities and look for new resources that could contribute to an enhanced and more efficient version of the class-planner.

Most of the teachers who work with the LD have been teaching at the institution for quite some time and are familiar with the levels and the methodology used. Therefore, if teachers had already taught the level assigned, that stage became a great opportunity for them to re-structure their teaching and evaluate how efficient their practices had been in the previous semester and from that, improve the lesson structure, the resources used or any other aspect that they considered needed an intervention to suit their current course and students' needs.

The second stage, the 'while-planning stage' is about the logistics teachers and mentors went through for actually sitting down and planning their lessons. In this stage, the principal factor to be taken into account was time management. For teachers and mentors, it was difficult to find the time to meet and devote to lesson-planning; therefore, finding strategies such as sharing class-planners in advance (pre-planning) and thinking of what went well and what went wrong in previous semesters was a mandatory step to save time and make the process more efficient. One of the most important aspects to consider was how students had perceived the activities and resources proposed. Although it was quite challenging to attempt to satisfy all of the students' preferences with the activities and resources proposed, teachers and mentors always tried to choose activities and resources that could appeal to the target ages and social conditions of the students in each level and to the trends found in society nowadays.

Time management was also a crucial factor when teachers and mentors met to discuss and agree on the activities and resources that were going to be included in the final planner. In most cases, teachers and mentors could actually meet for 1 or 2 hours at the most; so, time had to be fully taken advantage of to achieve the main goal. During those meetings, time was mainly devoted to making suggestions and reaching consensus based on the analysis of previous planners and on the selection of the new activities and the resources that teachers and mentors would propose for inclusion in the new version. For some mentors, it was hard to deal with the fact that teachers had innovative ideas and that it was absolutely necessary to open space for their ideas to refresh class-planning given that teachers usually have more groups than mentors and have a wider perspective regarding students' needs.

During the second stage, it was possible to identify that the co-planning strategy was not only a way to enhance class-planners, but also a way to actually get to know teachers in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. For teachers who had been working at the LD for some time, it was easier to understand the nature of the strategy and adapt to it; for new teachers, it was harder to adapt. However, as teachers were expected to plan two weeks in the semester, it was easier for them to plan the second week assigned, once they had become more familiar with process.

I have found the two profiles, teachers who already know how we work and come to the meetings with some proposals and we both agree in regards to class-planning and resources. With some new teachers, the co-planning process was more about explaining to them how it worked and showing them what a class was like, how we do classes, what we focus on, what kind of activities we use, etc. Interview 1. June 21st, 2016. Participant 3.

In this interview extract, one of the participants highlights how teachers' profiles influence the process and how mentors adapt to the kinds of teachers that compose the team. It is necessary for mentors to be aware of the roles they need to assume depending on the teacher they are working with every week.

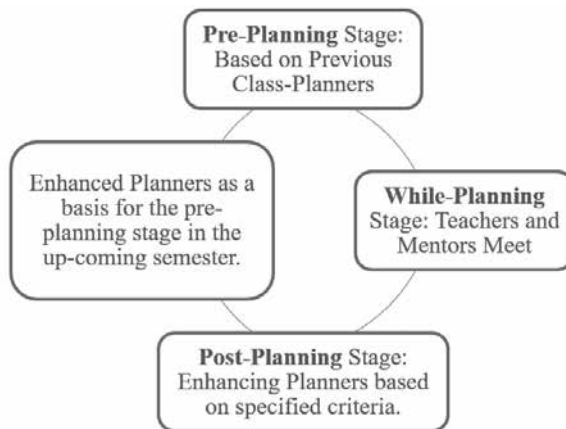


Figure 3: Co-Planning Process Stages Implemented at the DCL

The third stage was the result of teachers' suggestions regarding their experience with the co-planning strategy. This is a stage that had not been officially included in the process, but it was suggested by

teachers and mentors during the interviews conducted as a necessary step to successfully conclude the process.

During the ‘post-planning’ stage, teachers and mentors would have to meet again, after the class-planner has been implemented to evaluate the success of the activities and resources proposed. The purpose of that stage was to optimize the ‘pre-planning’ stage of upcoming semesters, so that either experienced or novice teachers would receive a version of the class-planner that had already been implemented and assessed based on course syllabus objectives and how successful the activities were with students in terms of effectiveness, efficiency and how entertaining and appealing they were.

Category 2: Co-Planning as a Way to Empower Teachers:

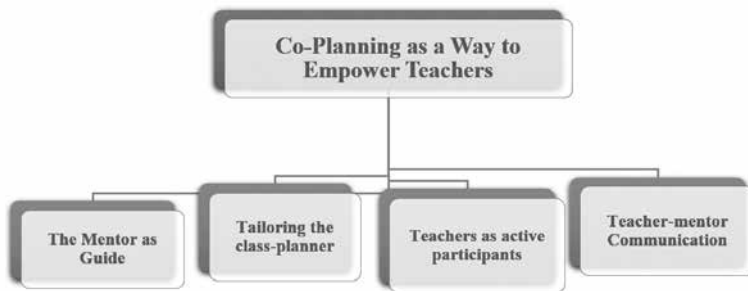


Figure 4. Category 2

This second category is about how co-planning was not only a strategy to class-planning, but also a path to improve all the aspects concerning the process.

Including teachers in lesson planning allows institutions to identify strengths and abilities that contribute to the improvement of the program. Displaying such characteristics can later become a crucial factor when determining future mentoring roles. Regarding this aspect, some teachers see this strategy as an opportunity to learn how to plan and consequently improve their teaching practice.

Mentors should then be open to suggestions and possible changes that teachers make to class-planning; however, this is not always the case. In an interview extract, one of the participants mentions how discouraging it was for her to see that some of the resources she had suggested for both of the levels she was planning had not been included

in the final class-planner. However, she is also aware that her mentor might have made this decision due to specific reasons.

Maybe, something that happened to me with both mentors, was that searching for suitable activities, videos, etc. was not easy, and at the time of receiving the planner, they did not use the video that I had sent, then one feels a little ... ah ok, it wasn't taken into account, my time was wasted. But, if we get back to the point, I think they also have a more general vision of the level and teachers and students' needs, so they know what would be more useful. But, in the end I didn't use the video suggested by the mentor, so, sometimes it's more about individual perspectives.
Interview 1. June 21st, 2016. Participant 4

In this extract, the participant tried to put herself in the mentor's shoes and understand the reasons why mentors sometimes made decisions that might seem unfair to teachers. However, at the end of the extract, she also mentioned that she made a decision regarding the class-planner and omitted one of the resources suggested, which brings up the need for a more personalized class-planner.

As mentioned in a previous section, before the implementation of the co-planning strategy, mentors were the only ones in charge of class-planning and teachers were only expected to follow the planners proposed by mentors. In the first survey conducted, it was possible to see that teachers identified the need for including more communicative activities that allowed students to increase their spoken abilities and activities that aimed at increasing the level of interaction among learners. In addition, teachers expressed that the previous lesson planning strategy had not included learning strategies and had not taken different learning styles into consideration.

Therefore, a co-planning strategy has been implemented as a way to provide solutions to the problems found and to provide teachers with an opportunity to contribute to the program and become more active participants of the process. In some cases, teachers had contradictory points of view that might have arisen when they had to use planners that had not been proposed by them. In the following extract, it is evidenced how the participant highlights advantages and disadvantages of the strategy.

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I get the planner and I go back and change some things then, I check it and again I go back and I say, yes this is cool but I think this wouldn't work for this group, I know my students, and, in

the end I end up making more changes even at the moment of implementing the planner, of course without changing the essence of the lesson or the topics or anything, but I end up putting other activities or modifying the way they are done, then sometimes I think, I do not know if all that work that other people did is being lost, because sometimes it doesn't work for me; and, I'm not saying that my activities are the only ones which work for my class, but definitely some activities don't work for me. There are also super cool activities that I would not have thought of and I say, uh, cool, this is very interesting, I would not have thought of this and it's nice, it's cool... Interview 1. June 21st, 2016. Participant 6.

Although this teacher mentioned that some activities were replaced according to the needs of the groups, she was also aware that some of the activities were actually very innovative and offered a new perspective on the concepts that were to be taught. The participant also made an analysis regarding the amount of work that the planners required and how this work might have been lost if teachers did not make use of the resources and activities proposed.

For this strategy to work, team communication becomes a key factor, mainly because level teams are made out of almost 10 teachers in average, so it would not be efficient to have all of them sit together to receive and discuss the planner. Keeping constant communication with all the members of the team through the forum, where lesson plans are uploaded to improve planning practices arises then, as a necessary component of the process. In this way, teachers would suggest activities, resources and successful practices to enrich lesson planning.

When listing the advantages of the strategy, it is possible to see that one of the major strengths provided by co-planning was that ideas, resources and activities would vary and contribute to more dynamic lessons that fulfill learners' needs and which tackle several learning styles. What is more, by co-planning, teachers' sense of belonging and commitment to the program increases, given that they are now in charge of the most important step for the success of the whole program. This also contributes to the knowledge that teachers have regarding the philosophy underlying the institution's program.

Category 3: The Co-Planning Resources:

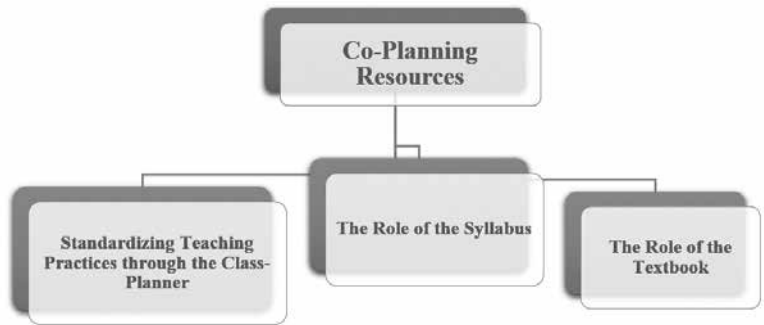


Figure 5. Category 3

For this category, the examined aspects were the role of the planner format used, the textbook and the course syllabus. The main reason to analyze these aspects was that teachers and mentors are demanded to follow the course syllabus to ensure the standardization of the procedures to be carried out by teachers in terms of course content, project implementation and evaluation criteria. The textbooks used in the program are selected based on the approach to language teaching adopted by the institution (Task-Based Learning). In the planner format, the co-planning team is requested to complete specific sections that go hand in hand with the approach previously mentioned.

In this sense, the LD provides teachers with a fixed format that contains specific sections (warm up, introduction, practice, application and independent work) that guide lesson-planning and in which the co-planning team records the objectives of the lesson, the learning strategies to be used, the skills to be reinforced, the activities suggested, the resources needed and the time allotted among others.

14th WEEKLY PLANNER 2016			
Format adapted from California Department of Education, Staff development Institute			
LEVEL: 5 Week 13	DATE: May 2 nd - 7 th	LENGTH: 2 hours	HOUR: 1 st and 2 nd MODULE: A CAFFEINE-FUELLED WORLD
TARGET TASK Collaboratively and in groups of 4, students will create a Digital Presentation (using prezi, glogster, smaze, wix) where they will portray 6 mini-tasks which will describe and make predictions of several aspects regarding a chosen country. The final presentation will be done during the 16th week.			
LESSON OBJECTIVE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ To discuss about modern daily living. ✓ To work on reading comprehension skills. 			
SKILLS Reading, Listening and Speaking			
STAGE ACTIVITY	PROCEDURE: (Consider student- centered activities and varied interaction patterns)		RESOURCES
WARM UP/REVIEW: An activity that: a. Uses previously learned content to begin a new lesson. b. Lasts 5-10' and uses materials students are familiar with from previous lessons (Visual/verbal)	Warm Up: The Coffee Pot Game: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One person thinks of a word and makes a sentence, changing the word to 'coffee pot'. Example: I take a "coffee pot" every morning. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other people have to guess what the word 'coffee pot' is or represents. Classmates: A "show-off?" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To wrap-up the game and have everything in context, you could give each of the Ss a coffee candy. 		PPT SLIDE Optional: Coffee candies to reward.
INTRODUCTION Focusing student attention on the lesson-asking questions, using visual. Stating the objective, relating the objective to previous learning.	Brainstorming: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will elicit brands from the question "What caffeine products do you know?" • Once elicitation is over, display the images with some caffeine products, and discuss with Ss generalities about them: Do you drink Speed Max? - How often? - Why do you do it? - Do you 		PPT SLIDE
			7 min
			7 min

Figure 6. Planner Format

The data collected evidenced that the planner format was quite clear for teachers so they had no problem to understand the purpose of the planner. Teachers highlighted how the planner helped them to create a cohesive lesson since the sections suggested easily connect to each other. Teachers claimed not to have trouble when reading the planners, even if they were not part of the weekly co-planning team.

Among the disadvantages mentioned by the participants of the study was the fact that not all lessons need all the sections specified in the planner, so teachers suggest that, according to the lesson, the sections can be modified or omitted; sometimes, the sections were completed with unnecessary content just because they were in the format.

Another aspect that emerged was that the descriptions of the activities included were sometimes too long and unnecessary information was included, and this, instead of helping teachers understand the lesson, made it harder to actually see the purpose of the activities.

What happens is that, there are certain activities that do need a description, for example, a game, then, I can look at the photocopy where the game is, but if for me it is still not clear, then, I can look at the planner. But, if the activity is in the teacher's book, it has the game or the exercises and those already have an explanation, so I just take a look at the book and that's it. I would say that it depends on the activities; there are others that just need to be mentioned and you already know what to

do. Certain activities require a full description and, at the same time we can use them with students, so, sometimes it is quite useful. Interview 1. June 21st, 2016. Participant 1.

For this teacher, it was evidently unnecessary to include such detailed descriptions in the planner, because in most cases, they are experienced teachers who have taught the same level and who know the activities (if they have been used in previous semesters). Therefore, it would be better to mention the activities and let teachers look for further instructions (teacher's book, photocopiable material, etc.) if necessary.

For teachers, the role of the syllabus and course books goes hand in hand with the planner format. In the weekly planner, the planning team should always include the components of these two resources that are necessary for the achievement of the goals established for the week.

As mentioned in the review of literature, the LD has made great efforts to find textbooks that respond to the demands of the program regarding aspects such as an appropriate methodology, fun and challenging tasks, topics which incentivize students' communicative production, and critical thinking skills. The textbooks should also include extra material that can scaffold students' learning and that can lead them towards the achievement of the objectives set.

Conclusions

All along the document many arguments in favor of the mentoring and co-planning strategies have been presented. There are several benefits and advantages that this strategy can offer to any institution interested in the improvement of the processes involved in the language teaching experience.

The advantages mentioned along the documents are not only concerning institutional matters. The participants of this strategy at the LD highlighted various positive aspects regarding this implementation and expressed the reasons why they considered this was an effective and efficient methodology to lesson-planning. Co-planning opens the door to many possibilities, for instance, teachers highlight how co-planning allows them to have access to a variety of activities and resources that they would not be able to think of on their own; as a result, classes can become much more interesting and motivating for students. Additionally, having different perspectives integrated in the class-planner is a lot more inclusive than having one person in charge of the planner. Teachers then, feel more empowered, comfortable and at ease with the activities and resources proposed; thanks to the inclusion

of other team members in class-planning, a wider view of students' needs is included.

Regarding mentoring, the study revealed that it is not only a matter of class-planning; the LD conceives mentoring as a key factor in the success of the whole program. When talking about co-planning and teachers' mentoring, it should be highlighted that the person who is in charge of mentoring his/her colleagues should be aware that teachers will turn to them in case of a doubt or a difficulty. However, mentors are also required to be careful when dealing with requests and suggestions made by teachers; not all of the suggestions or requests can be solved or included, so mentors should be knowledgeable professionals who count on arguments and criteria to make decisions in the level assigned.

In this regard, communication between team members (mentors and teachers) should be optimized to increase the quality of the process. Teachers argued along the data collection process that they sometimes felt that mentors had some difficulty accepting suggestions and comments. However, it is also important to take into account that level mentors have a much more global vision of the process given that they possess much more information about the good and bad aspects going on in the level. It is crucial that teachers and mentors are willing to negotiate and contribute to students' success. It should be considered that all the efforts made by the LD have a principle that revolves around students' well-being in all senses, which makes us more concerned about the high impact of teaching practices on students. In this context, the mentor is the one who monitors, guides and accompanies the process, therefore, teachers are also students' mentors.

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