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Pre-service english language teachers' use of reflective journals in an assessment and testing course

El uso del diario de reflexión en un curso de evaluación para futuros docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera

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Abstract

This text discusses how the implementation of the reflective journal in a language assessment and testing course for prospective English language teachers at a private university in Medellín, Colombia, contributed to develop their Language Assessment Literacy (LAL). Among the main contributions, future teachers highlight a shift of mind concerning assessment beliefs and a feeling of empowerment towards assessment practices. In the same vein, the text presents prospective teachers' views on constraints that can emerge when reflective journals are used as a learning strategy in teacher education.

Keywords: Reflective journals; Language assessment literacy; Pre-service teachers; Teacher education.

Resumen

Este texto aborda el impacto de la implementación del diario de reflexión en el desarrollo de las competencias de futuras licenciadas, para evaluar procesos de enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera, en una universidad privada en Medellín, Colombia. Entre las contribuciones más relevantes se resalta un cambio positivo en las creencias de las maestras en formación respecto a la evaluación, y el empoderamiento frente a sus prácticas evaluativas. Igualmente, el texto presenta las perspectivas de las futuras maestras respecto a las limitaciones que pueden surgir cuando se usan los diarios de reflexión como estrategia en la formación de maestros.

Palabras clave: Diario de reflexión; Competencias en la evaluación de lenguas; Docentes en formación; Formación de docentes.

Introduction

Despite the increasing interest in the quality of language assessment and testing training offered to pre-service teachers worldwide, research on language teachers' assessment literacy in Colombia is rather scarce. Nonetheless, existing studies share a common element: they all remark the need to equip prospective language teachers with the knowledge, skills and principles required in order to design, develop, use and evaluate assessments in the field of language teaching and learning (López & Bernal, 2009; Giraldo, 2018; Herrera & Macías, 2015). Consequently, a careful implementation of procedures to develop competencies and address contents in language assessment courses for future teachers become crucial to succeed in training them to plan and administer appropriate assessments in the educational context.

Regarding the knowledge base of assessment and testing courses, Inbar-Lourie (2008) proposes that "language assessment courses focus on learning, negotiating, discussing, experiencing and researching a core language assessment framework" (p. 396). According to the author, from this perspective, assessment should not be presented as a recipe, but as "a body of knowledge and research grounded in theory and epistemological beliefs, and connected to other bodies of knowledge in education, linguistics and applied linguistics". Moreover, the competencies developed in such courses should "reflect current views about the social role of assessment in general and language assessment in particular, contemporary views about the nature of language knowledge, and give due emphases to both classroom and external assessment practices" (p.396).

Expanding on the previous ideas, Scarino (2013) asserts:

In relation to developing language assessment literacy on the part of teachers, therefore, it is necessary to consider not only the knowledge base in its most contemporary representation, but also the processes through which this literacy is developed. In line with contemporary, sociocultural learning theories, these processes should recognize the "inner" world of teachers and their personal frameworks of knowledge and understanding and the way these shape their conceptualizations, interpretations, decisions and judgments in assessment (p. 316).

In that order of ideas, a class of preservice teachers enrolled in an English teaching program in a private university in Medellín was encouraged to keep a reflective journal as part of their training in the assessment and testing course. Future language teachers were expected to provide a weekly entry, based on a prompt provided by their instructor. Prompts were intended to allow trainees to connect current understandings of course contents with personal experiences, beliefs or perceptions towards classroom-based language assessment.

Regarding the use of reflective journals in teaching training programs, Lindroth (2015) contends that "purposeful reflection reduces random decision-making and allows an individual to make choices by carefully examining information gathered from various experiences, resulting in purposeful thinking" (p.66). After reviewing several studies on the use of reflective journals in teacher education, the author concludes that these work as efficient tools to promote preservice teachers' self-regulated and focused learning, critical thinking, and willingness to perform in educational settings. Furthermore, he asserts that "if teacher

educators incorporate reflective journals into their curriculum, they may become more effective in bridging the gap between theory and practice in that they may have a better understanding of the challenges preservice teachers face” (p. 71).

This text depicts the achievements and hindrances in using reflective journals in an assessment and testing course for language teachers in a private university in Medellín, Colombia. It exhibits pre-service teachers' perspectives on the contributions of reflective journals to their development of language assessment literacy, limitations to attain journal writing, and implications of the use of reflective journals in teacher education.

Contributions of reflective journals to prospective teachers' Language

Assessment Literacy development

According to Richards (1995), critical reflection allows us to respond to experiences by examining and evaluating them consciously in order to plan and make decisions concerning our teaching practices. In this sense, writing a reflective journal in the assessment and testing course positively contributed to the development of our Language Assessment Literacy in different ways.

Unveiling mistaken beliefs about assessment

To start with, through the reflective journal we were able to recognize not only initial beliefs about assessment, but also shifts just as we gained more insight about it. For instance, when we enrolled in the course, we believed that assessment was a matter of only giving a grade, clinging assessment practices to traditional ones where teachers relied heavily only on summative assessment at the end of a term not taking into consideration what students' outcomes were. Nonetheless, the language assessment course offered us a great amount of opportunities to reflect, as we could visibilize that all those misconceptions were formed in previous academic processes where we, as students, only saw assessment as a stimulus for learning, a way for penalizing misbehavior, a way for being promoted from a grade to another, or a way for obtaining a higher average in the course.

In that manner, we could imply that teachers and other individuals immersed in educational processes positioned, either consciously or unconsciously, all those beliefs in regard to assessment. Fortuitously, those misconceptions experienced a huge altercation. The reflective journal offered us the opportunity to see that assessment goes far from giving a grade. We could see that assessment is also one of the most relevant and powerful tools in any teaching practice to achieve clearly defined learning outcomes, to provide feedback on students' progress, and to map instruction in order to gather information to make decisions in teaching practices. In that, we consider that reflecting about our personal experiences with assessment in school contexts contributed to shape and expand our perceptions of what assessment is and should be; that reflection allowed immensely for questioning ourselves about the impact that assessment has had throughout our lives. We owned the possibility to gain awareness about what assessment is, for which we consider the first step to be language assessment literate.

Changing our view towards assessment purposes

Writing and reflecting constantly portrayed our views of language assessment purposes along the course. It was possible to observe how we tended to disregard formative purposes by relying heavily on summative ones. At the end, we could understand and be aware that the real purpose of assessment is to promote learning. In that manner, throughout deep analysis, we could take into consideration practices that promote formative assessment inside the classroom.

We agreed upon assessment has not only the purpose of giving a grade but also of entailing instruction and research. Shepard (as cited in Shohamy & Inbar, 2006) states that assessment has three big purposes 1) administrative, 2) instructional, and 3) research. Accordingly, they relate to placement or promotion, diagnosis, evidence of progress, providing feedback, and knowledge about language learning and use. Nevertheless, as stated previously, assessment has been nowadays focused on the first purpose (administrative). In this attempt, pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and even teacher educators tend to disregard the other two big purposes that language assessment has. In that manner, throughout deep analysis, we could take into consideration many different variables that favor immensely the assessment as a whole and the development of Language Assessment Literacy.

Giraldo (2018), Hill (2017), Kremmel and Harding (as cited in Chiesa, 2018) agree that one of the main features to develop LAL is to have knowledge on language assessment purposes. We strongly ponder that promoting knowledge on the three purposes of assessment, in any context, allows for introspection of our practices and experiences. Nevertheless, these statements came as a result when writing weekly in the reflective journal, which turned into being a window to set clear assessment purposes and in that manner to construct meaningful learning that allows combining instructional, administrative, and research assessment purposes.

In addition, this formerly declared view on the assessment purposes gave us the opportunity to even find broader purposes on the subject matter such as determining what we want to assess, which gives allusion to the “what for”. Besides, as we are talking about language learning, we realized that one of the biggest purposes needed to be taken into account is the what I want to assess; in this context, defining the language competence I want to focus on, as the common European framework of reference states 1) linguistic competence, 2) sociolinguistic competence, and 3) pragmatic competence.

Furthermore, we determined another crucial element to take into consideration is determining a well-founded procedure in how the assessment is going to be carried out. According to Shohamy and Inbar (2006), when we want to assess, we need to think about how we are going to perform such act. The authors state that there are several ways to approach assessments such as alternatives and traditional ones. Accordingly, they are 1) the requirement to generate responses and procedures when there are not fixed actions in the learning and teaching process, and 2) conventional methods of testing (ibid).

Understanding Language Assessment Literacy

Taking into account all these contributions that the journal brought to us, we could widely see that Language Assessment Literacy is a great grouping of knowledge, skills, and principles for using language assessment in context which is always in need of continuing learning. Having obtained these well-based insights, we could implement them for forming and expressing a sophisticated judgment of our own assessment practices, other teachers', and for other individuals immersed in educational contexts.

Along the process, we realized that we were aware of how we used language assessment terminology and concepts, based on the theory we had learned and analyzed during the course, and by writing the journal. This knowledge was also applied for arbitrating or agreeing upon practices when we were assessed or when we were assessing our own students. Correspondingly, when we were assessed in any subject, we could critique flaws or strengths the test being implemented had. This act was done by using formal vocabulary or concepts that are mostly used when someone has a wide knowledge on assessment and, indeed, is more assessment literate. For instance, we were always looking for visible assessment principles that give form to the real assessment purpose we could find by reflecting through our journals. Such principles in which we were very much interested in were validity, reliability, authenticity, and practicality.

Brown (1998) states that assessing languages must approach an essential set of principles, which fairly and effectively evaluates students' performance. For instance, when we were given any kind of examination, we were searching for the principles that needed to be put in practice according to the objectives to be achieved. Being aware, we came to a point in which we could argue with theory what was missing or what was well done. We even came to a point in which we stood and empower ourselves to raise our voice and let examiners see what they were doing. At this point, it is valid to say that we did it not with the aim of criticizing but critiquing in order to construct valid assessment processes that favor the real learning of students.

Similarly, we were not only critiquing others' assessment practices but ours as well. At that point, we were either doing our practicum in real educational context or working in several language teaching scenarios. In these contexts, we had the opportunity to use our knowledge on theory to put it into practice for constructing accurate practices that objectively assess students for supporting their learning and increasing their language outcomes.

Designing appropriate language assessments

Developing knowledge on assessment concepts, purposes, and principles strengthened our skills to appropriately design tests. As we were immersed in real teaching situations such as practicum, university courses, or our work, we had the opportunity to design tests, applying valid, reliable and meaningful assessments. Through the journal, we could realize about this since the connection between theory and practice was evident through our reflections. Similarly, we set clear and achievable objectives where students could reflect on their learning process.

Constraints and limitations in the process of writing reflective journals

Despite the just mentioned contributions of journal writing in the development of our Language Assessment Literacy, some limitations related to the writing process emerged. Those two limitations were the lack of time and not having writing habits.

Lack of Time

Prospective English teachers enrolled in the assessment and testing course were expected to make an entry in their journal each week. That commitment required us to be very responsible; however, as it needed it to be a process of continuous writing, it turned into being difficult because there was not enough time to devote to this task. At this point, it is valid to say that time was a constraint because other courses in which we were enrolled also required such writing responsibilities.

On the other hand, we relied upon a big-time limitation that, in some situations did not allowed us to fully carry out the reflection process due to anxiety and necessity of fulfilling the journal writing exercise. As a case in point, we had occasions in which we felt time was such a big pressure for completing and handing out the journal. For that reason, we believe that any reflection process must be undertaken through a free-time and endless manner.

Furthermore, we contemplate that this limitation also interfere with the acquisition of metacognitive skills that could benefit the development of language assessment literacy. Bashan and Holsblat (2017) state that “writing in a personal reflective journal may be valuable to student teachers for developing metacognitive abilities and for promoting their self-orientation and responsibility for the processes of their personal and collaborative learning”. In that manner, the lack of time was also a big constraint for us, prospective teachers, to develop our metacognitive skills through writing, since reflection, critique and self-analysis encouragement could not be altogether achieved as we depended heavily on time.

Writing habits

There is no doubt that writing is not an easy task. Students often find difficult to turn words into sentences, and sentences into paragraphs, so they can accurately express their ideas. This usually happens due to the lack of writing habits. In the language assessment course, it was evident that some students were not likely to write. Many of them experienced boredom or frustration towards the writing process. For that manner, even though we did not experience these feelings, we could consider that these elements had a big impact on some students’ writing journals which directly limited their writing in terms of coherence and cohesion.

Conclusions

We can conclude that, as prospective English teachers, we lived an enriching experience through journal writing which indeed contributed to our Language Assessment Literacy development. As a case in point, we could reflect that throughout the years, many teaching education practices have been focused on providing content to students, turning education into knowledge transfer only. Yet, there exist teacher educators who strongly believe that these kinds of practices should experience positive alteration where reflection becomes the protagonist of students' learning processes in order for them to start being more critical and having more awareness about what they are learning and how it can be applied in their future teaching.

In that manner, we advanced on expanding our language assessment literacy from partial to complex. For instance, there exist a broader perception, rendering thanks to the reflection journal that allowed us to reconfigure our insights about assessment which is not only the act of giving a grade but taking into consideration all the learning and teaching process. Furthermore, we also approached to having an evolution of the theoretical framework about assessment as we materialized all concepts when writing the reflection journal and when putting in practice what was imparted and what was reflected.

Conflict of interest

Authors declare non-existent conflict of interest with institutions or business corporations of any nature.

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