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FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES ABOUT THE TRANSITION FROM FACE-TO-FACE INSTRUCTION TO EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING FROM A NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

EXPERIENCIAS DE PROFESORES DE LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS SOBRE LA TRANSICIÓN DE LA ENSEÑANZA PRESENCIAL A LA ENSEÑANZA REMOTA DE EMERGENCIA DESDE UNA PERSPECTIVA NARRATIVA

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a narrative research study on language teaching in higher education. The study aimed to describe the experiences lived by nine language teachers during the transition process from face-to-face to emergency remote teaching and conducted within a qualitative research approach using narrative methodology as a technique of inquiry. The data were collected through stories and a focus group. Based on the data analysis, three main categories were identified: affective component, pedagogical component and technological component. The results showed that at the beginning, the transition was stressful and upsetting, however as time went by, teachers started to feel more confident and calmer about the way they addressed their classes because they adapted to the new teaching reality.

KEYWORDS: emergency remote teaching, face-to-face instruction, teachers, experiences, narrative

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta un estudio sobre la enseñanza de idiomas en educación superior. El estudio tuvo como objetivo describir las experiencias vividas por nueve profesores de idiomas durante el proceso de transición de la enseñanza presencial a la enseñanza remota de emergencia y estuvo enmarcado en un enfoque de investigación cualitativa utilizando la metodología narrativa como técnica de indagación. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de historias y un grupo focal. A partir del análisis de datos, se identificaron tres categorías principales: componente afectivo, componente pedagógico y componente tecnológico. Los resultados mostraron que al principio la transición fue estresante y agobiante, sin embargo, a medida que pasaba el tiempo, los docentes empezaron a sentirse más seguros y tranquilos sobre la forma en que abordaban sus

clases porque se adaptaron a la nueva realidad docente.

PALABRAS CLAVE: enseñanza remota de emergencia, enseñanza presencial, experiencias docentes, narrativa

INTRODUCTION

The Covid pandemic has brought about changes that until recently were unimaginable or not perceived as possible in the near future. In the field of education, drastic changes such as the unexpected and immediate transition from face-to-face instruction to remote teaching, due to the pandemic, are experiences that arrived suddenly without the vast majority of us being prepared. On March 22nd 2020, the Colombian Ministry of Education issued the regulation # 4 for higher education institutions to use technologies for communication and tools such as e-learning for the development of their academic programs. As a consequence, universities had to adapt the teaching and learning process to the new reality. What everybody started doing was moving their teaching practices from the classroom to their home through technological communication devices with the objective of continuing with the education process, despite the ongoing outbreak.

Several educational institutions started to do research about the impact of the pandemic in the academic field. In relation to higher education, Fernandez-Gubieda (2020) from the University of Navarra divulged a publication on the understanding of university teaching processes in times of Covid. It stated that in this new scenario, teachers "were forced to reinvent their teaching and introduce new didactics to face the interruption of presence on campus." (p. 9). Another example of research about the pandemic impact on education, specifically on the field of EFL teaching is a qualitative study developed by Karaeng and Simanjuntak (2021) in the *Universitas Advent Indonesia* (UNAI). This

study examined the experience of EFL teachers using e-learning during the time of Covid-19 pandemic. In a public university in Colombia, two members of the academic community conducted this study that is related to the pandemic impact on foreign language education in a local context.

Teachers' experiences, knowledge and preferences are not only unique but also diverse, that is why the present study aimed to know what the experiences of University of Cauca foreign language teachers were in the transition from face-to-face teaching to emergency remote teaching, from a narrative perspective. The situation caused by the pandemic in the language education field has brought very valuable experiences that must be known and studied to understand the complex process that teachers have gone through and to enrich the practices of remote teaching at the university level in the future.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

ONLINE TEACHING

Different definitions of online teaching can be found in different sources. De Silva (2016), for instance, defines online teaching as the presentation of course syllabus through a computer system. As well, Ding (2021) addresses online teaching as an educational approach where course materials are delivered online without physical activities, whereas Sales (2009) explains that online teaching involves the delivery of instruction through a computer network without face-to-face meetings. These three concepts clearly show that online teaching has to do simply with well-planned instruction through the use of a computer by developing online activities. When teaching online, technology is not only the background of the learning/teaching process but also it works as the context of instruction, given that technology works as the place where the instruction takes place (Howell, 2015). Amid the current crisis

due to COVID-19, educational institutions have had to make decisions on how to keep teaching without endangering faculty and students. The best option seems to be online teaching. However, as Hodges et al. (2020) point out, what teachers are doing to face the crisis cannot be called online teaching per se.

EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING (ERT)

Unlike online teaching, ERT is not as well planned. On the contrary, emergency remote teaching is defined as an interim change in the delivery of instruction due to crisis circumstances (Hodges et al, 2020). This change has to do with the use of available remote solutions for instruction which would normally be delivered either face-to-face or with blended courses once the crisis is over. The objective of ERT is to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a quick and easy way during the time of the emergency. Bearing this in mind, teachers facing this new way of interacting with students have to live a process of many changes in a short period of time. However, it is worth to highlight that although ERT cannot be a synonym of online teaching, it is true that it seems not to move away from the foundations of online education such as: authentic social interaction, ability to cognitively delve into contents and stimulation and guide from the teacher (Virgili, 2021).

TEACHING LANGUAGES ONLINE

Online language teaching consists in language instruction that can be partly or fully online. About online language teaching, Meskill and Anthony (2015) stated three premises about the subject matter: language learning mainly comprises social/instructional processes; online environments can be used well socially and instructionally, and teaching well online needs skilled instruction. According to Rosenthal (2000), computer technology is not something new in language teaching, and if it is used appropriately new technologies give

the opportunity to reshape the content and the process of language education. Rosenthal (2000), also stated that new technologies give the chance of integrating language, content and culture, as well as the encouragement for collaborative and autonomous learning. As teaching online has become a challenge for many of us, it is important to consider some aspects that are a requirement for this kind of teaching, since teaching languages online differs from teaching face-to-face or even teaching other areas. Hampel and Stickler's (2005), introduced a pyramid of the necessary skills to teach English online and it is presented from the basic level skills to the higher-level skills.

METHODOLOGY

METHOD

This study was conducted within a qualitative research approach which uses narrative methodology as a technique of inquiry. The qualitative research allows the comprehension of the world of the lived experiences from the point of view of participants (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). This type of research is characterized by the inquiries making emphasis on the studied subject who experienced the phenomenon we want to study. It seeks to comprehend the phenomenon from the people's experiences of what they say about a particular situation. Maxwell (2013) defines qualitative research as the one able to help to understand the perspectives of the studied people, see the world from their own view, analyze how these perspectives are determined by their particular contexts and the personal processes involved in the cohesion of these phenomena and its relations.

The narrative methodology is related to topical stories. Moen (2006) defines narration as a story that tells events in a sequenced manner, those events are relevant for the people who tell their stories and/or the ones who listen. In the particular case of the present research, the

narrative approach seeks to describe the lived experiences during the process of transition from face-to-face instruction to emergency remote instruction of the foreign language courses.

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

This study was conducted in a Language Education Program of a public university in Colombia, which offers courses in foreign languages at a basic level (A2), the languages offered are: English, French, Italian and Portuguese. Nine teachers participated in this study and they were teaching a foreign language in the different courses offered in the period of time where the data were collected. Six teachers taught English, one teacher taught French, one taught Italian and one taught Portuguese. The number of teachers teaching English was higher because the number of English courses offered is higher too. The participants' ages ranged between 28 and 55 years old. They all have at least five years of experience teaching EFL at the university level. These teachers were selected taking into account their availability to participate in the study and the different languages, courses and teaching experience they have had during their working time at the university.

DATA COLLECTION

One method of data collection in narrative inquiry is storytelling. With storytelling, researchers can obtain information about context, meaning, emotions, details, events, time, participants, etc. The most important about storytelling as data collection method is that researchers understand the experiences from the individual's point of view (Potts, 2004). As cited by Blanco (2011), for Clandinin et al (2007), storytelling is a gateway through which a person's experience is interpreted and transformed into personally meaningful. When using narrative inquiry, participants can be asked to tell their stories by answering questions in writing. Texts are created from the told stories and these are analyzed

through different approaches. In the present study, a specific type of story was used, this is the topical story. Riessman (1993) defines topical stories as restricted stories about one specific moment in time with a “plot, characters and setting” but that do not include the entire person’s life.

To broaden and reinforce the information gathered from the storytelling, four participants were selected at random to participate in a focus group. Focus groups aid the purpose of collecting qualitative data and can be used as a source of follow-up date to reinforce the first method Morgan (1997). The focus group was carried out through a meeting via Zoom where 7 questions were asked. The meeting was recorded and then the information provided by teachers was transcribed. The information from this data collection is qualitative, which allows an in-depth analysis of the gathered information.

ANALYSIS

Porta and Flores (2017) mention some approaches through which narrative researchers address their materials. The approach to be highlighted here is the one that states that researchers see narrative as a particular discourse that conveys the narrator’s point of view including not only descriptions but also emotions, feelings and interpretations. In relation to language teaching and learning, as stated by Mendieta (2013), narratives can help us to better understand these two concepts given that teachers and learners are “storytellers” who take part in narratives to make sense of their knowledge and experiences.

According to Creswell (2007), data analysis in qualitative research in general involves: examining raw data, reducing them to themes through a coding and recoding process, and representing the data in figures, tables and narratives in a final research text. In narrative inquiry, data analysis refers to working out the

meaning of the data. For the purposes of the present study, we focus on one of the three types of information defined by Pavlenko (2007) who claims the first of this is subject reality that involves “a thematic analysis where the main analytical step is the coding of narratives according to emerging themes, patterns and categories”. One of the most common approaches to analyze narratives is the narrative thematic analysis, which focuses on the content within the text. It is a flexible method that lays emphasis on the identification, study and record of patterns present in data and in this way gives a full, detailed and complex account of data (Gaskell, 2000).

FINDINGS

FINDINGS FROM THE TOPICAL STORIES.

AFFECTIVE COMPONENT:

This component refers to the feelings experienced by teachers during the transition process from face-to-face teaching to emergency remote teaching. The researchers found two emerging themes: Negative and positive feelings.

Teachers consistently expressed they experienced feelings of fear, anxiety and stress specially at the beginning of the transition process. Their concerns were mostly related to time constraints given that the change to emergency remote teaching was sudden and unexpected and about the need to learn to use technologies they had never used before. In addition, they mentioned the need to adapt their materials and activities and they felt uncertainty about the way these would work in the new scenario. Teachers also experienced feelings of stress because of connectivity problems.

“What I can’t deny is feeling afraid of thinking that something could go wrong. Everything was new at that moment.”
(Teacher 2)

After some time, teachers started to feel comfortable with their lessons based on technological resources and tools and using the virtual scenario to instruct their students. They started to learn how to use platforms adapting to the new teaching method and modality. They felt they experienced a period of learning and after that, they were able to develop their classes more comfortably and easily than at the beginning.

“The tiredness and stress I felt when this change happened disappeared and now, I feel really comfortable with my work.” (Teacher 4)

PEDAGOGICAL COMPONENT

The pedagogical component has to do with the academic issues related to the implementation of the emergency remote teaching. Three themes emerged from this component: Training, teacher's role, and resources and materials.

Some teachers mentioned they already had some experience with virtual education as students which somehow helped them to visualize the way they were to conduct their own courses. Other teachers had no experience with online instruction. Most teachers started to carry out autonomous and collaborative training in virtual education to be able to deal with the new experience. Mostly, teachers stated they consider this transition as a meaningful learning experience. As mentioned by Trust et al (2020), for teachers who used technology more frequently the transition was easier, however most educators seemed to be learning remote teaching strategies and the use of technological tools while they started teaching this way.

“At the beginning with the sudden entry of virtuality, my knowledge about it was minimal, since until that moment the virtual training that I had was very limited with respect to what the virtual

teaching process truly represents, but little by little I went deeper into the use of virtual resources through a continuous autonomous work and group work carried out with other colleagues.” (Teacher 3)

Teachers had the most active role in the process as they were the ones who had to start learning, adapting and transforming their teaching to fulfill the requirements of the new modality. They had to be autonomous in the search for resources, tools, materials, new forms of evaluation, platforms and several other tools that were necessary to teach. One aspect to highlight in relation to the teacher's role is that they were not able to control the students' work at home and it was difficult to control the evaluation process. This led to the difficulty that many students were promoted without advancing in their learning process appropriately. In addition, most teachers agreed on the fact that more time was needed to plan their classes, to design materials and to evaluate as well as the work load increased considerably. Follow-up, support and communication with students were considered vital aspects by teachers in this new way of interaction. According to Stavredes (2011), understanding the diversity of online students is crucial in this process since this can help to use the right approach to teach students in order to facilitate the learning process and the permanence in this kind of classes.

“This modality requires more time of dedication in the follow-up process in the teaching and learning process. Students require more support, reason why as a teacher I had to dedicate more time than the one required in the face-to-face modality.” (Teacher 5)

An advantage perceived by teachers in relation to the materials was that the program had a well-planned syllabus so they had materials

they could adapt and had a guide to plan the class. Teachers had to search for new materials, resources and tools to adapt their classes to the emergency remote teaching and these were made available to students constantly. Teachers agreed that one advantage of the new modality of instruction was the possibility to have access to materials, resources and tools that were not used in face-to-face classes given that there was no Internet connection in the classrooms. Teachers also highlighted the need for continued learning about the use of virtual learning objects.

“Every day I discover new tools, I believe that by having access to the entire network with one click, many things can be done. The students themselves enjoy being able to work with these tools. The pandemic made that many companies and applications were free for education, a great advantage for all.” (Teacher 1)

Technological Component

This component consists of the technological aspects involved in the teaching process. Here the researchers found two themes: Access to technological tools and technical difficulties.

The emergency remote teaching gave teachers and students the opportunity to have access to new resources and tools as videos, online exercises and apps they had never used before which gave diversity to the classes and activities. Teachers agreed that the resources offered by the Internet are a meaningful support to strengthen the teaching and learning process as long as participants take advantage of them.

“it is a new process that is motivating us to use new technological tools and design and plan diverse lessons.”
(Teacher 9)

Teachers continuously expressed their concerns in relation to technical difficulties both teachers

and students experienced during emergency remote teaching. Most of these difficulties have to do with connectivity as many students live in rural areas of the country where the access to a stable Internet connection is intermittent or nonexistent. Other technical difficulties were related to failures in computing equipment, lack of microphone or camera or malfunctioning of the last two. In addition to these difficulties, students also express they cannot have connectivity given to electricity failures, lack of WiFi connection and need to use connections provided by mobile phone companies which are not stable. However, despite these technical difficulties, teachers expressed that in general, these did not hinder the development of the classes and activities.

“...some students, especially those who live in rural areas, commented on issues with the electricity and internet service. A few more had to borrow a computer because they do not have their own equipment or resources to get one.”
(Teacher 6)

FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUP.

In the focus group, the questions were based on the three components that came up after the analysis of the topical stories.

AFFECTIVE COMPONENT

Teachers expressed that they experienced the most stressful moments at the very beginning of the process because of the sudden and unexpected announcements of change from face-to-face to virtual scenarios. They said that they felt anxious and stressed because things were new for them, because of the problems with the Internet connection and especially because they had to plan everything in little time. On the other hand, teachers expressed that they started to feel more confident and calmer at the moment

they were given tools and training about remote instruction and above all when time passed and they had more practice with the different components involved in this type of teaching.

PEDAGOGICAL COMPONENT

Teachers said that most of the preparation came from training offered by the university, self-training using tutorials on different websites and also from collaborative training. Teachers emphasized the need for motivating students and making classes more active and entertaining for students. They also said they became facilitators of learning and interaction by assigning collaborative work to students. Besides, they said that it was necessary to be more understanding, tolerant and flexible with students because of the frequent technical problems experienced with this type of instruction. Teachers also mentioned that students need more autonomy and that the more autonomous they become the better they respond. As for materials, they stated that they had to find different alternatives to facilitate and motivate learning and emphasized on the advantage of all students having access to the tools.

TECHNOLOGICAL COMPONENT

All teachers said they have used the Google suite as this is the one provided by the university. The tools they used with more frequency were Meet, Classroom, Jamboard and Forms. They also mentioned other specific tools they have used such as Canva, Sweetsnap, Kahoot, Whiteboard.fi, Genial.ly and Screencastify. In relation to technical difficulties, the most frequent were connectivity problems as they often had Internet failures or slow connections especially those who live in rural areas, municipalities or small villages. As well, some teachers mentioned that students often have difficulties to attend virtual classes because they do not have a computer and they have to use their smartphones which do not have stable connections.

CONCLUSION

These findings are strongly related to what several authors have defined as digital competences that teachers must develop in this modality of work. For instance, Martínez-Garcés and Garcés-Fuenmayor (2020) set out such competences as digital literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, security and problem solving. According to the findings, teachers had to develop at least a certain degree of digital literacy when they had to look for tools and resources or when they learned to use platforms and applications to use in their classes. As well, when teachers mentioned they had to rely on colleagues to help them prepare for teaching with technologies, they developed the competence of communication and collaboration. When teachers expressed, they had to create materials that motivated students they certainly developed the competence of digital content creation. Besides, at the moments teachers dealt with difficulties inherent to remote teaching they were able to develop the problem-solving competence as they had to think quickly and solve any problem immediately which later on gave them security when they started to feel comfortable with remote teaching.

The findings about the affective component in the focus group agree with those of studies such as the one conducted by MacIntyre et al (2020) where they found that language teachers suffered from substantial levels of stress, anxiety, anger, sadness and loneliness due to a long list of stressors caused by the emergency conversion to online language teaching. On the other hand, the positive feelings teachers experienced later on during the transition process are similar to those found in a study conducted with higher education lecturers where the researchers found that their emotions towards online synchronous teaching were positive and associated with opportunity and success rather than failure and threat. (Meishar-Tal, H. & Levenberg, A., 2021)

The findings about technical difficulties are not distant from those in other contexts. Ferri, Grifoni and Tiziana (2020) conducted a study to analyze the opportunities and challenges of ERT and they found that there certainly were technological challenges primarily related to lack of Internet connectivity, lack of proper digital devices and insufficient bandwidth. This situation is very similar to the one that occurred in the context where the present study was developed.

When comparing the data obtained from the two instruments, the information gathered from the focus group reinforced the aspects found in the topical stories in relation to the affective, pedagogical, and technological component. Something that emerged from the focus group and was not mentioned in the topical stories was that teachers found on the one hand that students needed to be more motivated and on the other hand that teachers needed to be more flexible with students.

The goal of this study was to become aware of the experience's language teachers had in the transition from face-to-face teaching to emergency remote teaching due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As shown in the findings it can be said that teachers' experiences were both positive and negative during this transition process. However, these experiences tended to be more positive than negative with time and practice since in both instruments teachers expressed that nowadays they feel they have adapted to the change and feel more confident working in this way. The only aspect that continues to be a problem is the one related to the technical difficulties but this is something that cannot be controlled by teachers. Our study corroborates with others that this transition was something that took us all by surprise and showed that teachers had different experiences in this adaptation process that became meaningful for them at a personal and professional level. To conclude, the findings

help us to realize that teachers are able to adapt to new teaching circumstances and that above all this has become a learning experience for all.

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