

## **CELE's Revamped Teacher Training Course – Contents and Piloting**

**C. Patricia Cánovas C., Centro de Estudio de Lenguas Extranjeras,  
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, canovas@servidor.unam.mx**

### **Introduction**

In this paper the process used to design a new Teacher Training Course is presented—the background which motivated it, the stages it went through, and finally its piloting and on-going evaluation.

The Language Center of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (CELE/UNAM), has been offering a Teacher Training Course for language teachers since 1980. The course has been continuously updated, but it was not until recently that major restructuring took place. The group of teachers involved in the course, approximately 30 from five different foreign languages (English, French, German, Italian and Portuguese) decided to revamp the course in order to fulfill the more recent expectations of participants. First, we started by doing a diagnosis of the course as it was. By means of questionnaires and interviews, we asked for the opinion of the student teachers, former student teachers, teacher trainers (present and former), and employers from private and public institutions. Parallel to this, we carried out a literature review to update the theoretical background and we searched the web to analyze different programs offered at national and international universities in order to have a wider range of comparison. Finally, we invited a well known specialist in curriculum design, Dr. Christian Puren, from the University of St. Etienne in France, to give us a five-week seminar in 2005, and another one-week seminar in 2006.

We arrived at several conclusions, the most relevant of which are the following:

- a. Though there exist various B. A. and M. A. programs on language teaching, the need for a shorter course is still predominant, particularly for teachers already working in the Mexico City metropolitan area and surrounding states who require certification. Moreover, novice teachers doing a B. A. may also be interested in taking it while finishing their major studies.
- b. There is an administrative, pedagogical and practical need, among the faculty of the course, to create a homogeneous program to be taught in all languages (there had been a wide range of variations) so that the students have a very similar profile upon graduation regardless of the language they teach.

- c. The connection between theory and practice needs to be more fully demonstrated.
- d. More practice is required, particularly for novice teachers.
- e. Autonomous learning has to be encouraged.
- f. More emphasis on intercultural communication is definitely needed.
- g. There needs to be more emphasis on internet resources and the pedagogical use of such resources.
- h. According to employers, there is a need to include information on teaching larger groups and younger students.
- i. Last, but not least, employers complained that the command of the language among graduates may vary immensely.

By revamping the course, we hoped to benefit the approximately 70 students we have per year (the average number of students who have made up every generation for the past 25 years), plus all the learners who will become students of these graduates in the future, and the approximately 20 teaching staff members.

In the early stages, there were 30 or more participants involved in this research project, so we decided to work in commissions. Each commission usually consisted of one member per language in order to integrate every area's viewpoint. There were commissions to:

- Write a synthesis of the 100-hour seminar with Dr. Puren in 2005.
- Write the research project itself, calculating the stages, time and resources required.
- Write the entry and exit profiles.
- Decide on the contents of the different modules, their length, relative weight and work load. Here, there was one sub-commission per module.
- Draft and map out the various curricula as the process was progressing.

We also agreed on having periodical meetings for commissions to report on their progress, keeping a record of the whole process, and organizing academic events so as to continue updating. As time went by, and the workload increased, participants started dropping out of the project. After a few months, there were no more than 10 teachers doing the job. Nevertheless, after long working hours, we designed the program which was first piloted from February to December, 2007. At present, the second piloting is taking place.

### **Theoretical background**

Based on Dr. Puren's teachings, our perspectives on Teacher Education were broadened. We included the *Philosophyco-Pedagogical Perspective (Perspectiva 'Didactológica')*, that is, the 'why' of teaching, which allows participants "to reflect upon their own discipline and construct models, as well as to reflect upon their responsibilities towards the learners and

society" (Puren, seminar, 2005). Thus, the two obvious perspectives we used to focus on:

- the *Methodological Perspective (Perspectiva Metodológica)* which deals with questions concerning 'what' to do in the language class, and
- the *Pedagogical Perspective (Perspectiva Didáctica)* which deals with questions related to 'how' to teach, 'how' to learn, and the connection between the two.

Moreover, the *Philosophyco-Pedagogical Perspective (Perspectiva 'Didactológica')* requires time – time to evaluate what we do in class, time to reflect and reason why we do it, and time to decide whether it is worth doing or not, if it benefits the learners, and, in the long run, society. This time requirement affected our course design, as we shall discuss below.

Four basic principles guide the new design:

1. The complexity of the teaching and learning process is to be carefully considered. Its different angles are to be questioned, analyzed, and reflected upon, as well as our responsibility towards learners and society.
2. Language is an integral part of culture, and thus inseparable. A language teacher is, therefore, a teacher of the language and culture.
3. Interlanguage is a continuous learning process which is personal, and starts with the learner's competence in his own language and culture.
4. Professional development is an ongoing learning process which does not end with this course.

Why these four basic principles? The first principle is self explanatory. There are no precise recipes; what at a certain moment in time used to be "the only way to teach" was later questioned and rejected. Language teaching is as complex as doing research or being a doctor. There are no right or wrong answers. There are learners with different characteristics, and abilities. Student teachers must not expect to learn a precise way to teach, but rather to reflect on what they do, analyze it, question it, and react accordingly.

*We do believe that language and culture or cultures (there is not one single culture, but many) are inseparable. You cannot learn a language without learning about the culture(s). If you learn Mexican Spanish, for example, you will learn culturally bound mexicanismos which might be used throughout all Mexico or locally, i.e. only in the specific region where you are. Though we had always taken culture into consideration, it had never been explicitly stated. We, thus, included a module in which we have tried to promote awareness, respect and understanding towards the culture(s) of others, and to analyze the relevance, the meaning, and the sense of "otherness".*

The concept of the learners' interlanguage, once restricted to psycholinguistics, was analyzed more profoundly. We became conscious of the fact that it exists even in our mother tongue, for L1 competence varies

according to one's background, culture, age and education. We thus agreed on considering it the basis for any language program. You have to keep it in mind when you design a curriculum, a course or even a lesson. We have tried to focus on interlanguage in every module – particularly in those dealing with skills or evaluation – in order for student teachers to bear in mind their students' interlanguage when they plan their lessons or design a test.

The fourth basic principle is also self explanatory – a Teacher Training Course is just the starting point of a long, ongoing learning process which, hopefully, will last for life. We hope graduates will be motivated to continue their teacher education by themselves – through reading, sharing, seeking help among colleagues, and taking part in workshops, conventions, distance learning, on-line projects, B. A. or M. A. programs; whatever is within their reach.

### **Entry Requirements and Exit Profile**

Candidates must be 21 or older, and they must have a *preparatoria* or high school certificate. Based on existing records, it is known that a great number of our candidates have done or are doing B. A. or B. S. studies, even Master's Degrees. However, we agreed not to require such a degree, for it would leave out those teachers already working who know the language they teach, but who do not have a degree, or the possibility of getting one. However, these teachers have a greater need of being certified. These candidates usually want to take the course in the open system for they only have to attend classes once a week (twice during the second semester).

A good command of the language is a top requisite. Besides using selected international certificates as a first filter, we demand that they take our own entrance exam where we evaluate their level of L2 proficiency and specific academic skills which are necessary for the course. As part of the revamping process, we recently revised all our exams. Writing is the most important section. It is through writing a formal essay that candidates demonstrate their actual command of the language. This section is photocopied, and corrected by two independent raters. When there is a discrepancy in the grades, a third rater is consulted. Those candidates who pass this first filter are scheduled for an interview. Again, as with the writing section, two interviewers are involved, and a parallel rating process takes place.

The new Exit Profile corresponds to these principles:

- The graduate will be prepared to successfully carry out his/her duties as a teacher of a foreign language and culture at the high school or university level.

- The teacher acknowledges that professional development will be better achieved through a three dimensional process of initial reflection, teaching practice, and continuous reflection.
- All decisions that are made by the teacher are to be based on two fundamental factors – the complexity of the language item as well as the specific teaching situation and the interlanguage stage of the students

### **The course itself**

In the end, we decided to give quality priority over time factors; therefore the length of two semesters was kept. In fact, the course ended up being even longer – it now lasts more than the 450 hours it used to be. At present, instead of finishing at 7:00 pm every day, participants have classes until 8:30 once a week, and until 8:00 pm twice a week.

Currently there are modules that are compulsory and others that are elective – student teachers can decide which to take depending on personal interest. There are obligatory 24-hour modules which last for the whole semester, and 12-hour modules which are generally elective.

All modules are meant to be interrelated and to emphasize practice over theory – that's why the Observation, Planning and Practice Modules now contemplate practice from the very beginning, and modules like Sociolinguistics and Psycholinguistics, that tended to be more theoretical than practical, became elective. When deciding on the contents of each module, we correlated the module programs in order to confirm module interconnection while at the same time avoiding overlapping. Moreover, teacher trainers are in constant communication with each other. An Internet group, which can only be accessed by members, has been opened so that each teacher knows what the other teachers are doing at a certain point in time and can connect the contents of the classes.

The language system (phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexis) is taught in connection with the participants' own learning and teaching experience, either previous or in progress. The language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing), are presented in pairs, when possible. The combinations vary, depending on the language area. French, for example, offers the two comprehension skills (listening and reading) together, while English combines listening and speaking, but not reading and writing. We have given special emphasis to the teaching of writing. A full 24-hour module was designed in order to allow sufficient time and opportunities for participants themselves to practice and improve their own writing, while at the same time learning how to teach it.

## **Names and main characteristics of the new modules**

*Pedagogical Theories* functions as the axis which gives global coherence to the whole Teacher Training Program. It deals with knowledge which is presented more practically in other modules, and incorporated here into one consistent theoretical module. It lasts two semesters, and is offered in Spanish for the student teachers of all language areas to take together and share common knowledge or contrast differences. The student teachers often work in small groups which have at least one member per language area. Each area receives extra texts and references in its specific language.

The Learning of an Unknown Foreign Language is an obligatory 12-hour module offered for student teachers to reflect upon their own learning process. The sessions are 1½ hours long – one hour to learn the unknown language, and half an hour to reflect upon the learning process. It is worth pointing out that because it is such a brief period of time, only the spoken language is focused on. Besides the foreign language teacher, there are four or five tutors who observe the class, and later lead the reflection process in small groups. Rather than focusing on theoretical psycholinguistic knowledge in language learning, reflection on the participants' learning process, their learning strategies and their own interlanguage is highlighted here. During the first piloting, Russian was the language to be learned; during the second year, 2008, it was Chinese.

The Action Research and Personal Research Project is a very important new module planned to last for two semesters. The goal is for student teachers to experience what action research is like, and to develop a personal research project that will encompass bits of relevant knowledge from all modules, as well as from other outside sources. Student teachers individually decide on what they want to investigate. This project, a formal one, is the main final product of the course. Besides the head teacher of the module, a tutor is assigned to guide every participant throughout the process.

*The Pedagogy of Culture* is a module where the importance of cultural competence is highlighted. As mentioned above, culture is intrinsic to language; one cannot exist independent of the other. Also, different cultures may co-exist within the same language. Ryan (1996: 572) considers that "the concept of culture is complex, difficult to explain, slippery". Student teachers must become aware of all this, and reflect upon it. They are expected to be able to analyze and assess the treatment of foreign culture(s) in textbooks and materials, as well as to design pedagogical sequences that deal with different aspects of the foreign culture(s). Byram's schema (1989: 34) shown in Figure 1 (where he "conserves the elegance of French terminology in which knowledge, skills

and attitudes can be described as different *savoirs*”) was the basis for the design of the course.

	<b>Skills</b> <i>interpret and relate</i> (savoir comprendre)	
<b>Knowledge</b> <i>of self and other;</i> <i>of interaction;</i> <i>individual and societal</i> (savoirs)	<b>Education</b> <i>political education</i> <i>critical cultural awareness</i> (savoir s'engager)	<b>Attitudes</b> <i>relativising self</i> <i>valuing other</i> (savoir etre)
	<b>Skills</b> <i>discover and/or interact</i> (savoir apprendre/faire)	

Figure 1. Factors in intercultural communication

*Observation, Planning and Practice (OPP 1 & 2)*, another important module, nowadays includes practice a few weeks after starting the first semester. Formerly, the first term only focused on observation and planning. Classroom management, practical teaching techniques, and the like are now experienced earlier, and can be reflected upon sooner. Student teachers, in small groups of four or five, practice twice a week with real learners from different CELE groups. These practice sessions consist of two hours of teaching, and two hours for feedback. It is during the lesson planning and feedback sessions that the *Philosophyco-Pedagogical Perspective (Perspectiva 'Didactológica')* clearly takes place; i.e. the association between practice and theory, and the reflection, analysis, and questioning of “why” this or that was done.

*Linguistic Descriptions and Language Pedagogy 1, 2 and 3* deal with the system of the language. Module 1 focuses on phonetics, phonology, and lexis – whatever is specifically related to phonetics and phonology. Module 2 comprises morphology and syntax, while Module 3 focuses extensively on lexis. The programs reflect the practice-theory connection we want to convey. The student teachers are required to design pedagogical sequences which demonstrate their awareness of learning strategies or which are backed by theoretical aspects being discussed at a given moment. We used to have only two modules dedicated to the system of the language, but, after a lot of reading and discussion, we considered that syntax and lexis deserved more attention.

*Group Dynamics* has become a compulsory 12-hour module. In 2007 it was offered in two parts – six hours per semester. *Group Dynamics* is now given a more profound focus than that traditionally expected by participants. The emphasis is not on having fun, but on providing an opportunity for the teachers to identify learners’ personality traits by observing the roles they might play in class. These kinds of activities may also help to speed up the learning process, to review or to diagnose a

problem – the module gives student teachers the chance to experience some of these techniques.

We used to offer this module intensively during the first week of the course. Based on former participants' feedback, who yearned for *Group Dynamics* activities during the second term, we considered that splitting the module and offering the second part at the beginning of the second semester (after student teachers had gained practical teaching experience during the first semester) would be better. However, this did not occur, as we shall discuss below.

*Electronic Resources*, a hands-on 12-hour module also split between the two semesters, is given in the multimedia lab. Student teachers learn to use the library electronic resources to help them do research, find complementary information, practical teaching tips, and so forth. We planned to split it, for participants to first become acquainted with the library electronic resources, and later with more elaborate resources. Again, this did not work out for reasons which shall also be discussed below.

*Elective 12-hour modules* are offered to promote participants' autonomy. Student teachers select three courses to be covered during the two semesters, according to their own needs and wants. They may take one or two modules during the first semester, and the rest during the second. They may also take more than three, if they choose to do so. At present, the elective modules offered are: *Psycholinguistics*, *Sociolinguistics*, *The Teaching of Larger Groups*, *The Teaching of Younger Learners*, *An Introduction to Virtual Environments in Pedagogy*, *An Introduction to Self-access Learning*, *Group Dynamics 2*, *ICT* (Information and Communication Technologies), and *Grupo Operativo* which is a different group dynamics technique specifically designed for the French area.

### **Evaluation Results so far:**

In 2007, the course was offered in English, French and Portuguese. There were not sufficient candidates to open it in German or Italian. In 2008, it was opened only in the first two languages. Throughout the piloting process evaluation was continuous. Teacher trainers and student teachers were asked to answer small questionnaires at the end of each module. The latter were also asked to complete a longer one at the end of the entire course. Teacher trainers' meetings were also a fine source of feedback and evaluation. The Students and Teachers' Council (*Consejo de Formación*) whose members are elected by their peers was a forum where opinions and concerns were often expressed. The role of tutors in some modules also provided important feedback. From the analysis of the data we were able to conclude, as expected, that not everything had gone as

planned, and that the student teachers' and teacher trainers' expectations were only partly met, or met in some modules, but not in all.

In *The Learning of an Unknown Foreign Language* module clear guidelines regarding the main goal were not made explicit at the beginning, so the student teachers were more interested in actually learning the Russian language than in considering their own learning process. It was therefore hard for them to reflect upon their learning strategies after each Russian class. Tutors had to stop after the third session, discuss the main objective with participants, and encourage them not only to try to learn the language, but to reflect upon their individual learning process as well. In any case, everybody loved the experience. Since this was only a 12-hour module, participants would have liked to continue with their classes for a longer period of time. This was not possible at that moment, but they were encouraged to enroll in a Russian class during the second semester. In fact, all student teachers at CELE have the right to enroll in a language course while they are doing their own TT course. When this course is over, they may continue with their language courses indefinitely till they finish all the levels. It is an important opportunity for them to learn another foreign language.

In 2008, for the second piloting, the tutors were better able to lead the reflection towards the learning process from the very beginning, and participants focused on the strategies they were using to learn Chinese. According to the student teachers, the learning of Chinese was successful both ways – as the learning of Chinese itself and as a reflection on the learning process. The foreign language teacher did not speak Spanish, so she herself provided communication strategies easily observed by everyone – one was resorting to English when she couldn't convey meaning by other means. Everybody was much more satisfied this time.

The two split-modules, *Group Dynamics* and *Internet Resources*, were too short. Most student teachers complained about this. The main objective of *Group Dynamics*, which used to be to integrate student teachers of all languages when the course started, was definitely not achieved. *Internet Resources* was deficient during the first part because participants had varying previous knowledge of the Internet resources. This was not taken into account and they were all treated as novice users. Also, there were problems with the facilities because the multimedia lab was brand new; however, these problems were overcome during the second part of the module.

For 2008, the two modules were reconsidered and changed accordingly. *Group Dynamics* was offered in its entirety during the first semester, having the integration of the whole group as its covert goal. An elective module that goes deeper into the topics was offered during the second

term; several students took it. The student teachers' evaluations were quite positive.

The *Internet Resources* course continued to be split. However, student teachers were asked before the course started to fill out a questionnaire to know what their pre-existing Internet skills were, and the program was modified accordingly. The majority of the learners were frequent users, and those who weren't were offered individual tutoring either on line or in the library itself in their spare time. Furthermore, this first part was given at the end of the first term, when student teachers already had an idea of what their action research project would be about, so that the use of Internet resources became meaningful. The second half of the module was offered at the beginning of the second semester; again, with better results, thus showing that there was improved continuity.

In 2007 the *Action Research and Personal Research Project* received somewhat negative evaluations from several student teachers and tutors. The first semester was considered too theoretical and dense – it included information on all types of research; the second semester was more practical, useful, and concentrated on action research. The program was therefore modified. In 2008 the first term was shortened – only four sessions were assigned to the introduction of what action research is about, while the second term was kept the same. An important factor that helped was that the teacher trainers of *Action Research and Personal Research Project* and *Internet Resources* were in constant communication. Thus, in 2008, the results of a better *Internet Resources* module were actually reflected in the participants' *action research* drafts for their final projects which they handed in at the end of the first term.

In 2007, the *Grupo Operativo* module did not achieve its goals. Planned exclusively for the student teachers of French, the objective of this module was to deal with participants' feelings, fears, conflicts in human relations, and the like. The very negative evaluation received caused us to eliminate it from the program for the second piloting.

*Pedagogical Theories 1 & 2* were the most successful, as was *Writing*. The vast majority of the student teachers were satisfied with the content, the balance between theory and practice, the class dynamics, and the teacher trainers. They reported that both teacher trainers were active, well organized, facilitated exchanges, and promoted learning. In 2008, the results were virtually the same.

Other modules that were well evaluated were *Linguistic Descriptions and Language Pedagogy 1, 2 and 3*, *Linguistic Abilities 1, 2 and 3*, and *OPP 1 and 2*. However, there were variations depending on the language area and the teacher trainer. The students' anonymous feedback was passed

on to the teacher trainers for them to think about individually, and react accordingly.

Other modules required slight adjustments, mostly due to the inexperience of the teacher trainers or the inclusion of excessive theory. The student teachers' evaluations were most useful to detect these aspects, though many times the teacher trainers who had already detected the problems themselves.

Though we had agreed during the design stage on every change that needed to be carried out in the programs, what was most difficult to achieve was, in fact, real change. Habits are difficult to modify, including the teacher trainers' habits. For the teachers who used to focus on one single skill, adapting their programs to give two skills during the same period of time was challenging. They had to decide what the most relevant and practical information was, and avoid expanding too much on either of the two skills. When you believe that everything is relevant, this is a difficult step to take. Student teachers, however, were satisfied with the programs and their teachers, though a few of them wished they had had more practice. It should be noted that this last comment is inconsistent with their complaint that the course overall is too demanding and tiring.

The same happened to other teacher trainers who were used to having 24-hour modules and who commented that the change to 12-hour modules was a laborious one to undertake. This is the case of *Psycholinguistics* and *Sociolinguistics*, and student-teachers also reported in their evaluation questionnaires that there was too much content for the time allotted. Both programs were therefore redesigned for 2008.

The interconnection between modules as well as the intercommunication between module teacher trainers became a practical problem. The Yahoo Group did not work as planned. In 2007; few teacher trainers uploaded information about their courses. The majority were overwhelmed with their own workload and did not find the time to participate. In 2008, the Yahoo group still exists, but again few teacher trainers are profiting from it. It is a pleasure to read what they are doing in *The Pedagogy of Culture* module, for example, but hard to integrate this information into one's own program.

Another problem related to change is homework. Since more time is spent at CELE, we had previously agreed on limiting reading and other homework to the minimum, but this did not actually occur in most modules. In 2007 this was brought up in the *Consejo de Formación* meetings and quickly resolved. The teacher trainers effectively reacted to the learners' concerns. For example, almost every module leader had asked participants to pilot their activities and write a report. It was impossible for every student teacher to pilot their pedagogical sequences,

tests or projects in their *OPP* language group or elsewhere. The assignments were thus negotiated, reformulated, reduced or even eliminated. The amount of reading was reduced too. In the 2008 first semester evaluation forms, there were no complaints.

The second piloting is not yet over, but we hope that the changes already implemented will generate positive results. Though a number of participants (student teachers as well as teacher trainers) complained about having classes till 8:30 pm twice a week, we have not yet reduced the number of class hours. We decided to wait until the second piloting was over because it is a decision which requires deep reflection and discussion.

One possibility we have thought of is to change the course into a specialized course at the graduate level, and design a shorter course for undergraduate students and working teachers without a degree. A second possibility, and most probably our next goal, is to give the course online. Both are challenges ahead of us.

The evaluation process is on-going, and might never end. But that is the point; that is what is expected – continuous reflection, and evaluation, learning and updating. In fact, it is the basic philosophy underlying our course, and what we consider *Teacher Education* and *Curriculum Development* to be all about.

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