

## **EFL Practice Teaching Immersions: The Whys and Wherefores**

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### **Abstract**

At the Universidad de Quintana Roo (UQROO) in Chetumal, Mexico, students in the course *Práctica Docente II* (Teaching Practice II), have the unique opportunity to be “immersed” in a classroom as part of their teaching practice. What is involved in this immersion experience? To summarize briefly, each student works with one teacher trainer in her classroom for eight hours over the course of four days, first observing, then assisting, and ultimately teaching part, or even all, of a lesson. Being immersed in this way gives Teaching Practice students an inside, realistic view of what is required of a teacher from one day to the next, the variety of teacher roles and responsibilities, and the different kinds of situations teachers regularly encounter. The immersion project has been extremely successful and well-received with positive results on the part of all involved. It is a unique approach providing a real-life, supervised teaching opportunity for students who are in their final semester of the English Language major. This article explains the whys and wherefores of classroom immersions and provides a guide for Teaching Practice professors who may want to include immersions in their course syllabi. Much of the theory underpinning this practical application comes from the work of Ruth Wajnryb, an applied linguist and writer with thirty years of experience in language teaching and education.

### **Guide to nomenclature**

*Immersion* refers to extensive exposure to the conditions under which students will eventually work.

*Student Teacher* refers to *Teaching Practice student*

*Student* refers to *classroom participant*

*Trainer* refers to *participating teacher*

*Teaching Practice professor* refers to the professor of Teaching Practice II and author of this article

### **Introduction and background**

How does a student who is training to be a teacher learn how to teach? There are many courses to take, books and articles to read, videos to watch, tutoring opportunities to begin, and observations of classes to do,

but what a student ultimately needs is the chance to be immersed in a classroom for an extended period of time and to be a part of what goes on there. Wajnryb (1992) talked about the need for teacher training to include all aspects of what is involved in the teaching profession, "Training should not be limited to making trainees competent at a survival level, but should prepare them for the sorts of processes that they will encounter as teachers. This means encouraging a spirit of inquiry about the bases of effective teaching" (p. 21).

When I first began teaching the Teaching Practice courses, I could see that students were not getting enough actual teaching practice time in a real classroom. In an ideal world, a student teacher would spend a whole semester working side-by-side with an experienced teacher. This type of in-classroom supervised student teacher training is normally carried out during the last year of university study and is generally referred to as the teaching practicum. Haigh and Tuck (2004) of the Auckland College of Education in New Zealand emphasized the practicum's importance when they stated "Teaching practicum is a central element in most pre-service teacher education programmes". This coincides with Vasconcelos (2007) of the Lisbon School of Education in Portugal who explained that:

*The final practicum is a crucial component of the process of teacher education, having as its ultimate goal preparation of students for entrance into the profession of teaching. As an experienced teacher educator, I believe that the final practicum is crucial to a teacher education program (p. 2).*

Because a full-semester or full-year teaching internship has never been done before at the UQROO, the short immersions instituted in the spring semester of 2008 were a good first step towards implementing a longer internship program. Each immersion consisted of eight consecutive hours and was done with a teacher in the Language Teaching Center (CEI, in Spanish) or in the English Language major. The courses in the English Language major run two hours a day, four days a week, so an immersion was completed in one week. At the CEI, the courses run two hours a day, three days a week, so the immersion carried over one day into a second week. During the spring semester 2008, each Teaching Practice student did two immersions.

What is the logic behind the concept of immersions? One reason is so that the student teachers can get involved in the flow of a course from one day to the next, to see transitions not only from one activity to the next, but also from one class to the next. This continuity allows the student teachers to see how a teacher reinforces what was done the previous day. Wajnryb (1992) addressed this issue when she stated that, "Trainees need time to adjust to and become familiar and comfortable with the language learning classroom" (p. 21). Although relatively short, immersions do provide time for this familiarization to begin to happen.

The student teachers were required to do two immersions, one in the first half of the semester and the other in the second half. Some of them did both immersions with the same teacher trainer, while others worked with two different trainers. This depended on their schedules. If they worked with two different trainers, they had the opportunity to get to know two different groups and to be exposed to two different teaching styles. If they worked with the same trainer with the same group for both immersions, they were able to get involved with that particular group more deeply.

## **Organization**

What are the steps involved in organizing immersions?

*Finding Trainers:* First of all, it is important to find appropriate trainers who are interested in participating in the project. A trainer needs to be able to help the student teacher understand what is happening in the classroom as well as be willing to give both positive and negative feedback when the student teacher does his or her teaching. The trainers fill out an evaluation on each student teacher at the end of the immersion (Appendix 1).

It takes a certain type of person to be a teacher trainer. To begin with, the trainer needs to have a passion for teaching and an interest in sharing her knowledge and experience with others. She needs to be an excellent, dynamic teacher as well as a good role model on both a personal and professional basis. Regarding how much work is involved in being a teacher trainer, Wajnryb (1992) noted, "The task of the trainer is to help the trainees understand the various processes involved in the teaching and learning of a language and the complex array of activities that occur in a language classroom" (p. 5). It is a multi-faceted challenge.

In addition, the trainer needs to be able to integrate the student teacher into the class itself. As Wajnryb (1992) stated "the very presence of an 'outsider' among the learning community will affect it in subtle, perhaps imperceptible ways. This is difficult to avoid..." (p. 58). Having a student do an immersion means that the classroom environment will be different than usual; there is no way around this. Fortunately, in this project it has been shown that immersions can be mutually beneficial experiences for students, student teachers and trainers. However, the teacher trainer needs to be aware of the "outsider" status of a student teacher and incorporate him/her into the classroom in a comfortable and productive way.

Effective teaching involves all elements of teaching, from the pedagogical to the psychological. Wajnryb (1992) emphasized that:

*The language classroom is the primary source of information out of which teachers will develop their own personal philosophy of what makes effective teaching and*

*learning. It is also the domain where they will find out about their professional roles and responsibilities (p.13).*

Comprehensive teacher training is not a simple task. Fortunately, six outstanding teachers at the UQROO were willing to participate in the immersion project and provide the student teachers with a holistic outlook regarding what being an EFL teacher really entails.

*Scheduling:* The Teaching Practice professor must set up the schedule in such a way that student teachers can find time slots to fit their busy schedules. The student teachers are in their last semester at the university; many are working on their theses; and some of them have jobs as well. For this reason, it is important to offer a variety of available time slots.

*Identifying the Student Teacher's Role:* Each student teacher enters the immersion sessions with a different level of experience; therefore, the trainer needs to first ascertain how much or how little the student teacher can contribute. Some student teachers have already worked as teachers while others have had no prior teaching experience. Wajnryb (1992) mentioned this dimension:

*Some trainees begin a pre-service teacher training course with some experience of the classroom.... Others have never before stepped into a classroom in the shoes of a teacher. ...whatever the teaching background of the trainee, all have had educational experience in classrooms and hence they come to training with some expectations. These might be conscious or subconscious, or a blend of the two; they might be positive or negative; they might imbue the trainee with courage and optimism or with nervous apprehension or dread. Whatever the cargo of experiences and expectations that a trainees brings to a training course, one thing is certain – that the classroom has primacy of place in the learning and teaching experiences which lie ahead. It is important that these experiences are used in the process of learning to become a teacher (p. 5)*

Obviously, the student teacher who has had previous teaching experience can be in charge of higher level activities than the student teacher who has had no experience. Clearly though, regardless of student teachers' prior experience, all of them learn an enormous amount from their immersion sessions.

### **Three phases of immersions**

#### Stage 1, Observing

Why are observations crucial to this experience? The experience of being in a classroom as a student or a teacher is very different from that of being there as an observer. Wajnryb (1992) elaborated on this concept when she discussed how much is happening in the classroom at any one moment:

*When we teach, we are often so absorbed in the purpose, procedure and logistics of our lesson that we are not able to observe processes of learning and interaction as they occur through the lesson. Being an observer in the classroom, rather than the teacher, releases us from these concerns and affords us the freedom to look at the lesson from a range of different perspectives outside of the actual lesson plan of the teacher. For the trainee teacher, this freedom is particularly important. In a way, this stage in training is akin to the 'silent phase' of a beginning language learner.... Because such a lot happens in the language learning classroom there is a lot to observe: teaching behaviour and learning behaviour, patterns of interaction, different learning styles, concentration spans, patterns of group dynamics, to name some (pp.7-8).*

The students do a number of observations in Teaching Practice I in the fall semester, so when they come into their Teaching Practice II immersions they are already familiar with observations. The beauty of immersions is that the student teachers can observe and then utilize the information directly by teaching the particular group they observed. This allows the student-teachers to incorporate information gained during the observation process in a real way in the classroom. Through their observations, the student teachers become more aware of the many roles a teacher has.

Wajnryb (1992) referred to these different roles, as well as the different roles a learner has, when she stated that:

*Within the time frame of any one lesson, there is a range of roles that a teacher may adopt, and a range of corresponding learner roles as well. An important aspect of effective teaching is the facility with which a teacher can move in and out of these various roles and enable learners to do likewise (p. 113).*

There is a definite difference between just doing observations and doing observations as part of an immersion. With immersions, the student-teachers assist the teacher and then teach the group themselves after they have observed the trainer teaching that particular group. While observing, they are able to assess the students' English level, notice how the teacher deals with management and discipline issues, and become aware of the group dynamics and learning styles. The student teacher has the opportunity to observe all of these aspects and then carry that knowledge over into his or her own work when teaching in that same classroom.

### Stage 2, Assisting

Once the observation phase is over, it is time for the student teachers to enter the assisting stage. This assistance can take a variety of forms such as helping with small group activities, monitoring written and oral work, or leading activities. As previously mentioned, what the student teacher can do at this point depends on his or her previous experience. The trainer makes informed decisions about this so that the student teacher's

participation does not impede the flow of the class. She needs to determine how the student teacher can best participate and contribute.

### Stage 3, Teaching

The ultimate goal of immersions is for the student teacher to teach the fourth and final lesson. The trainer can help out as much as needed. Again, depending on the student teacher's experience, the trainer decides how much of the lesson the student teacher will actually teach. Some student teachers will be able to teach the entire two-hour lesson while others may do less than this. The student teacher is responsible for developing the lesson plan and creating materials.

### **Evaluation**

*Lesson Plans, Observation Reports and Reflective Journals:* Throughout the semester, student teachers are required to write a one-page observation report on observation days and a one-page reflective journal on assisting and teaching days. A lesson plan is also required for teaching days. The lesson plans are helpful in many areas as they enhance the student teacher's organizational and planning skills. The plans are also especially useful in terms of guiding student teachers to better predict the time required for activities. As Wajnryb (1992) mentioned, "The most common weakness of lesson plans is unrealistic timing" (p. 65). Through this experience, student-teachers began to gain a better and more realistic understanding of how long activities take.

The student teachers were already accustomed to writing observation reports from Teaching Practice I; they used a checklist to help them identify specific items noted. Having already been trained in proper observation techniques, they are able to make the most out of these immersion observations.

The reflective journals are particularly useful in that student teachers can look at themselves and their lessons and learn from their own thoughts and feelings. The journals are not point-by-point explanations about activities in the classroom. Instead they provide an overview of the class in terms of how it developed, the problems that were encountered, the things they learned, how the student teacher felt, improvements made, and areas which needed more attention.

*Trainer Evaluations of student teachers:* After the last day of the immersion, each trainer filled out an evaluation form (Appendix 1). Because it was impossible for the Teaching Practice professor to observe all of the student teachers during their immersions, it was important that the participating trainers understand what aspects the Teaching Practice professor was interested in grading the student teachers on. The trust level between the Teaching Practice professor and trainers must be high,

and expectations must be clearly laid out at the beginning of the course. The goal of the evaluation forms is to give the trainers a guide to insure that there is a homogeneous understanding in terms of what aspects are graded. These evaluations by the trainers and the reflective journals written by the student teachers are the means through which the Teaching Practice professor graded each student teacher's immersion.

*Student Teacher Evaluations of the Immersion Experience:* At the end of the semester, each student teacher filled out an evaluation of the immersion experience (Appendix 2). The results were overwhelmingly positive and indicated how very useful this experience was for the student teachers' professional development (Appendix 2). Of the eight yes/no questions, there were an overwhelming number of positive responses. All of the twenty-one respondents answered positively to questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7. Question 4 (whether doing an immersion helped in different ways more so than other Teaching Practice activities) had three negative replies. Question 8 (whether the student teachers felt that they knew what they were doing when teaching) received two negative responses.

The first open-ended question was about whether or not there was enough time for each immersion and whether two immersions were enough. Eight of the twenty-one student teachers felt that two, one-week immersions was a perfect set-up; four wanted a third immersion during the semester; one wanted two more weeks of immersions; one wanted "more" in general; two wanted three immersions of three days each (one observation class, one assisting class, one teaching class); three wanted each immersion to be two weeks long instead of one week, and one wanted two weeks but the second week to be twelve hours, not eight. From these responses, it seems that although there were some suggestions regarding time changes, the overall time frame was more or less acceptable to most.

With the second open-ended question which was about how specifically the immersions were most helpful, two student teachers said in the area of giving directions; seven in managing the group; two in designing and adapting materials; seven in learning to speak louder; four in developing more confidence; two in having less fear; three in knowing how to prepare a class; two in learning the importance of being punctual; three in being more organized; three in using the blackboard, and four in understanding the importance of classroom energy.

The third question was an open one so that the student teachers could add any additional comments they wanted about the experience (Table 2). These comments are illustrative of how much the student teachers valued their immersions.

## Conclusions

### Benefits:

Immersion offers a variety of different benefits to students, student teachers and trainers. The most obvious is that student teachers have the opportunity to learn from and be supervised by experienced teachers in a real classroom situation. Student teachers begin the transformation process from student to teacher. All that they have learned in their teacher training courses comes to fruition as they put their book-learning into real practice.

Another benefit is that the trainers have the opportunity to see themselves and their teaching in a clearer light. Wajnryb (1992) reminded us, "Often when we observe someone teaching, the very process of observation stimulates self-reflection, as if observing were a kind of mirror" (p. 121). This is a side benefit for trainers and can stimulate the concept of observations in general. Julian Edge (1993) made a good point when he said:

*Teachers work alone. One of the most terrifying words in teaching is observation: it means having someone else in your classroom who is not one of the students. Observation has always been connected with being assessed, and this introduces tension and fear. Because of this fear, teachers do not share experiences with colleagues and seldom really learn from each other (p.12).*

Brown (1994) also mentioned this concept of sharing and co-observing among teachers:

*One of the most neglected areas of professional growth among teachers is the mutual exchange of classroom observations. Once you get into a teaching routine, it is very difficult to make time to go and see other teachers and to invite the same in return (p. 431).*

Perhaps immersion can stimulate teachers in general to remember we have much we can learn from each other.

In addition to the benefits gained by student teachers and trainers, an unexpected outcome of the immersion is that the immersion gives students in the English Language major a true idea of what they will ultimately be required to do in their final semester. This is motivational for them in two ways: one is to take their future teacher training classes more seriously and, second, to try and improve their English language level. Students in classrooms where an immersion was taking place also mentioned that they felt they got some extra practice and attention because it was like having a second teacher in the classroom. Several students made verbal comments about how impressed they were with the work the student teachers were doing and how exciting it was for them to see students a few generations ahead of them acting as real teachers. The student teachers shared information with them about the upper levels of

the English language major and what the expectations and workload required are, and the students really appreciated receiving these insights

### Problems:

The immersion project went very smoothly and the only real problem encountered was in the area of scheduling. Because students in the tenth semester are very busy, it was a little difficult to find time for the immersion sessions that fit well with everyone's schedule. Fortunately, this was satisfactorily resolved; however, in the future I can see the need to expand the number of teachers working as trainers so that there are more time-slots available.

In conclusion, the immersion project at the UQROO was a grand success and provided Teaching Practice students with a much-needed real-life teaching experience. Everyone involved in the project came away with a warm feeling because not only was good teacher training accomplished, but there was also a lot of interpersonal caring and sharing that went on. Student teachers now feel more prepared and more confident in taking on an actual teaching job as their understanding and experience were so enriched by their immersion sessions. As the professor of the Teaching Practice course, I feel very happy because of this positive learning and sharing experience.

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### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank the following superb teacher trainers at the UQROO for their dedicated and enthusiastic involvement: Argelia Peña, Deon Heffington, Karina Camacho, Karla Pech, Liz Gomez, and Rosario Diaz.

**Appendix 1. Immersion Evaluation Form**

At the end of the immersion session, the trainer filled out the following evaluation form about the student teacher's performance.

Please rate on a scale of 1-10 (with 10 being the highest).

TEACHING PRESENCE AND HABITS Comments

Eye contact (looks around the room at everyone) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Seems confident \_\_\_\_\_  
 Friendly towards students \_\_\_\_\_  
 Good organizational skills \_\_\_\_\_  
 Punctual \_\_\_\_\_

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Ability to keep students' attention \_\_\_\_\_  
 Teaches to all students, not just a few \_\_\_\_\_  
 Able to discipline when necessary \_\_\_\_\_  
 Classroom energy \_\_\_\_\_

ENGLISH SKILLS

Pronunciation \_\_\_\_\_  
 Good voice range \_\_\_\_\_  
 Appropriate use of vocabulary \_\_\_\_\_  
 Correct grammar and sentence structure \_\_\_\_\_

TEACHING SKILLS

Gives clear explanations (grammar, vocab etc) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Gives clear directions for activities \_\_\_\_\_  
 Knowledge of subject matter \_\_\_\_\_  
 Error correction \_\_\_\_\_  
 Evidence of planning and preparation \_\_\_\_\_  
 Board work \_\_\_\_\_  
 Reflective journal \_\_\_\_\_

Areas that need improvement:

General comments:

## Appendix 2. Immersion Feedback Form

At the end of the semester, each student teacher filled out a feedback form about the immersion experience. A summary of the results is included in this appendix.

|   | yes       | no       |
|---|-----------|----------|
| 1. I enjoyed the immersions.  | <b>21</b> | <b>0</b> |
| 2. I learned a lot from the immersions.   | <b>21</b> | <b>0</b> |
| 3. My teaching has improved as a result of what I have learned in the immersions.           | <b>21</b> | <b>0</b> |
| 4. Doing an immersion helped me in different ways than other Práctica Docente activities.   | <b>18</b> | <b>3</b> |
| 5. I think doing immersions is a good idea for Práctica Docente II.                         | <b>21</b> | <b>0</b> |
| 6. I could see positive advances in my teaching from the first immersion to the second one. | <b>21</b> | <b>0</b> |
| 7. Were the teachers helpful to you?  | <b>21</b> | <b>0</b> |
| 8. Did you feel like you knew what you were doing when you were teaching?                   | <b>19</b> | <b>2</b> |

**You did two different immersions, each for one week. Do you think that is enough time or would you suggest more time for each immersion?**

8 felt it was perfect  
 4 wanted a third immersion  
 1 wanted two more weeks of immersions  
 1 wanted "more" but not specifically in terms of weeks or immersion numbers  
 2 wanted 3 immersions of three days each  
 3 wanted each immersion to be two weeks long instead of one  
 1 wanted two weeks but that the second week be 12 hours, not 8

**In what ways were the immersions most helpful to you? Please be specific.**

2 giving directions  
 7 managing the group  
 2 designing and adapting materials  
 7 learning to speak louder  
 4 developing more confidence  
 2 having less fear  
 3 knowing how to prepare a classroom  
 2 learning the importance of being punctual  
 3 being more organized  
 3 using the blackboard  
 4 understanding the importance of classroom energy

**Please write any additional comments you have about this experience.**

Now I'm more confident.

I felt as if I were a teacher, and I felt the responsibility that a teacher has.

It was a great experience.

It was a nice experience because I could use all my techniques that I learned in my práctica docente courses.

I learned good tips to help me in the future. People like me who never worked as teachers before could gain a lot of experience. It was a great experience and the teacher advised me on how I can improve my teaching.

I am really thankful with all teachers and students because otherwise I would not have had such a wonderful opportunity. I learned from my mistakes and now I can see that practical experience is something really crucial.

It's good to feel the pressure of being in front of people who are strangers and start teaching.

I loved this experience because I could learn from very nice and experienced teachers and I learned a lot from them.

It was a wonderful experience.

It was fantastic.

Immersion is a good opportunity to meet the real life and to know teachers who can advise you.

I really enjoyed my immersion because you are practicing your teaching in a real classroom, and with real students, and another teacher is helping you if necessary.

It was a very nice experience and it enriched the way I teach and improved it.

It was nice to practice and receive feedback because sometimes we feel that we do things well but we can always improve.

It helped me realize I'd enjoy more teaching young people than children. I really enjoyed it. I loved it.

It was good to work with a real class instead of an imaginary one like with our micro-teaching in *Práctica docente* classes where we are teaching our classmates. They already know the language and you don't notice if you're giving correct directions or not. In the immersion class, you realize if students understand or not.