

# Evaluation in the Teaching Practicum of the English Program at the Universidad de la Amazonía

La evaluación en la práctica docente del Programa de Licenciatura en Inglés de la Universidad de la Amazonía

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The following article summarizes the research study which sought to examine the process of evaluation in the teaching practicum of the undergraduate program in English language teaching at Universidad de la Amazonía, in Florencia, Caquetá, Colombia. The purpose of this project was to establish which evaluation paradigm promotes the professional development of the student teacher whilst inside the actual conditions of her/his work. The research process was based on participant, non- participant observations and interviews with a group of 17 student teachers and their counsellor. The results showed some features of the critical paradigm of evaluation that contributed to the professional development of the subjects involved in the practicum (student teachers and counsellor). It was also found that it is very important to encourage the formation of critical and progressive professionals.

*Key words:* Critical evaluation, professional teacher development, teaching practicum, action research

El siguiente artículo resume la investigación que buscó examinar el proceso de evaluación en las prácticas de formación profesional docente en el programa de Licenciatura en Inglés de la Universidad de la Amazonía, en Florencia (Caquetá - Colombia). El propósito de este proyecto fue establecer qué paradigma de evaluación promueve el desarrollo profesional del maestro en formación en medio de las condiciones en las cuales desarrolla su labor. El proceso de investigación se basó en las observaciones participantes y no participantes, y en una entrevista a profundidad con un grupo de 17 maestros en formación y su consejero. Los resultados mostraron algunas características del paradigma crítico de evaluación que contribuyeron al desarrollo profesional de los sujetos involucrados en la práctica (maestros en formación y consejero). También se encontró que es muy importante promover la formación de profesionales críticos y progresivos.

*Palabras clave:* Evaluación crítica, desarrollo profesional docente, prácticas de formación docente, investigación acción

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## Introduction

The importance of the teaching practicum which, in the case of this study, consists of the physical, temporal and symbolic considerations required in the formation of teachers, is particularly significant in the teacher formation process as it takes advantage of the school environment in order to support and develop the processes used for the professional development of teachers in the educational and pedagogical fields.

In this particular project, it was initially necessary to establish the complex nature of the current world in which the English teacher is bound. This reflection enabled us to define a conception of an English teacher as a critical and reflective professional inside her/his educational context. A process of training teachers was then established that both encouraged the formation of a critical and progressive professional and, at the same time, promoted the evaluation of this very process. Finally, the roles of Action Research and other such strategies were defined in order to establish in what way they promote the evaluation of the teacher training and, therefore, the teacher formation process. By determining both, the methods and the role of evaluation in the teaching practicum (TP), we can reflect on the professional development process and the impact that working in an educational context (in a real life context) has on this process.

## The Problem

Some student teacher weaknesses were identified at the beginning of the TP in the following areas: First of all, the teacher's labour was focused exclusively on teaching English in the classroom. Second, there were deficiencies in the communicative competence in the English language, particularly in areas related to the organizational,

pragmatic and illocutionary competences. Third, the teaching practices were being developed through non-reflective processes, based mainly on the application of teaching techniques supported by empirical knowledge acquired through implicit experiences students had. Finally, a definitive process of evaluation of the TP had not been established.

## The Research Questions

Upon consideration of these problems, the following questions were constructed to guide the study:

What are the historical, economic, social, cultural and educational conditions in which the English teacher develops her/his work?

What conception of the English teacher should guide the development of the teaching practicum?

What kind of evaluation of the teaching practicum would promote the professional development of critical and reflective teachers?

What is the role of action research during the teaching practicum and in its evaluation?

## The Thesis

A critical and formative evaluation of the English teacher during the teaching practicum promotes the development of a critical and transformative teacher which, as a consequence, has implications for their conceptions and practices, for their school environment, as well as for the people involved in their work.

## Research Objectives

The objectives of the present study were as follows:

- To establish a conception of formation that promotes an English teacher as a critical and transformative teacher.
- To determine the conditions of the teaching practicum in such a way that they would promote the professional development of teachers.
- To define both the conception of evaluation and its process in order to enhance the professional development of teachers.
- To determine the role of action research as a tool of critical reflection in the teaching practicum.

### Theoretical Framework

In order to establish a paradigm of evaluation that supports and promotes processes of professional teacher development, it was necessary to reflect on the context in which the teacher develops her/his work.

This is a world characterized by fast moving and changing economic, scientific, political, cultural, and environmental conditions, according to Hardgreaves (1996). These varying conditions often directly impact on the living situation of the world's inhabitants. They impact job markets and work stability; they affect the struggle for the most basic needs such as food and health care; they increase the pace of technological advancement which can have both the obvious positive impact but also an implicit negative impact (particularly in the area of communication); they rapidly change the struggles of cultural minorities as they seek acknowledgement and respect. All these factors and the impact they have on people's living situations directly relate to the fundamental nature of politics and how the world is currently governed, this being characterized by the subordination of politics to economic considerations —a cause,

amongst others—, of violence in several regions in the world.

Teaching English in the particular conditions of the globalized, complex and critical world determines new and urgent demands on the educational context, on the school and on the English teachers.

This study focused on these three areas: professional teacher development, teaching evaluation, and the teaching practicum with an emphasis on action research.

The considerations made in the study regarding the professional development of teachers were supported by the concepts of Carr & Kemmis (1988), who established that the actions of a professional are based on a theoretical and conceptual knowledge. They also stated that the teacher must subordinate her/his interests to those of the clients. Other conceptions used were taken from Ferreres & Imbernón (1999), who mentioned the need for autonomy and social prestige.

These are the conditions that characterize a profession and, when applied to the teaching profession, lead us to the next question: What kind of process of teacher formation is necessary in order to address the educational demands of today?

Historically, the aims of teacher formation have responded to the intentions and goals of a society's governing sector and to the model of person they have wanted to create, argued by Birgin (1998). In the Middle Ages, with the religious sector having the responsibility of directing society, the system of teacher formation was developed through a traditional organization of workshops with the master and his apprentices. In the XIX century, with the focus of creating civilized children, it was necessary to train teachers to be able to work with children. In the modern capitalist world, it became necessary to mould a person's character in order to create

productive and autonomous people. In that way teachers were trained through models of technical efficiency. During the post modernist age, in which we now live, the school has to prepare people to be competitive and able to work in the globalized world, and, as such, teachers have been trained in order to develop established competences and standards that enable them to operate in this world.

These models of teacher training —practical, academic, technical, and by normative standards— have not been able to promote the development of democratic, responsible, peaceful, critical, and respectful citizens. However, through alternative models of teacher formation, this is possible to achieve.

This alternative approach of people and teacher formation includes characteristics such as taking account of people's emotional spheres; recognizing the complex and unpredictable life of the school; promoting personal and collective participation of everybody involved in school life; integrating and producing knowledge; developing critical thinking in the teachers in

order to prepare them to be able to influence both the people with and the environment in which they work; having a connected evaluation process; and, finally, operating through action, reflection and collective work.

This kind of teacher formation requires a process of evaluation that guides and demonstrates the accomplishment of the above expectations.

Conceptually, the field of evaluation has been defined by two main approaches based on Álvarez (2003): the traditional which uses concepts such as measure, correction, classification, examination; and the alternative which determines evaluation as assessment, reflection and value. Both approaches differ in their purposes, resources, and uses. The people doing the evaluation and their roles also differ. The first approach corresponds to the technical paradigm and the second to the critical.

One important difference among the two paradigms of evaluation is the role that subjects have in the process. According to Niño (2006), educational evaluation is a notion and a practice that is thought out and focused, having as its center the human being.

**Table 1.** The two main approaches in evaluation proposed by Álvarez (2003).

<b>Evaluation in the technical paradigm</b>	<b>Evaluation in the critical paradigm</b>
A classification purpose.	A formative purpose.
Results based and thus temporal.	Continuous.
Looks for reliability, validity and objectivity.	Allows for comprehension of reality.
Restricted participation.	Democratic.
Heteronomous, external to subjects.	Autonomous, seeks the comprehension, participation and emancipation of the subjects.
Excludes certain people and factors.	Includes everyone and recognizes all factors and processes in order to comprehend and transform the educational context.

Historically, the role of subjects in the process of evaluation has changed, depending on the interests of society's governing sectors. It is common to find the subjects being considered as just one more element in the process of checking the results of a financial investment. In some cases, the subjects are objects who are classified, described, and studied by the same experts who must also take decisions concerning them. In other situations the subjects are elements in a standardized chain of developing a range of competences. Consequentially, in these examples, the subject is an object without subjectivity, consciousness, and autonomy, who cannot express his identity, culture, conditions, knowledge or history.

### **Tendencies in teacher evaluation**

The aforementioned paradigms of evaluation are reflected in the different approaches by which teachers have been evaluated. Based on Niño (2006), there are four different approaches: evaluation as accountability, evaluation as payment for achievement, evaluation as professional development, and evaluation as institutional improvement.

The first one makes a contrast between educational results and financial investment. The second establishes rewards for teachers according to their achievement in previously defined parameters. These two approaches were created to respond to economic and bureaucratic goals and do not develop qualitative changes in the pedagogical, teaching and educational fields.

As an alternative option to these two approaches, evaluation as a means of professional and institutional improvement was developed. This process requires a different role for both teacher and institution as they are parts of a whole that create a total growing environment.

In this way, growth is a collective aim in the institutional organization and in the performance of the teachers.

### **The teaching practicum**

For this study, we earlier conceptualized the teaching practicum based on Schön (1992), as the different social actions habitually developed inside the school context that affects the symbolic, conceptual and practical knowledge of the teachers. The social, historical, institutional and cultural conditions in which the teacher develops her/his work will determine the nature of these actions and the impact they have on the development of the teacher.

- In order to successfully achieve teacher development, the TP requires some certain characteristics like the following:
- It must be developed through a process of praxis, idea taken from Vasco (1990). This implies a process that uses informed actions which, evaluated reflectively, can enhance knowledge and, as such, support the positive modification of these actions as well as the conditions in which they exist.
- It must enable reflection on the problematic conditions of the reality studied and allow for the suggestion of ways and actions to improve it.
- It must encourage the development of a teacher's higher psychological processes through social and mental interaction with people and through symbolic tools such as language and concepts, or technological tools such as texts and computers.
- Teachers should be taught through Situated Learning, a strategy proposed by Lave (1991) in which they learn day by day through their actions and reflections in the educational

context. These actions and ways of thinking are modified by the way each teacher reflects, acts and communicates and by the norms that govern their lives in society.

- The teaching practicum should promote the formation of various communities of practices as human groups that seek community welfare and collective progress in their relative contexts.
- The use of two main strategies that contribute to the professional development of teachers is necessary. The first, called reflection in practice, analyzes the uncertain and complex world of teaching practice. The second is an action-research process that tries to cultivate and transform the pedagogical practices by cycles of observation, reflection, planning, and action. This action-research process establishes links between the particular conditions and the general conditions, between individuals and society, between theory and practice and between thought and action.
- Other strategies such as reflective teaching, self-awareness, observation, writing, portfolio, retrospection, introspection and prospection are also required.

### **The Research Process**

This research corresponded to the reflection on the evaluation of the teaching practicum in the undergraduate program in English at Universidad de la Amazonía during the second semester in 2004 and 2005. The study was conducted on the teaching experience of a group of 17 student teachers and the counsellor of the Practicum in 6 public educational institutions (Sagrados Corazones, Siglo XXI, San Francisco de Asís, 1.º de Mayo, Normal Superior y Jorge Eliécer

Gaitán) and one private school (Domingo Savio) in primary and secondary levels in Florencia, Caquetá. This group of student teachers attended the last part of their academic career conducting a reflective teaching practicum supported by the methodology of action research.

The research process on the evaluation of the teaching practicum was developed under the strategy of grounded theory. According to Strauss & Corbin (1994), this strategy was created by Glaser & Strauss and focuses on “developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed” (p. 273). The research process went through three main practices: description, conceptual ordering, and theorizing of data collected from the following sources:

- The student teachers’ and teaching practicum counsellor’s diaries based on their participant and non-participant observations during the lessons.
- Their personal reflections written after their lessons and before preparing their new lesson plans.
- A semi-structured interview with the student teachers based on two actions; naming the activities conducted during the teaching practicum that can be considered as practices of evaluation:
  - Choosing from those abovementioned activities the ones that impacted the most in the process of teachers’ professional development.
  - In addition, the research process included the use of two computer programs as supporting tools for the analysis of qualitative information - LIFA 2000 and ATLAS-ti. The first one —and its tools SSA and MSA— was very useful for the analysis of the information found in the interview which corresponded to student teachers’ introspections and retrospections about the strategies of evaluation applied

during the TP and their impact on the student teachers' professional development.

The second one, ATLAS-ti, facilitated the analysis of the diverse and wide amount of information from diaries, observations and reflections by supporting the coding and establishment of conceptual networks which were a result of the inductive analysis of the fields, conditions, agents, and events of evaluation of the teaching practicum and their role in teachers' professional growth.

## Findings

There was very little reference about the contexts in which the student teachers developed their teaching practicum (TP) in the information collected. The political, economic, cultural, social, educational or scientific conditions in the world and their effects on school and teaching contexts were not mentioned during the reflections about planning, development and evaluation of the student teachers' work. This situation could imply that student teachers presumed a standardized environment without any relationship to the authentic and contextual circumstances of their teaching.

According to the information found in diaries and written reflections, the growth process of the student teachers and counsellor in the course of the development of the teaching practicum in some fields was clear. This opinion was formed from perceptions in the changes found in the contents, language and concepts used in the diaries and reflection logs during the teaching practicum. These changes are evidence of improvement in the following issues:

During the first semester of the TP, the data collected from diaries and reflections described student teachers' and counselors' interests in carrying out of some the English teaching strat-

egies, the development of students' language skills and the relationship between the teaching and learning processes.

- Teaching strategies 1 (28) ~ "This is a group of the different aspects related to the teaching strategies observed and expressed through the counselors' diaries. In this information we can find different observations about teaching grammar, dialogues, pronunciation, vocabulary, reading, as well as the aims and development of language functions and language skills. Other aspect is referring to some students' processes: cognitive, affective, and their participation, practicing and grouping arrangements in the classroom. The last one refers to aspects related to lessons: planning, stages, and language activities".

(Description of the network view from the counsellor's diaries in the second semester-2004)

During the first semester of 2005 the information was focused on three main topics: The classroom interaction —and a strong interest in creating an appropriate language learning environment—, the relationship between the teaching and learning strategies and the action-research process. It was mentioned, for the first time, as an important topic.

In addition to the changes found in the topics, there were changes in some features of the documentary information (diaries and written observations). These were more descriptive during the first stage of the practicum, but more explanatory and reflective in the second part.

Pedro- John. 18-09-05

"This activity permitted the students' performance in a real context (the high school). The examples were always related to the real situations. It let us have a view about how the context influences learning".

(Taken from students- teachers' reflections, September 2005)

While at the beginning of the TP the student teachers and counsellor were more concerned about what to do and how to do it, as the process advanced they included the notion of why; in other words, the reasons for their actions and choices, and established some causes for the English classroom situations.

Pedro- John. 01-09-05

“For this class we took into account the difficulties we had and we reflected on those; then, in order to overcome those problems we applied a strategy.

Grammar is very important to teach but it is not the best way to teach the structure, because it turns into a mechanical system not just for the students but for the teacher. It must be related to the real situations. In this way students can learn in an easier form”.

(Student teacher’s reflection, October 2005)

Throughout the TP, most of the student teachers progressively started supporting their actions and decisions related to methods, procedures, use of resources and teaching actions in concept with intentions of improving and transforming the situations.

Jorge 13-05-05

“Remember not to explain in a deductive way but to induce your students to the comprehension of the topic through the activities”.

(Partner’s suggestions taken from student teacher’s non-participant observation in May 2005)

The student teachers recognized the unpredictable, paradoxical and unstable conditions of their work and prepared themselves through reflections and expectations for possible problems. In that way, they developed a positive attitude to-

wards problems, viewing them as opportunities to propose diverse solutions to the situations that they faced in the language classroom.

In the field of evaluation, the information was mainly taken from the interview and the classifications that the student teachers did of the actions that they considered were activities for which their work was evaluated during the TP. Hence, the student teachers established the characteristics of those actions and their effects on the student teachers’ professional development. The following list presents the actions during the TP that the student teachers considered as evaluative:

1. Illuminative reflection with the counsellor
2. Students’ spontaneous opinions
3. Surveys for parents
4. Student teachers’ observations of their students’ attitudes and opinions
5. Self- reflection
6. Partner’s feedback
7. Lesson planning
8. Work with partners
9. Writings based on classroom observations
10. Reflections with the students
11. Analysis on students’ homework

Based on the mentioned list of evaluative actions, the student teachers established a classification of the actions according to some characteristics that they recognized in each of the items.

The different characteristics that student teachers assigned the evaluative actions were grouped into the following categories:

- Impact on their formation
- Quality of the information
- Pleasant accomplishment

**Table 2.** Example of one student teacher classification.

Core category	Sub-category	Cards
Impact on teaching formation	1. A lot of impact.	5 8 6 1 9
	2. Impact	7 4 10 11 2
	3. Little impact	3
Pleasant implementation	1. Very pleasant	2 5 8 6 1
	2. Pleasant	4 10 11 9
	3. Unpleasant	3 7
Valuable information	1. A lot of information	5 8 6 1 9
	2. Enough information	2 4 11 10
	3. Little information	7
	4. No	3

The analysis of this information established that the evaluation process conducted during the TP could be considered part of the critical paradigm of evaluation, which included the following characteristics: A reflection on what has been done, what is being done and what will be done.

- An interaction amongst people as well as between people and technological resources.
- A valuable feedback process.
- A tracking and recording of the continuing advancement of the subjects, processes and contexts.
- An inclusion of a wide range of educational processes.
- Flexibility in the contents, tools, instruments and sources.
- The collection of valuable information.
- The use of subjective, personal and emotional information regarding the subjects involved.
- The writing of diaries, journals, observations, protocols, etc. as an instrument of reflection.

All of those features of the evaluation process conducted during the TP reflect the strengths found in two fields: *aims and processes of evaluation*. The former seeks student teacher formation, improvement of the teaching and learning of English, and comprehension of the classroom reality. The latter are open to participation of different actors, integrative of different factors and situations, and flexible. In terms of weaknesses, the TP lacked an evaluation plan that had been predetermined and what is more, the evaluation process was centered exclusively on the student teacher labor in the English classroom.

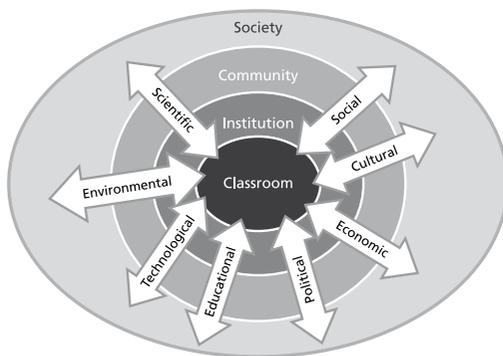
Another important factor during the study was the impact of the action-research process in the evaluation of the TP and on the student teacher formation. The most important achievement of that process was that it fostered critical thinking among the student teachers. Additionally, it promoted coherence between theory and practice in the work of student teachers. As a consequence of the mentioned highlighted aspects, it developed student teachers' autonomy. Finally, this research strategy enabled student teachers to bring together

different aspects of the classroom work with their own reflections and practices.

The study also demonstrated that the combination of action research and evaluation is a positive factor for the teacher formation process. The cycle of observing a particular teaching or learning procedure, reflecting on its positive and negative characteristics, planning proposals, developing strategies for its improvement, and re-initiating a new cycle based on the conclusions found—as was part of the action research strategy— corresponded to the process and purposes of the critical evaluation approach: reflection, comprehension, improvement and transformation of reality.

### Conclusions and Implications

Teacher formation requires a reflection on the conditions in which teachers develop their work; a reflection that goes beyond the institutional context to different aspects of human life such as the social, cultural, economic, political, scientific, technological and environmental fields. The nature of the world today dictates that teachers should make an effort to participate in its improvement.



**Figure 1.** Context, fields of knowledge and interactions present during the processes of formation of the English student teachers.

The previous diagram intends to show the most relevant contexts, fields of knowledge and interactions related to the educational field in which the student teachers develop their processes of formation and, consequently, the factors needed to be considered during their TP.

It is vital for the professional formation of teachers and for the educational system that the role of teachers is extended beyond the classroom, especially the role of English teachers, who are currently being trained, almost exclusively, to focus on the language standards of the students. Instead, they should be trained to use the language in order to develop critical thinking in students as an important means of practicing the language as they learn it.

The exercise of extending the physical parameters in which English teachers work could promote the formation of different communities of practices; for example, with their community of professionals (colleagues), the educational community, the institutional community, the academic community and so on. This inclusion of different subjects in the communities of practices demands the use of different communicative strategies with the aim of enriching the professional and personal experiences of their members.

Widening teachers' physical and social contexts will—through the employment of reflective and critical thinking strategies— permit the enhancement of theoretical and conceptual knowledge and promote teachers' personal and professional development.

Any teacher formation program requires a plan of evaluation based on a critical approach with the purpose of establishing a democratic, critical, participatory, formative, comprehensible and emancipatory environment that permits teachers to assess, value, reflect on and transform the processes, as well as fostering the devel-

opment of the subjects involved in the different areas of education. In this sense, the evaluation should be developed initially by the subjects of the teaching practicum themselves, inside the working conditions, and with the purpose of improvement, advancement and development.

In order to verify the value of the evaluation process in the teaching practicum, it is necessary to develop a process of evaluation of the evaluation—meta-evaluation—with the aim of analysing its advantages and finding ways to solve its problems.

The conditions of the world today determine that a teacher has a high degree of responsibility in the following areas:

- Recognizing, reflecting upon and integrating the complexity of the post-modernist world into the process of the formation of her/his students, with the purpose of contextualizing her/his teaching and developing a transformative capability.
- Participating efficiently in the construction of curricula and syllabi which must be developed through an open, democratic, and participative process, connected to the world of the students and to the goals of development.
- Preparing students for the critical and responsible use of the information and communications technology (ICT), which includes the responsible selection of information for critical reading and ethical reflection which can turn non-critical and passive students into students of an inquisitive, pensive, and pro-active nature.

The critical evaluation of the teaching practicum will serve its purpose if the professional and institutional aims are connected from the beginning and if they have been established based on student teachers' needs and interests

in the professional, personal, institutional and educational fields. Seen in this way, evaluation will become a process that exists in harmony with the professional development of the student teachers as it will demonstrate their progress but also, if necessary, their deterioration.

The evaluation of teachers in the teaching practicum should include a review of the following areas expressed by Duke & Stiggins (1997) as the most integral to the teaching profession: pedagogical (didactics, use of resources, curriculum), professional (development as an English teacher), organizational (use of strategies for improvement of the institutional and classroom organization), and personal (development of personal characteristics that support her/his teaching competence).

The acknowledgement of cultural, economic, political, and social processes that contextualize learning, in our case learning English, as well as the recognition of ethical, cognitive, emotional, socio-cultural, and physical characteristics of the students, are both inexorably linked to the learning of English for each student. These factors should be taken into account when teaching, in the development of curricula and syllabi, in the development of materials, in the creation and development of the process of evaluation, and in all the decisions that the teacher takes in her/his labour.

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