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Demo Lessons and Peer Observation to Enhance Student Teachers' Competencies and Exit Profiles

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Abstract. The research study was carried out at an Ecuadorian teacher training university and aimed at bridging the gap between the exit profile requirements of student teacher graduates and the syllabus of the subject called *Teaching language skills*. The objective was to establish how far demo lessons (such as microteaching sessions) can facilitate the training of student teachers, and prepare them for authentic teaching-learning situations at the beginning of their careers. A qualitative paradigm based on Action Research (AR) methodology was used in two consecutive cycles employing class observation, reflection and survey questions for feedback. In the first cycle, student teachers, who gave demo lessons on how to improve listening skills, were given feedback by the class teacher and their peers. In the second cycle, which aimed at mitigating the weaknesses identified by the observers and the class teacher in the first cycle, student teachers gave demo lessons on improving speaking skills. After the two cycles were completed, the 26 participants of the module were asked to provide responses to a survey questionnaire which specifically explored their perceptions on how far the demo lessons had helped them develop their professional competencies. The researchers conclude that observations of and reflections on the demo lessons benefited not only the class teacher, who was able to improve her methodology, but it also helped the student teachers since they could improve their teaching strategies and techniques to teach English. The student teachers' answers to the survey questions proved that the activities associated with the demo lessons were considered effective for the development of their professional competencies as future teachers of English.

Keywords: demo lesson; peer observation; teaching language skills; language teacher competencies; student teacher reflection

1. Introduction

1.1 Context and Background

The student teachers of the ELT training program at the National University of Education of Ecuador (UNAE) need to develop linguistic and methodological

competencies for teaching English to achieve the requirements contained in their exit profile (see Appendix A).[1] As part of their professional development, they need to take the module called *Teaching language skills* in the sixth semester of their 9-semester studies. According to the syllabus, the student teachers are expected to learn how to apply ELT methods and employ various techniques and strategies to be able to teach the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. While the minimum content in the syllabus design of the subject is clear, the methodology, namely, the techniques, strategies and procedures for the class teachers to use so that the student teachers reach the objectives or the expected learning outcomes is not specific enough.

Therefore, our article is linked to a specific strand of an overarching research project at UNAE: *Management of innovative and creative didactic techniques that facilitate the teaching-learning processes of English in the students of basic education and high school* (PINE Major Project, 2018)

In order to investigate the research problem described above, namely the gap (discrepancy) between the exit profile requirements and the lack of detail in the syllabus for the subject *Teaching language skills*, the authors decided that observing microteaching[2] or demo lessons may be an appropriate strategy because it could throw light on the student teachers' learning and the class teacher's way of facilitating that learning in an area that combines language learning and pedagogical knowledge.

Consequently, the following overall aim has been set for the AR project:

To illustrate how **demo lessons** can contribute to the development of professional competence in the exit profile of student teachers accomplishing their ELT training program at UNAE, the authors started their investigation by consulting the relevant literature.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teacher Education and Professional Competence

Teacher education institutions worldwide aim at training highly qualified teachers whose pre-service learning experience supports the development of their professional competencies (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2016; European Commission, 2013). The matrix compiled by Cambridge Assessment English (2018) contains what is called "full level descriptors" of ELT teachers' competency (p. 2), and these include the teaching of the four language skills at "foundation, developing, proficient and expert" levels (p. 7). The document describes further elements of teacher competence that are of interest to us, such as carrying out classroom observation, the ability of reflecting on teaching, and learning from observation feedback (pp. 9-10). Below we use "competence/competency" as the overarching term, while we reserve the notion of "competencies" as a complex set of skills required of language teachers.

While teacher knowledge domains can be broken down to content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and general pedagogical knowledge (Shulman,

1987), König et al. (2020) emphasized that there is also a need to examine "teachers' situational cognition" (p. 800), namely, the contextual and procedural knowledge that they could gain by the end of their training as future language teachers. In the context of pre-service teacher education, this implies that teacher trainees need to develop *situation-specific, adaptive skills* so that they are able to plan and deliver lessons that take into account the learning disposition of students and their heterogeneity.

2.2 Beyond Teaching Basic Language Skills

In their seminal book on the teaching of listening and speaking (the skills that our student teachers were required to teach in their microteaching sessions), Nation and Newton (2009) used a framework that is rooted in the principles of teaching and learning. The authors organized the teaching/learning process around four strands: meaning-focused input, meaning focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development. Whilst their research-based (but, at the same time, highly practical) approach has stood the test of time, in the third decade of the 21st century, educators such as Pardede (2020) underline that "besides knowledge and the basic skills, today's students should also be equipped with what is called the 4Cs (communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity)" (p. 71). This element is duly emphasized in the exit profile of graduates at the university where the research project was conducted.

2.3 Reflection in Teachers and Student Teachers

Since reflection is a key element in teacher education, the employment of reflective thought is encouraged both in the case of practicing teachers and in the training of student teachers. Dewey (1933) emphasized that teachers needed to give "active, persistent and careful consideration" (p. 17) to their knowledge and beliefs. In Schön's (1987) understanding, teachers are eminently capable of drawing on their experiential knowledge and the latter serves as the primary source of their learning. In the past decades, the term 'reflective practice' has been increasingly understood as "a relatively systematic use of reflection for professional development" (Anderson, 2020, p. 481). Farrell (2016) conducted a review on the role of reflection in ELT and found that it can positively impact language teachers' cognition and practice.

Hayden et al. (2013) examined how teacher trainees can improve their reflective skills regarding their own teaching practice. According to their SOAR acronym, reflection starts with the *subjective retelling* of the events of a lesson, followed by an evaluation of how it progressed in achieving its *objectives*, after which teacher trainees can *analyze* the lesson and *reflect* more deeply on their learning.

Amobi (2005) focused on how a group of 31 student teachers developed their reflectivity skills after receiving feedback on their two microteaching sessions. Following the second round of microteaching, the participants were asked to write a short self-reflective essay that was arranged around three self-analysis questions:

- What did the student teacher intend to do?

- What did actually take place during the session?
- What would the student teacher do differently if they were to teach the lesson again?

The results showed that "microteaching is an activity that is considered favorably as a meaningful learning experience" (Amobi, 2005, p. 129). Nevertheless, even though the 'on-campus experience' would allow pre-service teachers to critique their performance in a pressure-free environment, many of the student teachers involved were reluctant to admit their vulnerability and "hold up their teaching actions to scrutiny" (p. 129). Ultimately, however, those who were prepared to reflect on their microteaching sessions in a meaningful and honest manner, were able to "self-correct specific elements in their emerging teaching skills" (p. 129).

2.4 Action Research and Microteaching

Action Research (AR) has often been used to explore pre-service EFL teachers' microteaching practices. A recent example is Odo's (2022) study on pre-service teachers giving video-recorded microteaching lessons followed by video-recorded feedback from their course tutor. The qualitative data gathered from the student teachers show that they felt that "the feedback was extensive and detailed and offered an objective perspective on their teaching that they could review many times" (p. 327). Since the lessons and the teacher's video feedback were shared with the student teacher's peers (classmates), one of the drawbacks mentioned was that the student teachers felt nervous about allowing others to watch their microteaching and access the tutor's feedback on it.

Önal (2019) carried out an exploratory study on how pre-service teachers reflected on their video-recorded microteaching. He emphasized the utility of integrating video-recordings into the feedback (and evaluation) phase of the microteaching process arguing that this technological tool "enables self-report, self-assessment and self-reflection, because learners can analyze, reflect on, evaluate and improve their didactic skills" (p. 811). In line with Odo's reasoning, Önal stressed the importance of the fact that the participants of his study were able to watch their performance several times and were able to write more detailed and thoughtful reflective reports on several aspects of their performance, including the challenges they faced in classroom management and the anxiety they experienced during microteaching.

2.5 Peer Observation by Teachers

Since our research study investigates two forms of peer observation (a teacher colleague and a senior student observing a class teacher, and student teachers observing each other), the review of relevant literature referring to these two practices need to be treated separately. First, let us look at the literature related to teachers (or senior colleagues) observing each other.

For many in the educational field, classroom observation has a negative connotation since it often involves an *evaluative* element and, as such, serves as the basis for the performance appraisal of the teacher being observed (Richards

& Farrell, 2005). The main factors why teachers feel threatened by such observations were highlighted by Williams (1989), who said that observations tend to be prescriptive and trainer-centered with the class teacher not having much of a say in the assessment process.

However, Richards and Farrell (2005) explained that "observation can be a part of the process of teacher development rather than […] a component of appraisal" (p. 85). Elsewhere, Richards (1998) stated that non-evaluative observation may help to gather information on specific aspects of a lesson and provide information on 'blind spots' that the teacher who is being observed may not have reflected on before.

2.6 Peer Observation and Feedback by Student Teachers

Kamimura and Takiwaza (2012), who use the term 'teaching demonstration' (to peers) and 'microteaching' interchangeably, investigated the effects of peer feedback on student teachers' teaching demonstrations. They concluded that: a) student teachers found feedback provided by their peers helpful; b) student teachers were also able to incorporate the comments made by their peers in the second round of their teaching demonstrations leading to "marked improvements in their performance" (p. 18).

Since in our context the demo classes were mostly given by pairs of student teachers, Yan and He's (2017) research on pair microteaching at a teacher education university in central China is especially pertinent. Pair microteaching was employed owing to a necessity, namely, time constraints and the large number of student teachers attending the English teaching methodology course. However, the university's course tutors also intended to develop collaboration by creating "a platform for student teachers to experiment collaboratively with the educational philosophies and pedagogies promoted in the methodology course" (p. 209). Ultimately, even though the majority of the 30 student teachers provided positive feedback on microteaching in general, two-thirds of the participants were of the opinion that pair microteaching is 'idealistic', because co-teaching does not exist in China. The authors stressed that "the scepticism about the feasibility of pair microteaching […] seems to reflect the students' pragmatic aspirations to acquire teaching skills which could be directly applied in the real teaching context" (p. 215).

2.7. The Role of Microteaching (Demo Lessons)

The terminology applied to a classroom event when a student teacher gives a lesson (or part of a lesson) to their own peers is inconsistent. It is often referred to as microteaching, but in the context of the present study it is more aptly called a **demo (demonstration) lesson**. Microteaching is usually perceived as a 'scaled-down' teaching situation in terms of class size, teaching time and teaching task. Bell (2007) defined microteaching as "the common practice of having students in educational methods courses "teach" a lesson to their peers in order to gain experience with lesson planning and delivery" (p. 24). In our context, the 'demo classes' at the university in question are longer than the standard microteaching sessions, and are delivered by pairs of student teachers, who teach their peers for the duration of an average school class (40 minutes). These extended

microteaching sessions, or **demo lessons**, appear to have the same advantages and disadvantages as those that are usually mentioned about microteaching.

The usefulness of microteaching as a widespread training exercise for the purposes of learning effective teaching practices has been proven by several studies (see, for example, Amobi, 2005; Bağatur, 2015). Takkaç Tulgar (2019) stressed that one of the advantages of microteaching arises from the fact that "it offers a controlled setting in which pre-service teachers can have practical experience" (p. 17). She underlined that "in the simulated environments […] pre-service teachers can sense the identity of being teachers and understand the responsibilities and requirements of the profession" (p. 17).

2.8 Pre-service Teachers' Attitudes to Microteaching and Teaching Performance

In a recent study, Sagban et al. (2021) examined the possible effects of microteaching on Iraqi EFL students' teaching performance and their attitudes to the technique itself. Altogether 30 student teachers participated in the research study, divided equally into two groups to serve as the experimental and the control group. The experimental group was given a microteaching course (combining theory and practice), while the control group was exposed to "[the] traditional method of teaching" (p. 1988). A checklist was used to measure the student teachers' subsequent teaching performance. The findings revealed that the experimental group's performance was significantly higher than that of the control group. Furthermore, the majority of the members of the experimental group claimed that "their microteaching experiences affected their education through strengthening their speaking skills, motivation, and questioning proficiency, self-reliance, preparation, and reinforcement ability" (p. 1991).

Sagban et al.'s findings (2021) confirm the results of earlier studies, for example, those presented in Ögeyik's (2009) article on student teachers' attitudes to microteaching. The author provides details of many of the arguments that the 57 Turkish student teachers provided in favor of microteaching. For example, the fact that it is "efficient in [the] material production process for introducing various materials, forces the students to prepare lesson plans and is beneficial for evaluating teaching performance and getting feedback" (p. 209). Ögeyik also discussed the aspects that student teachers mentioned among the less favorable characteristics of microteaching, such as its inauthentic nature, and the amount of time needed to design teaching materials.

Sa'ad et al. (2015) looked at the impact of microteaching on student teachers' performance during their teaching practice (practicum). They concluded that microteaching is useful for improving teaching skills and classroom management but it also enhances the confidence of teacher trainees. Further to this point, Solanki and Patel (2017) described studies that had found that there was no direct correlation between successful microteaching performance and how teacher trainees later performed in their teaching practice. The authors stated that these findings may be explained by the fact that microteaching could have an authenticity deficit and, as a result, may not fully prepare teacher trainees for real-life classroom situations.

2.9 Authenticity in Microteaching

Bell (2007) drew attention to the fact that the task of microteaching can be a considerable challenge for student teachers, because they have to "simultaneously negotiate the roles of teacher, student, classmate, and peer/friend" (p. 24). Analyzing 22 videotapes of microteaching and interviews conducted with 13 teacher trainees, the author concluded that the participants of her study perceived microteaching as 'performance' and 'classroom task' rather than 'real teaching'.

The issue of authenticity in pre-service teacher education programs is a recurring theme in the literature (see He and Yan, 2011; Rismiyanto & Suryani, 2020). He and Yan (2011), for example, listed down the drawbacks of microteaching as perceived by student teachers themselves, and 'artificiality' is one of the main issues raised. The authors point out that student peers tend to have more advanced proficiency than the learners whom teacher trainees are likely to encounter. He and Yan referred to the participants' reflective writing assignment and concluded that the "well-intentioned excessive support and cooperation [of the student peers] were felt to have significantly reduced the opportunity to practice real-life teaching skills" (p. 296).

Rismiyanto and Suryani (2020) looked at how EFL student teachers perceived the issue of peer or 'real' students. By 'real' students the authors meant high school students who, in the context of the research study, volunteered to participate in the microteaching classes. It probably comes as no surprise that the 25 student teacher participants of the study believed that microteaching *real* students prepared them better for their future classroom practice than teaching their peers. The authors added that student teachers tended to prepare more meticulously for their real students, the reason for which may be that "they feel more challenged and enthusiastic with real students" (p. 436). That said, real students were reluctant to ask questions and provide feedback, and time management was also more challenging in classes with them. Student teachers felt more anxious when teaching real students rather than their peers, but they also appeared to benefit more from observing their peers teaching real students than working in their comfort zone with their peers.

Based on the literature review related to the research question and in order to accomplish the overall aim of this piece of research the following methodology was followed.

3. Methodology

3.1 Timeline and Participants

The Action Research project took place in the second semester of the academic year 2021/2022. It was carried out with the participation of the 26 student teachers of the *Teaching language skills* module, the class teacher and two observers, one of whom was the ELT program teacher of *General Didactics* while the other was a senior student of the ELT major.

The authors employed a qualitative paradigm based on Action Research (AR) methodology using class observations, reflection and a survey questionnaire. Action Research (AR), which is also an integral part of the research activities and educational practices at the university where the research study was carried out (Modelo Pedagógico, n.d., p. 90), "is a research approach whereby the practitioner in the field, with 'insider' knowledge, closely investigates and reflects on his or her practice in order to bring about improvement and transformative change" (Burns et al., 2022, p. 4).

The usual stages of AR involve identifying a problem, planning and carrying out an action or intervention, observing the results and reflecting on the process (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). AR is localized practice that can bridge the gap between theory and practice (Ulvik et al., 2018) with reflection considered to be one of its crucial elements.

The AR process developed for the purposes of the present study was organized in two cycles following the six cyclical steps in Action Research as described by Efron and Ravid (2013).

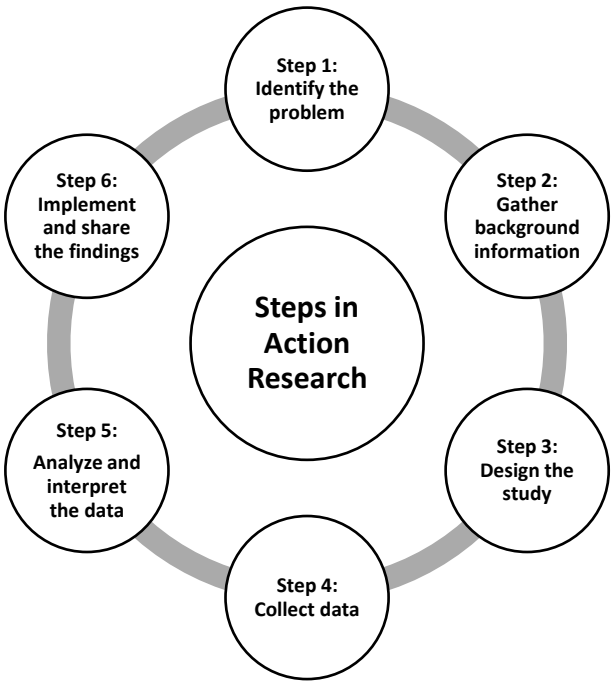

Figure 1: The six cyclical steps in Action Research
Adapted from Efron & Ravid (2013, p. 8)

In Step 1, the problem was identified, namely, the fact that the curriculum design of the subject *Teaching language skills* did not specify in sufficient detail what methodology is to be used in order to develop the students' competencies when teaching the four language skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

This gap led the authors to devise the following research question:

How can the improved practice of microteaching (demo lessons) contribute to the development of student teachers' desired professional competencies and exit profiles?

Then, moving on to Step 2 of the AR process, the authors gathered the background information as presented above in the Literature Review section. In Step 3, the authors designed the study involving two cycles of AR and using class observation, reflection and feedback. As part of the data gathering process, they administered a survey questionnaire to the students to gauge their perceptions on the AR process carried out.

In Step 4, the data were collected using the research techniques and tools mentioned above (observation, reflection and feedback via a survey questionnaire). The qualitative data gathered via the questionnaire were analyzed using the MAXQDA software (2022). Going on to Step 5, the full set of data was interpreted by comparing and contrasting them with the background information gathered in Step 2. The AR plan itself was implemented in two cycles. In the first cycle, the student teachers gave demo lessons to teach listening. In the second cycle, during which actions were taken to alleviate the weaknesses identified in the first cycle by making the required adjustments, the student teachers gave demo lessons on speaking.

In both cycles, most of the student teachers taught the demo lesson in pairs. The class teacher and the rest of the students gave feedback to the presenters during class while the two external observers gave feedback to the class teacher after the lessons finished. The class teacher also carried out self-reflection on how she had taught the classes.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Results of the First-Cycle Observation and Reflection Process

In the first cycle of the Action Research process, observation, feedback and reflection were carried out when teams of two (or three) student teachers taught a demo lesson to develop listening skills. The student teachers first submitted a lesson plan outlining the rationale of the activities that they were intending to run, and then taught the demo lesson using co-teaching, that is, team members took turns applying the different teaching strategies and techniques to teach listening following the ideas of Yan and He (2017).

The class teacher provided the student teachers with feedback by writing her suggestions, comments and observations on the whiteboard while eliciting ideas from the students about the different elements and stages of the lesson. She also wrote key ideas on the whiteboard, and asked students to copy them in their notebooks for future reference in order to avoid making similar mistakes in future demo presentations.

The teacher of *General Didactics* (Observer 1) and a senior eighth semester student (Observer 2) observed each group presentation and how the teacher of

the subject *Teaching language skills* managed the class and how she gave feedback to the student teacher presenters after they taught the demo lesson.

The first round of observation yielded some insightful comments and recommendations (see Discussion) because even though the lesson was evaluated positively by the two observers, there were some weaknesses that could be remedied.

The observers pointed out to the observed class teacher that the presenting students did not give clear instructions about the activities or ask Instruction Checking Questions (ICQs) to verify that the other students knew what they had to do and for this reason, some of the activities failed. The instructions were given only orally while the students teaching the demo lesson should have shown the instructions on a slide for the students to understand clearly what they had to do. The observers and the class teacher agreed that the presenters did not manage their time well and, consequently, they did not have time to finish what they had planned. The observers also pointed out that the quality of the presenters' Power Point slides was not satisfactory. They also noticed that some students spoke in Spanish while working in the small groups and the student teachers giving the demo class did not deal with this issue on the spot.

The teacher of *General Didactics* (Observer 1) recommended the following:

- To include in the rubric for evaluation some general tips on how to prepare PowerPoint presentations (font size, use of colors, etc.);
- To request the student teachers teaching the demo class not to simply ask if the other students understood the task, but rather, ask Concept Checking Questions (CCQs) and/or Instruction Checking Questions (ICQs);
- To give students written feedback so that it is easier for them to store the recommendations arising from the comments in their long-term memory.

The senior 8th semester student (Observer 2) made the following recommendations:

- The teacher should make sure that the students do not speak Spanish while working on the activities in small groups.
- Grammar correction should be made on the spot to add to accuracy.

Even though some of the reflections and recommendations made by the teacher of didactics (Observer 1) and the ones made by the senior student (Observer 2) did not fully overlap, each of the issues raised were discussed and analyzed with the observed teacher. The three participants of the Action Research process, namely, the observed class teacher and the two observers then agreed on the modifications to be included in the next Action Research cycle.

4.2. Results of the Second-Cycle of Observation and Reflection Process

In order to enhance the teaching and learning process, the second cycle contained the improvements that the class teacher and the two observers had agreed on. There was more emphasis on using Concept Checking Questions and Instruction Checking Questions. The student teachers teaching the demo lesson

were asked to move around the classroom making sure that the students spoke English all the time. The class teacher was ready to provide more detailed and specific written feedback.

The observation process was similar to the one developed in the first cycle, however, on this occasion student teachers taught a demo lesson to develop speaking skills. They incorporated the suggestions that had been made in the previous cycle and the results were better in terms of learning outcomes and the development of professional competencies. The class teacher explained and illustrated the use of CCQs and ICQs before the student teachers began the demo lesson and asked them to pay special attention to these when teaching. She also highlighted to the students the importance of keeping time for each activity so that they could teach everything they had planned for the 40-minute session. The teacher emphasized the importance of speaking English all the time, explaining that the students had to reach a C1 level of English proficiency in order to graduate, and practicing English whenever they worked in groups was a very effective way of reaching this goal.

In the second observation session, the class teacher's feedback to the presenters was not only given orally, but also in writing. The teacher changed the way she presented the feedback; during the demo class she took notes not by hand but on her laptop into a Word document, which she then gradually projected to the students during the feedback phase. After the class, the whole document of suggestions and recommendations was made available to all the students in the class through the virtual classroom, so that the students could go back to those written notes when planning and teaching subsequent demo lessons and avoid making similar mistakes.

After the demo lesson itself, the class teacher gave oral feedback to the presenters. She did not give it directly but elicited answers from the students by means of questions. She first invited feedback from other students as a starting point, and then asked those who taught the demo what they would do differently in order to improve the lesson. She pointed out that even though the topic chosen for improving speaking skills was excellent the students did not exactly do what the presenters wanted them to do in either of the two activities. She said that the ICQ was good but, apparently, one single question was not sufficient for the students to comprehend what they had do, so she recommended asking more ICQs. These results coincide with Odo's (2022) study on pre-service teachers and with Önal's findings (2019) as well.

Irrespective of the improvements identified in the observation and reflection process, the researchers decided to administer a survey questionnaire to the student teachers in order to explore their perceptions on the use of planning and teaching demo lessons for the development of their future professional competencies as teachers of English as a Foreign Language. Altogether, 26 students were given the survey questionnaire, all of which were returned.

The results are summarized in Point 4.3.

4.3 The Results of the Survey Questionnaire

The data were processed using the MAXQDA qualitative analysis software (2022) and this resulted in retrieving the following codes (themes): active learning strategies, meaningful learning, fun and interesting activities, CLT strategies, didactic resources, presentations, warm-up activities, didactics, group work, gamification strategies, projects and technological resources.

Out of these themes, the following categories were given special attention: active learning strategies, fun and interesting activities, and CLT strategies. Active learning strategies were understood as those strategies in which learners were actively engaged, either physically or mentally. Fun and interesting activities were those in which the students were engaged and had fun while learning. CLT strategies were the ones that intended to have real, authentic and meaningful communication as their main goal.

These categories are presented in the following diagram and tables, which include all the responses supplied by the participating students.

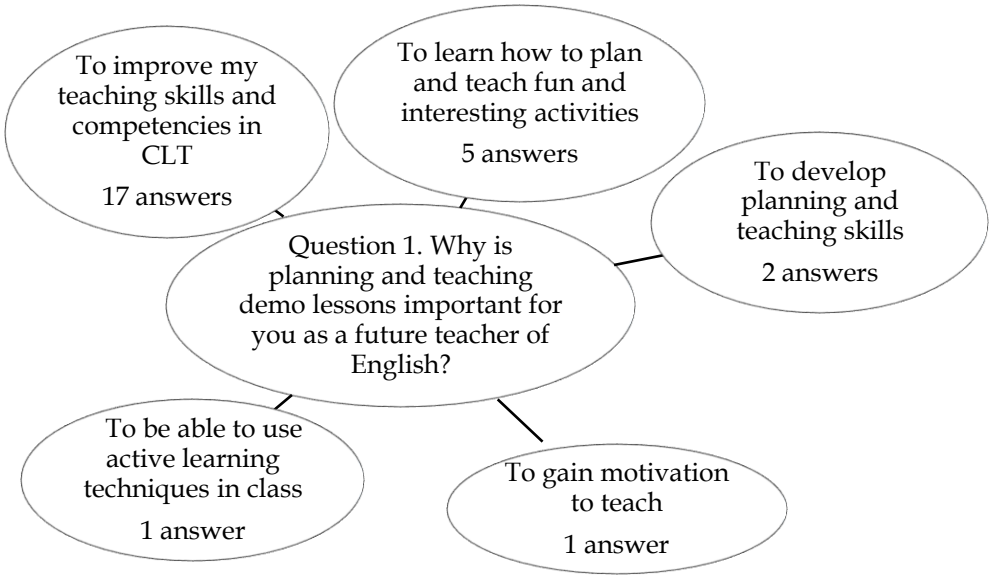

Figure 2: Students' answers to Question 1

As can be seen from the responses, most of the students (65%) consider that the planning and teaching of demo lessons contribute to the improvement of their communicative language teaching skills and competencies.

Some students provided the following explanations:

> "*It helps me to realize when I make mistakes.*"
> *"It helps me to teach in a more communicative way."*
> *"It provides me with knowledge and skills on how to plan my lessons more communicatively."*
> *"It helps me to improve my accuracy and fluency in English". "It helps me to plan how to avoid making mistakes when I teach my class."*

"It helps me to improve my communicative competence to interact with the students."
"The feedback the teacher gives me helps me to improve both my language and my teaching skills."

The second most frequent response (19%) revolved around the idea that the planning and teaching of demo lessons encouraged them to look for techniques and tools that would help them design their future lessons in a fun and engaging manner. Furthermore, student teachers could see other benefits as well: they found the act of teaching itself enjoyable, stating that the process allowed them to become more confident and, as a result, their anxiety and 'stage fright' were reduced.

Table 1: Students' answers to Question 2 and 3

Nº of answers	**Question 2. What challenges did you face when you had to plan and teach the demo lessons?**	**Question 3. How were you able to overcome the challenges you mentioned as a response to Question 2?**
13	Handling the lesson plan template (Establishing a relationship between the topic, the objectives and the activities)	Research on how to create lesson plans Feedback (from the teacher and classmates) Finding out for whom the lesson is intended
11	Feeling nervous when teaching the demo lessons	Still feel nervous (4 students) Teaching my classmates (best friends) before the demo (2 student) Getting positive feedback from my classmates (2 students) Not looking directly at my classmates when I teach the demo (1 student) Being more active in class (2 students)
2	Time management	With my classmates' help and cooperation Doing research on how to do it Teacher's feedback

Thirteen students (50%) reported that the most frequent challenge they faced was understanding the lesson plan template. Overcoming it involved doing their own research, relying on the feedback they received, and taking into account the proficiency levels and the characteristics of the learners the lesson plan was intended for. Eleven students (42%) reported feeling nervous when teaching the demo lesson. It is particularly interesting that four (15%) of them reported this was a challenge that they still had to overcome.

Table 2: Students' answers to Question 4

Nº of answers	**Question 4: During the planning and teaching of the demo lessons, what moments and specific activities do you think helped you learn the most?**	**Examples of moments and specific activities mentioned by the respondents**
12	Planning the lesson	Researching the issue Grasping the structure of the lesson plan template Teaching the lesson using fun and interesting activities Observing other classmates' presentations Avoiding making similar mistakes Gaining experience in the use of CLT strategies Keeping in mind the students' needs when planning Choosing appropriate objectives and techniques Creating specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound objectives Planning a warm-up activity to feel more confident and relaxed in front of the students Understanding the problems students face in evaluations Seeing the difference between aims and objectives
9	Teacher's feedback	By correcting my mistakes
5	Working in groups	Sharing ideas and learning vocabulary due to communicating as part of a team Developing active learning strategies The experience of helping one another

Table 2 shows students' responses about what they consider were the moments or activities during the planning and teaching of the demo lessons that contributed the most to their learning. Twelve students (46%) reported the process of planning the lesson was the activity that helped them the most to learn. The reason given for why this activity was the most relevant for their learning was that it allowed them to 'learn by doing'.

Specifically, students reported that planning the demo lesson helped them to understand the structure of the lesson plan, to learn by observing their classmates' teaching, to gain more experience in the use of CLT strategies, to choose appropriate objectives and techniques, as well as to teach the lessons using fun and interesting activities. Nine (35%) students mentioned that the most valuable moment for them was receiving feedback because it helped them to correct their mistakes. Five students (19%) considered it important to have had the opportunity to work in groups because it allowed them to share ideas and help each other and develop active learning strategies while carrying out group work.

5. Findings and Discussion

In this section we bring together different strands of our investigation, highlight the importance of our findings and answer the research question.

5.1 The importance of student teachers' professional development

The student teachers acknowledged the importance of needing to develop their language and pedagogical skills. They understood the need for communicating and becoming more fluent and more accurate as prospective language teachers. Teaching skills and language skills go together and, in this regard, the necessity for an advancement of all-round competencies, as described by Cochran and Villegas (2016) has been confirmed.

5.2 The Importance of Demo Lessons for Professional Development

The participants in the study emphasized some elements that they found important from the point of view of improved pedagogical skills. By focussing on active learning strategies, meaningful learning and communicative language teaching approaches, they were able to create activities that were both engaging and appropriate in the peer-teaching context. The feedback at three different levels (student teachers' providing peer feedback, classroom teacher giving feedback to student teachers and the senior colleague and senior student supplying feedback to the class teacher) served both the student teachers and the class teacher but it also improved the observation skills of the external observers. It led to dialogic communication with tangible improvements in the student teachers' motivation and performance. Even though several studies have raised the issue of authenticity, namely, the lack of 'real students' in demo lessons (see, e.g., Rismiyanto & Suryani, 2020), the participants of our study did not mention this aspect. Indeed, they repeatedly highlighted the fact that their peers provided them support both while preparing for their demo classes and during the 'live' session.

5.3 Reflection as a Tool for Professional Development

It is understood that reflection as a form of practitioner research is of great importance in education (Schön, 1987) and is a primary source for learning. The survey questionnaire, with its targeted questions, allowed for reflection and the student teachers readily provided evidence of both the challenges they faced and the way in which they were able to overcome those. The difficulties that the student teachers mentioned are familiar from the studies that we presented in the literature review. Bell (2007) referred to the complex nature of microteaching, such as when students need to fulfill various roles (teacher, student, student peer). As for improved performance, Kamimura and Takizawa (2012) found that student teachers are able to process critical comments and do better when microteaching is done in stages, which was the lived experience of our student teachers. As for pair teaching, Yan and He (2017) described how Chinese student teachers thought that teaching in pairs is alien to their local context. At UNAE, where students are introduced to collaborative and cooperative ways of working early on in their university careers, this has not surfaced as an issue.

5.4 Insights Arising from the Observation Sessions

Even though at times observation is perceived as an uncomfortable occasion because it can be part of teachers' annual appraisal (Farrell, 2005), in our case the carefully designed observation process resulted in constructive and forward-looking criticism. Both external observers were able to make pertinent comments and meaningful recommendations, as a result of which the class teacher was able to incorporate new elements into the feedback that she gave to her student teachers. Even though her modified and improved practice did not imply changing her feedback process in a fundamental way, the 'tweaking' resulted in an enhanced routine, an outcome that is often true of Action Research projects (Smith and Rebolledo, 2018).

5.5 Answering the Research Question

Based on the results and the analysis of the research findings, we can now answer our research question, which was phrased as follows:

How can the improved practice of microteaching (demo lessons) contribute to the development of student teachers' desired professional competencies and exit profiles?

Since there is an apparent gap in the required exit profile (see Appendix A) and the syllabus for the *Teaching language skills* module, we contend that any improvement of an important element contributes to enhanced levels of competency by the time students graduate and will lead to better performance in the pedagogical knowledge domain. It will probably also result in improved language skills (since the student teachers are expected to present and teach a feature of the language or a grammar point intensively). Such an important element is the demo lesson (microteaching), which was the focus of our study. We found that student teachers perceived demo lessons a useful tool and felt that as a result of having gone through the experience of peer-teaching, they were better prepared for their practicum involving 'real' students (Rismiyanto and Suryani, 2020).

These outcomes are in line with the findings of the study conducted by Kamimura and Takiwaza (2012), who concluded that: a) student teachers found feedback provided by their peers helpful; b) the student teachers were also able to incorporate the comments made by their peers in the second round of their teaching demonstrations leading to "marked improvements in their performance" (p. 18).

The suggested improvements in the methodology to be employed by the class teacher to guide and assess students were, therefore, successfully accomplished. Reflection on the process of improvement by the class teacher highlighted the positive impact of reflection on language teachers' cognition and practice as underlined by Anderson (2020) and Farrell (2016). The microteaching experiences affected the student teachers' education through strengthening several skills that are expected of language teachers, including speaking skills, motivation and self-reliance. The overall process resulted in the development of

student teachers' performance as previously demonstrated in Sagban et al.'s (2021) study.

6. Limitations and Recommendations

Even though in Action Research it is sufficient to investigate one group of students with their class teacher, one cannot overgeneralize the results of any such research study. Exploring the microcosm of a relatively small group of student teachers, their class teacher and two external observers may only provide limited understandings of the usefulness of microteaching sessions.

However, there are several recommendations to be made. One is that there needs to be more research comparing the experience of student teachers in various contexts and investigating what the differences in perceptions and practices might be owing to. A second recommendation is to look at the effectiveness of the methodology employed regarding the successful acquisition of the material taught during the demo lessons such as the ones described above. It is clear that peer-teaching may not provide guidance here, since the student teachers are instructing their peers whose level of English is usually higher than that of their prospective primary and secondary school students, but before student teachers start teaching 'real students', the effectiveness of their teaching might be worth investigating. Finally, the often-raised issue of authenticity is worth further examination since, ultimately, beginning teachers will become instructors in the real world and real classrooms.

7. Conclusion

The small-scale Action Research project that was carried out at a national teacher training university in Ecuador aimed at establishing how it was possible to enhance the delivery of a module called *Teaching language skills* in such a way that it improved both the student teachers' competencies to teach the four language skills and contributed to their exit profiles as proficient and all-rounded beginning English language teachers. The two cycles of Action Research design allowed non-evaluative performance observations by two observers (a senior colleague teaching didactics and a senior student of the ELT major). The agency awarded to the class teacher (through her own reflections) and that of the two observers ensured that the observations took place in a collegial and non-hierarchical manner. This was further enhanced by the active participation of the student teachers who, beyond the demo lessons that they delivered, were able to provide feedback to the student teachers whose presentations they were actively engaged in as the target audience and participants of the demo classes. By analyzing the triangulated data arising from the observations and the responses to the survey questionnaire, the authors contend that giving demo classes (microteaching) is a useful technique to prepare student teachers for their future careers. Simultaneously, reflection and an Action Research-style process can result in improvements that can make the outcomes of microteaching more effective and its lessons even more memorable.

8. Endnotes

(1) We use the term 'student teachers' but in the literature, one often comes across other terms, such as 'pre-service teachers' or 'teacher trainees'.

(2) "Microteaching" is often spelt with a hyphen or as two words. We are using it as one word since that is how it often appears in scholarly articles.

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10. Appendixes

Appendix A

Summary of the graduates' exit profile

The graduates of the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages need to possess the following competencies:

1. Command of the English language at C1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference that allows them to develop communicative activities in the classroom.
2. Management of innovative and creative didactic techniques that facilitate the teaching-learning processes of English in the students of basic education and high school.
3. Management of information and communication technologies (ICT) as didactic resources to facilitate the teaching-learning processes of English in the students of basic education and high school.
4. Advanced development of the required logical, critical and creative thinking to carry out pedagogic proposals that favor the teaching-learning process of the English language in a way that promote the formation of values, acceptance, integration of the differences and interculturality among students.
5. Motivation and sociocultural commitment to English language teaching (ELT) with a communicative, inclusive and intercultural focus.
6. The necessary knowledge of educational research to diagnose and identify educational problems among the students with the objective of designing and to applying curricular projects of intervention that promote a solution to these problems within a framework of respect, tolerance, inclusion and collaboration.
7. Leadership in the educational processes in English language teaching with a social vision, respect for individual differences in the educational community, the environment and different cultures as well as humanistic education and promotion of educational inclusion.

(PINE Major Project, 2018)

Appendix B
Survey questions on the demo lessons

Question 1. Why is planning and teaching demo lessons important for you as a future teacher of English?

Question 2. What challenges did you face when you had to plan and teach the demo lessons?

Question 3. How were you able to overcome the challenges you mentioned as a response to Question 2?

Question 4. During the planning and teaching of the demo lessons, what moments and specific activities do you think helped you learn the most?