1-21-2019

Defining a Practicum in Applied Linguistics through Duoethnography to Comply with the National Postgraduate Audit Culture in Mexico

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Abstract

In this article, we attempt to conciliate the issues of an audit culture that surround the postgraduate programs in Mexico through the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACyT) with highly flexible definition of the course using duoethnography. The goal being to satisfy national requirements yet retain freedom in applied research in English as a foreign language teaching. This is done through an intense process of data recycling with the student participants in a semester-long analysis. This analysis also involved a continuous editing and reediting process to try and connect all the participants' autobiographical dots of the course to arrive at a definition.

Keywords

Audit Culture, CONACyT, Duoethnography, Evaluation, Professional Practicum

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In this article, we attempt to conciliate the issues of an audit culture that surround the postgraduate programs in Mexico through the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACyT) with highly flexible definition of the course using duoethnography. The goal being to satisfy national requirements yet retain freedom in applied research in English as a foreign language teaching. This is done through an intense process of data recycling with the student participants in a semester-long analysis. This analysis also involved a continuous editing and reediting process to try and connect all the participants' autobiographical dots of the course to arrive at a definition. Keywords: Audit Culture, CONACyT, Duoethnography, Evaluation, Professional Practicum

Introduction

In our current world, education and ideology are difficult to separate (Apple, 2004). What we have is "the odd combination of marketization on the one hand and centralization of control on the other is not only occurring in education; nor is it only going on in the United States. This is a worldwide phenomenon" (Apple, 2005, p. 11). Apple (2005) claims that:

> The ultimate result of an auditing culture of this kind is not the promised de-centralization that plays such a significant role rhetorically in most neoliberal self-understandings, but what seems to be a massive re-centralization and what is best seen as a process of de-democratization. Making the state more "business friendly" and importing business models directly into the core functions of the state such as hospitals and education – in combination with a rigorous and unforgiving ideology of individual accountability – these are the hallmarks of life today. (p. 15)

In Mexico, this concept of evaluation by an audit as become increasingly more prevalent in what we do in the field of graduate education; we are part of this social process as we are under constant observation from external organizations. Namely, the National Council of Science and Technology (in Spanish, *Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología,* or CONACyT) audits us in terms of graduate programs every three years. If a negative result appears, the program in question will be closed. We are part of this social system, and while we may not agree with all of what it proposes, we wish to exploit the positive aspects that can be found within it. Even though,

> [a]udits are typically associated with bookkeeping and accountancy, that is, routine systems of financial management designed to verify budgets and ensure that organizations comply with administrative norms and regulations. Why, therefore, should we be interested in something as prosaic and dull as a "method of accounting"? One reason is because small technological changes and

routinizations often beckon much more profound processes of social change. (Shore, 2008, p. 279)

English language teaching is no stranger to this process of social change (Block, 2010; Block & Cameron, 2002; Kubota, 2002; Kumaravadivelu, 2008). In our case this social change is that our MA program in Applied Linguistics is classified by the National Council of Science and Technology as an applied research program and as a result is required to have a professional practicum in each of the four semesters of the program. This course relates directly to the student's research project and is seen as the road map to the thesis defense at the end of the two-year MA program. It is important to note that this is a required consecutive strand of courses that are sequential and imposed by the National Council of Science and Technology. Yet, we as staff members are left to define and teach these courses with only one guiding principle: These courses must be practical in nature, and the result must be the student's thesis or final project. The problem of the lack of a clear definition is that teachers leading courses such as this may interpret the implementation of the content and guiding principles in different, and perhaps, ineffective ways. We believe that this study is a starting point to make sense of professional practicum courses which are also taught in other postgraduate programs around the world. Moreover, even though it is not expressly written, we think this has a direct relationship to the large automotive industry and their affiliates. Mexico is a large recipient of US and European companies that have produce a high demand of professionals that are fluent in English. This is a global economic phenomenon that many emerging economies deal with, but in Mexico it tends to have a strong political component given the relationship with the US. One of the most common requests/complaints from transnational corporations is related to the availability of professionals that speak English. This in turn places pressures on the educational institutions to addresses those requests. As staff members, we are constantly reminded of the end to connect our graduates to the realities of the local and national labor market.

While we are keenly aware of the economic pressures around us, there is more of a focus on our MA than on that of local needs. This makes the requirement an issue of survival for the program. However, we also see a benefit to having a course that accompanies the student from start to end. We want to develop a culture of academic evaluation through this course as proposed by Yoland Wadsworth (see Snyder, 2013), but we want to define the course and its scope in conjunction with the users, that is, our students. To carry this out we set a research space based on dialogues with a group of incoming students to reflect and debate this course as it was being taught from January to June 2017. The task was to find a methodological approach that would allow the opportunity to construct a joint definition. Thus, a qualitative paradigm was chosen.

Methodology, Participants, and In-Depth Email Interviews

A qualitative research approach was used to explore the participants' definitions and conceptualizations of the professional practicum through the filter of the dynamic discussion of the course's professors. According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994), qualitative research "examines people's words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways closely representing the situation as experienced by the participants" (p. 2). This means that the situation can be studied in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret that situation in terms of the meanings that people bring to them. Nevertheless, qualitative research is difficult to define as no one has copyrights on the term. It ends up meaning a variety of things for a variety of people. Chenail (1992) states its most important point: "qualitative research can be a diverse, rich, and sometimes self-contradictory world of inquiry" (p. 1). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define qualitative research as:

> Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives. (p. 2)

For this research, we invited eight students to participate. As previously mentioned, these students were taking their professional practicum in the first semester of the MA program in Applied Linguistics at the Language Department of the University of Guanajuato, central Mexico. The group of student participants and the clearly defined workspace were treated as a visible small culture, as defined by Holliday (1999). Moreover, the selected student participants explored through in-depth open email interviews the course development allowing their views to shape the themes of the research. After being thematically analyzed, the data was then returned to the participants to begin an ethnographic dialogue within the shared classroom space (Sayer & Crawford, 2017). What do we mean by a shared classroom? In the case of the research, both of us are teachers in the class that is being analyzed. In other words, we were team teaching. In this sense, the dialogue that we have is between us, the teachers, and our students in the course under analysis. We are all stakeholders in this process in that we as teachers need the support of the National Council of Science and Technology. We hope that through this research we can discover a clearer vision of both the teachers' and students' roles in this particular course.

Duoethnography

Participants in the Study

As previously mentioned, this research project has eight student participants and the two course teachers. Both teachers and students are of the Language Department at the University of Guanajuato. The participants were part of the MA in Applied Linguistics. All of the student participants are full time and dedicated exclusively to the academic program. Both of the teachers are full-time staff, one on staff for 33 years and the other a recent hire. This gives the cross analysis of the professors very distinct viewpoints in terms of their professional background.

In this context, a statement of third-party approval is not necessary. However, we ensured that this study was conducted ethically and always protecting the students' rights and anonymity. All the student participants were informed of their right to participate in this study under no obligation, and to withdraw at any time the study. They all provided consent to participate. Complying with their right to be protected from identification, the students' names and identities were carefully anonymized. Instead, abbreviations are used. The letter "S" for student and another letter (for example, SA) were used to identify specific learners in the extracts, analysis and discussions.

In-Depth Email Interviews: Multivocality

For this research, we used in-depth email interviews and combined them with short discussions with the eight participants. This interview technique is part of mainstream and feminist linguistics (Cameron, 1997). Madriz (2000) points out that these discussions or

interviews bring multivocality to the research process by bringing out the multiple voices of participants' perceptions and experiences. With this technique, personal emotions and opinions regarding to participants' cultural backgrounds, educational background, use of languages in relation to the practicum are explored. Each participant responded individually with semi-structured email and a follow-up open email. This interview scheme was chosen as a research tool because it can generate useful information about lived experience and its meaning. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) refer to interviews as conversations, and "the art of asking questions and listening" (p. 643). The objective of these email interviews was to allow the participants' experiences in the practicum to be expressed privately. Given our current social networked society in where email has become a highly used source of personal exchange, we think the quality of the data gathered has not been diminished from a partial lack of face-to-face interaction (Castells, 2009). Partially because we had the opportunity during the semester to clarify and expand the email data directly with the students.

However, as a methodological approach, this did not seem to do complement justice to the agency of the participants, in particular, the "research subjects." The authors of the text had the constant opportunity to discuss and debate the research findings, as well as edit and reedit this current text. These discussions allowed the researchers to interact directly with the student participants and provided opportunities for clarification and extension of response much like an on-going focus group (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Yet we felt that more discussions seemed to be needed to create an ampler picture for the complexities of defining the course.

The complexities that came out of the data gathered in the in-depth email interviews pushed us to a limit where we needed a point of entry to return to the interviewees, but the consensus was that we need a setting in the form of a conversation rather just simple clarification on the "research subjects." It was felt that something more detailed was needed. We needed to go in a direction along the lines of Eakin (2008) and find a way to create a definition through narrative. Thus, duoethnography was selected, the three forms of ethnography, named as such beginning in the 1990s, not only are intended to answer different questions, but are meant to engage different processes and forms of representation (Rinehart & Earl, 2016). Duoethnography, term coined by Joe Norris, Richard Sawyer, and Darren Lund (2012), sets out to create a "dialogic methodology" (Norris, Sawyer, & Lund, 2012, p. 9), that is structured upon the concepts of storytelling and currere. Norris, Sawyer, and Lund (2012, p. 35) state that "through dialogic storytelling, one can reclaim agency, authority, and authorship over one's life. In (re)presenting experience, duoethnographies (re)generate and (re)conceptualize them" (p. 35).

However, we made a slight move away from this original intention in that the dialogues and discussions were developed in collaboration between both researchers and research subjects. Specifically, the participants were asked to read the segments where email interview data was transcribed for this article. Through a dynamic discussion on our distinct views of writing, interpretations and perspectives seem to overlap or collide, when engaged in the process of trying to connect all of autobiographical dots from the semester began to emerge (Denzin, 2013). From the aforementioned, in practice we became aware that:

> Autoethnographers use their personal experiences as primary material (data) for social investigation. (Chang, 2013, p. 108).

> Our collaborative autoethnographic examination of our resocialization as second-career academics focused on our use of an informal comentorship as a way to address our struggles in resocializing as new faculty. It was completed with full collaboration meaning that we worked through each phase of the

process together from "beginning (data collection) to the end (writing)" (Chang, 2003, p. 111).

Using the writing and sharing of our personal stories and experiences as primary data, we found mental images from our past being brought to life, unveiling the complexity of the many variables inherent in our new roles in higher education and showing how our past roles as teachers or administrators influenced the tensions in our current roles. (Barrett & Brown, 2014, p. 4)

This dual growth from the participants, both as students and researchers, was in many ways a critical incident that produced a strong reflexive turn that can be seen in the conclusions. Furthermore, the complex manner in which the elements of the lived experience of both teachers and students are intertwined became easier to verbalize. The data were analyzed following a meaning categorization which is believed to facilitate the identification of patterns, themes and meaning. The specific process involved analysis by each researcher for the initial structuring of the argument. Afterwards, we returned the analysis to the student participants for any observation or comment they felt was relevant. Globally, this involved identifying extracts manually, and attributing them to theme categories and sub-categories which emerged from the data.

Discussion of Findings

Several themes emerged from the data. The original focus of the discussion was to remain exclusively on the theme of defining the concept of the EFL professional practicum through the data extracts from the students email interviews, and the filter of an open discussion between the two teachers of the course. Yet, because of the data that emerged, along with the subsequent discussion, it has evolved into an exploratory of the course. In the following, we have a detailed discussion of the data extracts by the two researchers that were responsible the course, where the discussion focuses on the presence of two teachers and trying to define the course.

Two Teachers in the Classroom

Troy: On the surface, this may not seem to contribute to the definition of the class, but it is necessary to look a bit deeper. The first two comments from the data are positive. The references to a mixture of styles and the sense of additional support. There is an impression of an experienced guide vs a professor who can relate to them. Even though we had a negotiated agreement to try and balance our perspective in class, we must admit that fundamental reason that we were placed together was for me to train my colleague who was a new hire at the time and not a planned effort to impact the classroom process.

Emmanuell: It is interesting to see that the students perceived the dynamics of two teachers in one classroom positively, e.g., different teaching styles, good rapport between them and the two professors and academic support. This was actually our intention; we agreed that we should complement each other's teaching backgrounds and experience for the benefit of our students. However, I agree that the extracts do not contribute to a clear definition of this class. The statements below are centered on the learners' perceived benefits of the class. It seems possible that it is not easy for these students who are members of this community to try to define the class because they have been recently immersed in the dynamics of the class. It seems possible that these students centered their attention on their perceived benefits of the class, rather than trying to define the class which may require more time to process.

I have never had two teachers in the same class, so that has been interesting because the two personalities could not be more different. I like both styles, and even though I find Troy's personality very intimidating, I like when someone speaks to me in an honest way. Emmanuell's personality has helped, I feel that the fact that he was recently a student, allows him to relate to us more, he always has a good disposition to help, and both teachers are always willing to share what they know about our thesis topics, articles they found, or anything that can help us move forward. (SF)

I also like having two teachers at the same time. I consider that Emmanuell and Troy complement each other in an interesting manner. Troy's experience and Emmanuell's newness make a combination to provide a good support for us students. I also like the pressure that professor Troy puts on us. I think it works as a motor that makes us become more productive. Moreover, that is how real life works and we must be prepared to function at such rhythm. (SP)

Troy: In particular, the reference to how it works in real life I think is important. On paper, the idea that sustains the practicum is to help guide the students towards the completion of the MA. In particular, it focuses on the completion of the thesis project. Yet below we see a bit of opposition in my teaching style.

Emmanuell: At the beginning of this class, I was aware of the final aim of the class: to direct and guide students' interests and ideas on a research project that will enable them to plan, design and carry out an MA thesis. In order to attain this, I was constantly reflecting on the activities and content of the class, maybe because of my status as recently hired professor and my first time sharing a classroom with another professor. As part of this, Troy and I decided that using rubrics was going to be a fair and more objective way to evaluate these students and the initial process of their research project as part of this class. However, it is surprising that there were students who believed that we had different grading criteria.

I believe that what has not worked in this class, for me, is that we have two teachers who grade totally different. I mean, in another class we have two teachers also, but they evaluate similarly. My grade does not change so much from one teacher to the other. In this class, my grade varied significantly in the research proposal. I got and 8 with a teacher and a 7.2 with the other, that is a huge difference. (SA)

Furthermore, I know that both teachers have different perspectives, experiences, and styles. What I would really like to is to keep the advices from one of the teachers without getting rid of them because of the other. (SD)

Troy: Where does this stand? Is it the students' perception of a difference or is it real? I do not think that we showed any major differences in the class. In addition, I do not think that a difference of .6 in a grade is important or significant. I can see that for the student it is important because of the obligation to maintain an average of 8.0 in order to keep the National scholarship. While this does not directly focus on the definition of the class, it does have an impact. If students are dealing with conflicts as to the criteria of the teachers it would be safe to believe, it could have an impact on their performance, which would affect negatively the intention of the course. It has been a long time since I was a student, but looking back, I can see that maybe we did not take enough care to show a more unified image to the students. Yet, at the same time I doubt myself because academics has many subjective or grey areas that you

have to deal with over time. There is one overriding element that I must accept, this student perceives a clear difference. At least, as a teacher I need to be more careful in how I conduct myself.

Emmanuell: This class was an opportunity to work with an experienced professor (Troy). I was aware that our years of experience and perspectives would be different and noticed by the students (see SD's statement above). Initially, working and interacting with an experienced teacher made me think that this class would be a challenge for me to gain recognition from the students as a teacher who was recently hired, but from whom they could also learn. However, this class allowed me to negotiate and reinforce my identity as a teacher while interacting with Troy. That is, the class was a space during which we both carried out teaching and learning decision-making and contributed to the classroom discussions, without subtracting the students' credibility of neither of us. This was perceived by the students who claim to value having two professors in one classroom, though with different grading criteria, years of experience and perspectives.

Defining the Course

When asked directly to define this subject, there were a diverse set of answers, which had a tendency to align themselves with what is found in the program outline. Classic in the sense that the students in part paraphrased form the course outline. This is not really surprising, as I think we have a tendency to look for conformity in the academic world.

Troy: I think that in the data extracts below the common theme that arises is the literature review. This is not surprising as the final paper is an annotated bibliography. This is why I think that the first four data extracts focus on the literature related to their project. The final comment encompasses the entire research project, which is the intention of the course. The other aspect that stands out to me is the issue of receiving feedback in the moment. I think that this has been the most useful. Real-time personal feedback I think has helped the students to shape their literature search and has helped elevate their self-confidence.

Although, I think it is noteworthy that in the last two data extracts the students are showing a perception that underlies the thinking in the course as outlined by the National Council of Science and Technology. They are expressing how the course is only a segment of a longer journey through the entire program. While the other three comments are focused exclusive on this class. I think the merit here is with the students because if the others perceive the class as only looking at the literature of their potential project, I think the fault is with the teachers. Fault is the sense that we may have given too much emphasis on the literature review without giving it a context within the bigger picture of an applied research project.

Emmanuell: Again. It is apparent the perceived usefulness of this course, as suggested in all the extracts below. Moreover, it is apparent that these statements link back to the general objectives stated in the descriptions of the class. At a surface level, the extracts below would seem different. However, taking into account bits of their written language, it is possible to find things in common among the extracts. For example, SDS, SP, SA and SO suggest the perception that the class provided them with "guidance," "feedback" and "advice." SDS, SF, SA and SO felt that this course was a "space," which allowed them to explore, work and define their research ideas and thus design their research projects, as suggested by SF, SP, SA and SO. As part of this space, the students, namely, SF, SP and SA, mentioned the literature review, which we asked to conduct before finishing the semester.

> I believe that this class is very important for my classmates and me because here we do all necessary activities for writing our thesis. Our main goal is to get Master's degree; and thesis is a key to it. Thus, this subject is essential for us.

Moreover, it is very useful because you, as experienced researchers, help us, give good advice how to write academic papers and what literature to look for. (SDS)

I would define the class as the space that we have to reflect about the research project, by taking the time to explore different ideas in order to define what our interests are. In addition, it is the moment where we can start getting familiar with literature; prepare what will be the basis of our future research project. (SF)

This subject part of the curriculum of the MA in Applied Linguistics in ELT that offers students the possibility of researching on bibliographical resources; as well as receiving guidance to students during the initial process of designing their own research project. (SP)

I believe this class was created for the MA students to be able to work on our research proposal and understand the topic that we have chosen. Through the search and reading of different articles that I have done in this class, I have a clearer idea of what I want to do for research. The feedback that we received for our research proposal is also of great help to know if we are on the right track. (SA)

I would define this class as a space to develop our research project. It is an opportunity to receive feedback from our professors. At times, this feedback questions and challenges our projects. (SO)

Conclusion

Troy: I find myself in a type of limbo. I still cannot give a concrete definition to the professional practicum, yet I find it to be essential to the program. As a teacher, I found at times that I was a bit out of focus in the classroom. There were times that I felt as if we were not really offer any guidance to the students. On the other hand, there were moments where I think I truly saw growth and understanding in a particular student. This usually occurred in the brief one-on-one discussions. In addition, working with a younger teacher I think help me because I believe the students in the course saw Emmanuell as more approachable than me.

I think all of this bothers me on a deeper level as I am not a supporter or advocate for government meddling in academic issues. Yet, I have to accept that the professional practicum seems to be serving as a grounding force to guide the students. Although I would not have planned a professional practicum of my own free will, now that I have taught it twice and cannot define it clearly in a sentence, I would not recommend it be taken out of the program. Having taken the time to look at the program more closely and discuss it with students and a coworker has been a strong learning experience. I think of three small data extracts above because they highlight the detail of the course and a view beyond the course itself.

Emmanuell: Despite the fact that the extracts do not contribute to a clear definition of the professional practicum, it is possible to see two things in general. First, the students perceived this course to be of great benefit for their research project. Second, they felt that this course provided them with a space which enabled them to carry out activities concerning their research ideas and for which they received continuous feedback. I believe that a possible definition of the course should include these key points.

> I feel like this class has helped as a reminder of all the reasons I wanted to be here. (SF)
>
> I think everything is great. I really like this class because it gives me insights of what I can do as an applied linguist in English teaching. (SA)
>
> I have found useful in the course are: (1) networking tips, interacting and sharing ideas with one another. (2) Online resources, knowing about how to use databases to find academic journals, scholar google to cite, bookzz to find books, (3) Sharing a bank phrase. (SL)

Can there really be a precise conclusion here? It seems that the idea of a finite definition for a class like a practicum may not be possible. The practicum in itself appears to be a living entity that tends to suffer frequent changes. Furthermore, the organic nature of qualitative research blended with a group of participants might just make definitions a fore gone conclusion. It seems to be more the narration of a journey. A journey by definition is unique. The word unique appears to best describe the definition of the class itself. We think that this will most likely be the case in the future. The professional practicum seems to be by definition a journey. The journey will most likely de unique with each new group of students. Even though it was a journey, there have been two interesting results from this small research project—the most important has been the introspective look at our teaching practice which is what seems to have been important to the students. There has also been a policy change that was not requested from this project: our Program Coordination has decided to permanently have two professors in all of the four professional practicum courses.

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Article Citation

Crawford, T., & Garcia-Ponce, E. E. (2019). Defining a practicum in applied linguistics through duoethnography in order to comply with the national postgraduate audit culture in Mexico. *The Qualitative Report, 24*(1), 145-155. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss1/11