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Practicum Challenges that Preservice Teachers Faced when Teaching Kindergarten Students Online

Los Desafíos de la Práctica que Enfrentaron los Maestros en Formación al Enseñar a los Estudiantes de Jardín de Niños durante el COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study aimed to explore the experiences of a group of pre-service English teachers through their professional practicum during the fall term in 2021 in kindergarten contexts delivered online. The questionnaire applied to a group of ten pre-service teachers identified their struggles and the pedagogies they implemented to solve their difficulties when they shifted from face-to-face classes to virtual scenarios. The study found that the academic conditions the pre-service English teachers experienced in kindergarten classrooms worked as a catalytic agent to grow and learn how to use platforms with technologies that they had not used before. The significant challenges were the existing infrastructure in schools and homes, parental involvement and implementing appropriate pedagogies to use with young learners. Their experiences also dealt with the management of their own emotions and teaching knowledge.

KEYWORDS: Practicum, pre-service teachers, TEYL, online instruction, technology

RESUMEN

Este estudio de caso cualitativo tuvo como objetivo explorar las experiencias de un grupo de maestros de inglés en formación a través de su práctica profesional durante el período de otoño de 2021 en contextos de jardín de niños impartidos en línea. El cuestionario aplicado a un grupo de diez futuros docentes identificó los retos y las pedagogías que implementaron para resolver sus dificultades cuando pasaron de clases presenciales a escenarios virtuales. El estudio encontró que las condiciones académicas que experimentaron los futuros maestros de inglés en las aulas de jardín de niños fueron el agente catalizador para crecer y aprender a usar plataformas y nuevas tecnologías. Los desafíos importantes fueron la infraestructura existente en las escuelas y los hogares, la participación de los padres y la implementación de pedagogías apropiadas para usar con los jóvenes estudiantes. Sus experiencias también involucraron el manejo de sus

propias emociones y conocimientos de enseñanza.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Práctica profesional, maestros en formación, enseñanza de inglés a niños pequeños, instrucción virtual, tecnología.

INTRODUCTION

When the first cases of coronavirus appeared in Mexico, the national government, through the educational bureau, decided to adjourn all face-to-face school-related activities. Therefore, all schools were advised to organize remote teaching arrangements wherever possible to offer virtual learning at all levels of education. However, the different ways schools have implemented these programs are still an area under study. The pandemic generated substantial changes in educational systems worldwide, and kindergarten programs have been particularly affected by the accompanying challenges. Due to school closures, teaching settings have shifted from the face-to-face classroom environment to an entirely virtual model.

This situation in education has been unique; students and teachers can now compare their courses before and after the pandemic in different ways. Daniel (2020) stated that most educational institutions had little or no time to prepare for the remote and online teaching and learning. At the same time, teachers and students could realize that learning online asked them to develop more specific skills than the average skills they used for communication and entertainment.

Rogers and Sabarwal (2020) affirmed that the emergency shift to remote learning entailed teachers learning digital skills to develop to work with technologies and adapt the teaching-learning materials and methods into synchronous and asynchronous styles. However, the transition to emergency remote learning (ERT) demanded the development of technology-savvy among teachers, including pre-service teachers who were meant to do their practicum during the pandemic. Consequently, pre-service teachers were also affected by this sudden change as most of the preparation programs were based on a future performance in face-to-face teaching settings. Therefore, these pre-service teachers had to face both their first teaching experience and a virtual teaching setting not foreseen in their teaching programs.

Given this situation, this study sought to explore the experiences that a group of Mexican English pre-service teachers had during the pandemic and the challenges they faced during their practicum in public kindergarten programs in a central state in Mexico and how they performed their teaching during this period. The investigation aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What were the main challenges Mexican pre-service teachers faced during their practicum with kindergarten students?
2. Which pedagogies have these pre-service teachers implemented to teach kindergarten children online during the pandemic?

Literature Review

Online Education

Emerging educational technologies had become helpful in the language classroom as a basis of new teaching dynamics in the pre-pandemic scenario. For example, Silva et al. (2019) mentioned that these technologies allowed teachers to connect with colleagues and, in that way, create working networks of peers and learners. This kind of collaborations could also allow intercultural

environments so that pre-service teachers can improve their theoretical and academic concepts and improve their emerging pedagogical competence (Johnson & Golombek, 2020). These experiences seemed to establish the foundations for the scenario that the pandemic brought into the world.

The use of technologies in education generated the need to search for innovative strategies and approaches to respond to teaching and learning. Furthermore, integrating the use of technologies into initial-teaching programs has become a fundamental pillar in the preparation of pre-service teachers. Recent studies have shown that teachers who were not adequately prepared to integrate technology into their classrooms (Banerjee & Waxman 2017; Sutton 2011) have found technology advances difficult to follow. However, the lack of digital literacy in preservice teachers can cause a limiting factor resulting in negative self-image and personal agency (Shelton, 2018). The main difficulties in teacher preparation/education had been teaching pre-service teachers the skills to integrating technology in their language classroom.

Back in (2014), Brown evaluated the two modes of delivery, face-to-face and online instruction, and found that student-teachers in an online course used more consistently higher-level thinking when using educational platforms or sharing their discussion posts online. However, all these benefits were overlooked with the emergency, and teachers and students were sent to online instruction without considering how well prepared they were to use online tools.

Typically, English as a subject is designed and displayed on platforms like Moodle, email systems, blogs, online discussions, videos, articles, and other platforms (Ogbonna et al., 2019; Sturm & Quaynor, 2020; Tarman, 2020). In ideal situations, students have access to the teacher in synchronous or asynchronous sessions, or both (Ohlin, 2019, Richardson et al., 2020). However, this was not the case in many contexts, when the pandemic emerged, for example, the context where this study took place.

Practicum in language teacher preparation

Most university initial teacher-preparation programs include a teaching practice period that induces the pre-service teacher into the actual teaching world. This way, teaching practicum is one of the most relevant aspects of teacher preparation. It combines theory and practice, providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to expand their learning and allowing them a period of adjustment to become effective teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Pre-service teacher training has a crucial role in preparing future teachers to deliver effective education; this preparation is a period of guided, supervised teaching that allows future teachers to develop their teaching skills in general to be effective teachers (Farrell, 2001; Johnson et al., 2017). In 2004, Tsang explored the impact of teachers' personal practical knowledge in the process of pre-service teachers' decision making while da Silva (2005) studied the congruence of input and practiced teaching in teaching education among many others who have focused their research on initial teacher-training programs and practicum in specific.

Then, the practicum period becomes one of the first encounters of pre-service teachers with situations such as curriculum content. Osman (2020) affirmed that online teaching practicum had set a new dimension to teaching practices. It may serve pre-service teachers as a platform to develop and strengthen their teaching skills and their learning, technological and instructional skills.' At the same time, guided practicum allows pre-service teachers to assume more effective classroom management and instruction responsibility as the experience progresses.

According to Dvir and Schatz-Oppenheimer (2020), teachers' challenges and opportunities during the pandemic covered three key dimensions: technological, pedagogical, and educational. Pre-service teachers had to adapt their pedagogical content knowledge to online virtual environments, such as classroom management and teaching skills (Ball et al., 2008). At the same time, Schleicher (2020) affirmed that ecological-systemic organizational and technological knowledge was essential during the emergency period. Additionally, the personal dimension of becoming a teacher adds an emotional overload of feelings (Anttila et al., 2017) as learners must redesign their identities and performance. With the implementation of online practicum, pre-service teachers have experienced a shift in the learning to teaching transition and a global shift in instruction, making them face challenges and opportunities for their future teaching careers.

Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) online

Teaching English to young learners (TEYL) is already a challenge for pre-service teachers, given the specific characteristics of young learners. Nunan (2010) claims that the most relevant challenges that teachers of young learners may encounter are: cognitive development, motivation, attention, multi-level groups, and assessment. Additionally, online teaching in early childhood has implied research on the most appropriate pedagogical approaches and technology to suit children's learning needs. For example, Huber et al. (2016) have claimed that preschool students should have the opportunity to engage in play-based activities even through computers. Then, the age of students must be considered in the design of online classes to be more effective and attractive for young learners.

However, young children can also benefit from online teaching and learning as children of multimedia and multimodal environments. Shin et al. (2021) have proposed a whole child approach that considers the child from the physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional perspectives as they grow and learn as multicultural and multilingual individuals given the virtual environments in which they can learn a new language. The literacies and technologies to which young children are exposed nowadays allow teachers to follow the framework developed by Shin et al. (2021) for effective teaching of English in early childhood. The framework proposes that teachers of young children develop: a) Commitment to children, b) Recognition of English as a global language, c) Integration of multiliteracies, d) Commitment to a multilingual world. These principles may facilitate how new teachers of young learners approach the children's needs in the 21st century.

Despite the many challenges, Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020) have claimed that the new scenario of online teaching may provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to get familiar with educational technology such as software, tools, and online platforms.

Methodology

This study explored the virtual teaching phenomenon that a group of ten pre-service teachers faced during the pandemic. These pre-service teachers started their practicum in public kindergarten schools when all instruction was virtual due to the global health emergency.

Creswell and Poth (2018) established that qualitative research "address the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem". (p. 42). Therefore, this qualitative case study research followed an exploratory case study methodology interpretative paradigm to identify the experiences that the participants went through during a pandemic, exploring the social, human and in this case, educational problem. This way, the experiences of this group of pre-service English teachers have been described, analyzed, and interpreted through the interaction

with the participants and their remote teaching practices as human and social practices. As Yin (2014) stated, case studies provide an in-depth analysis of situations and interactions between participants in a natural setting, providing a detailed picture of that specific unit. The study was conducted from August-to December 2021 during the Fall term.

Context

The study was carried out in the *Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla*, Mexico. The University offers an initial program or B.A. program in ELT. The *Licenciatura en Enseñanza de inglés* (LEI for its initials in Spanish) is a four-year program that prepares future language teachers for the different levels of the Mexican Educational System. By the end of the program, students must do their practicum with different kinds of students, and one of the contexts of the teaching contexts is kindergarten. Students are guided by a teacher-tutor who helps them with their lesson planning and their doubts during their practicum. Professional practicum is for most of the pre-service teachers the first-time they face a real classroom and the first time they are in charge of real students.

Participants

The participants in this study were ten Mexican students enrolled in their professional practicum at LEI. The participants consisted of seven women and three men; their ages ranged from 20-26 years old. They performed their practicum from August to December 2021 in different public kindergarten schools in the urban area of Puebla. The cases of coronavirus were still very high and as a result, the term was still delivered online. As an ethical consideration of the study, all participants were informed of the nature of the research at the beginning of their practicum, and all of them agreed to be part of the study.

Instrument

The instrument designed to collect the data was a questionnaire applied to the participants at the end of their practicum. The questionnaire consisted of eleven open-ended questions so that participants could freely express their opinions and experiences during their practicum. Punch (2014, p. 87) affirms that "open-ended qualitative data are often appealing to researchers who are keen to capture directly the lived experiences of people", that is, "to represent their experience in words," which was the intention of the researchers when carrying out the study. The questions were designed to cover several issues, from the participant's perceptions of their level of digital literacy to the involvement of parents in their children's language learning process (See Appendix 1).

Data collection and analysis process

Once designed and validated, the questionnaire was sent via email. The participants answered it and returned in two weeks right at the end of their practicum, that is, December 2021. The data gathered were analyzed using inductive and thematic analysis to identify, evaluate, and figure out the themes expressed by participants (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005). The replies of each participant were coded using keywords and organized into different themes. This inductive technique permitted the identification of the themes (Liu, 2011). This information coding allowed the researchers to answer the research questions previously posed to guide the study.

Results

Results were divided into two categories. The first category refers to the challenges the group of preservice teachers faced during their online teaching kindergarten children practicum, and the second category to the pedagogies implemented during the pandemic (Autumn, 2021) in kindergarten instruction. The first category answered the first research question: What were the main challenges Mexican pre-service teachers faced during their practicum with kindergarten students?

The answers provided by the participants were analyzed and coded to find a typical pattern that allowed the researchers to discover three main aspects that represented the significant challenges for these ten students. The categories are presented in Figure 1 below:

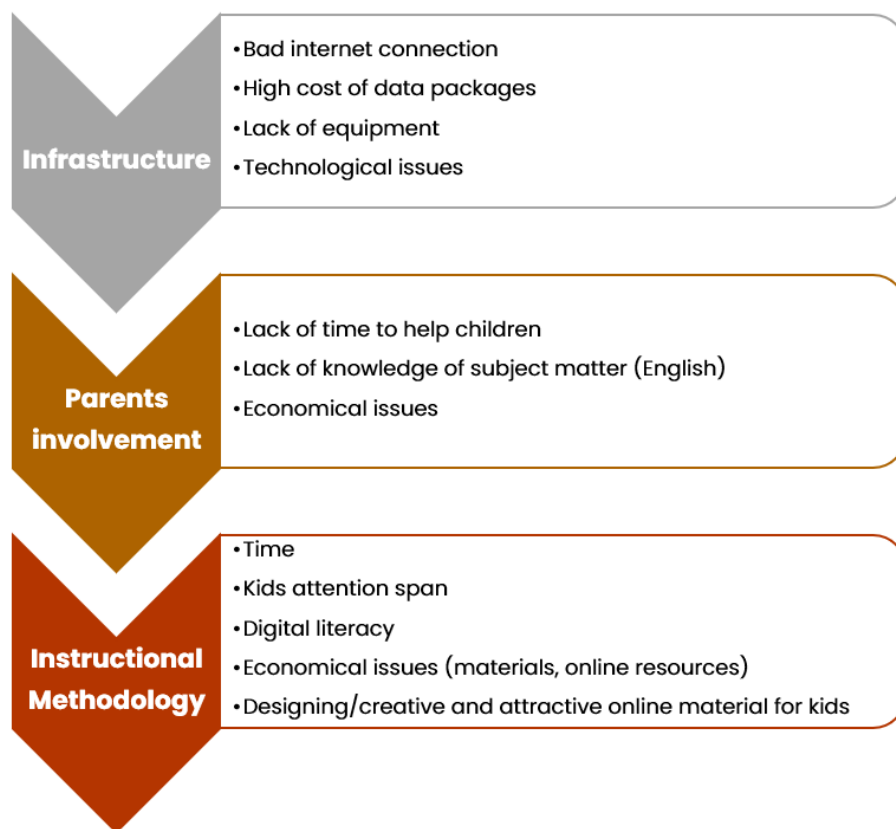


Figure 1: Main challenges faced teaching kindergarten students online during the pandemic

As results showed, various problems arose during the pandemic period. The first was that schools were not prepared with the appropriate infrastructure, such as effective internet networks. At least in Mexico, public schools neither have internet access nor computer equipment in all schools. Young learners at home without reliable internet access and technology struggle to participate in digital learning. Limited internet access was challenging for instruction and learners, resulting in delayed tasks submission (Selvanathan et al., 2020). Additionally, the high cost of data packages and poor internet connection, in Mexico, were obstacles to implementing online learning. Pre-service teachers claimed that this situation affected their performance and the quality of their classes.

Another critical constraint was parental support. Pre-service teachers mentioned that the children were often late in doing and completing assignments and connecting to classes. Furthermore, even understanding the material became a significant problem. Working with kindergarten students requires the constant support of parents. However, this support was sometimes absent.

These pre-service teachers observed that parental support with technology was decisive for the kids' academic success. This result constitutes a piece of evidence that there were differences between the level of familiarity with technology that parents had when learning at home (Bhamani et al., 2020) and the struggles faced by low technological education parents due to the lack of digital tools to support their children (Pozas et al., 2021). Parental collaboration is then, necessary for online learning, at kindergarten children level, as parents can help children when they use their own devices such as cellular phones or laptops.

Instructional design and lesson planning became more complex tasks as pre-service teachers found challenging to transfer their recently acquired teaching skills to an online system which implied online learning experiences that they had not experienced before. It was evident that lack of experience with online teaching was a barrier to organizing online education for young learners. Luongo (2018) affirmed that pre-service teachers who do not have prior knowledge and experience in online learning sometimes also lack technical assistance and support systems. In their responses, the pre-service teachers mentioned that some instructional strategies implemented during the Pandemic had degraded the quality of learning because they were improvised. Pre-service teachers claimed that their educational program's support and instruction was necessary for their performance as kindergarten English teachers.

The second category answered the research question: Which pedagogies have these pre-service teachers implemented to teach children online during the pandemic? Figure 2 illustrates the strategies and pedagogies used by pre-service teachers during this time.

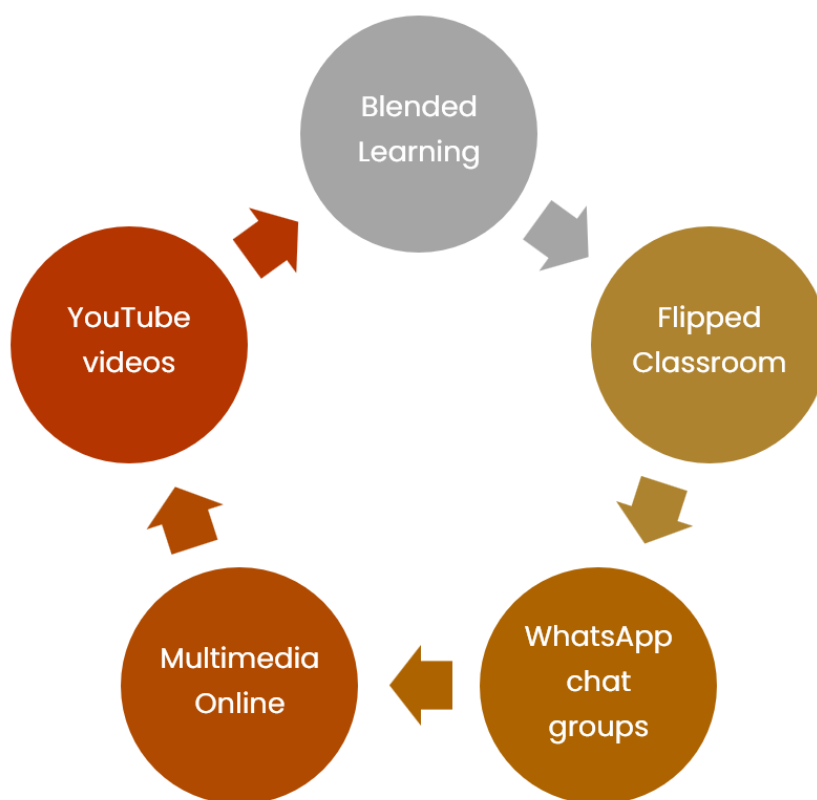


Figure 2: Pedagogies implemented during the pandemic

The instructional media that teachers most often used were teaching videos for young children, either downloaded from YouTube or learning videos that teachers adapted from coursebooks they had used before the pandemic in their language teaching. Most pre-service teachers

mentioned that instructional videos were one of the most accessible media because they were easy to access and students could easily understand. Besides YouTube, WhatsApp, Google Forms, Worksheets, YouTube, and Zoom also served as media in delivering and developing teaching-learning materials. As a result, these pre-service teachers mostly used digital platforms for their lessons and materials were sent through WhatsApp, Google Forms. Additionally, worksheets were delivered to students' parents, evidencing the work and tasks done during the session. At the same time, the pre-service teachers' competence allowed them to shape the digitalization (Aagaard & Lund, 2020; Damsa & Jornet, 2017) by adapting the digital materials to their instructional needs.

The actions mentioned by teachers describe the integration of classroom and online teaching under the pedagogies implemented during the pandemic. Classroom time (synchronous sessions) was reduced but not eliminated, with substantial time used for online learning. On the other hand, they also used the 'flipped' classroom principles. They recorded a class and provided access to videos, exercises, quizzes, and other resources that students worked through previously to coming to class, with the help of parents and relatives at home.

Discussion

The technological experience was a great challenge because it determined the efficiency of instructional activities. Most pre-service teachers mentioned that creating attractive, low-cost, accessible, and striking material for kids was their most difficult challenge. It should be designed for kids and accessible and understandable for parents. Watson (2020) claimed that the emphasis on the ability of teachers to understand virtual teaching had impacted the success of online learning during this pandemic time.

These group of preservice teachers could develop a professional confidence by using the pedagogies and tools available to them during the pandemic. Some of these tools, such as videos, platforms, social media, allowed them to go through their practicum in an unexpected setting. However, teachers and pre-service teachers who did not have online teaching experience or had difficulty running technology and information tools found it challenging to carry out online learning because these types of classes forced them to master a variety of applications. According to Rapanta et al. (2020), online teaching and learning suggest a specific pedagogical content knowledge, related to the design and organization of contexts that foster better learning experiences with the help of digital technologies. Some of the pedagogies they could implement were flipped learning (with the help of parents) or WhatsApp chats.

Pre-service teachers considered that online children's instruction was challenging but at the same time a "once-in-a-lifetime" experience that would impact them for their professional development and their future careers, following what Sepulveda-Escobar et al. (2020) have mentioned. Through this experience, pre-service teachers might be more prepared for the real world, quickly changing if they are better prepared.

Another challenge, especially for these pre-service teachers and their context, is that few Latin American countries have national digital education strategies with a model that takes advantage of ICTs (Álvarez-Marinelli et al, 2020). The design of adequate online classes for young learners revealed how lesson planning was time-consuming for participants. In addition to this challenge, pre-service teachers had to align the instructional objectives with the context of teaching in these new learning environments and try to make parents understand the material because they were the immediate help to students. Additionally, the attitude preservice teachers had to technology influenced in their emerging identity as professionals as McLay and Reyes (2019) affirmed. This

could set basis for the need of adequate training in educational technology from initial training preparation.

A variety of pedagogies and methods may enhance more parents' participation during online learning. Ideally, parents need to get involved in their young children's helping to overcome challenges in relation to infrastructure and social issues, but also at the personal level. At this young age, children need assistance on both sides of the screen. The pandemic has intensified inequity, social disparities, and exclusion at all levels. This dramatic change has emphasized the gap in technological aspects between the ideal and the reality in the educational system as Eisenberg and Selivansky (2019) mentioned. Giving the pre-service teachers a realistic view of the state of education in their country.

More integrated approaches, such as the whole child approach, could also be integrated into children's instruction to improve academic results. At the same time, professional development for teachers could integrate personal, emotional, and pedagogic dimensions. The pandemic panorama has set the need for teachers and pre-service teachers to adapt to new contexts of teaching and learning online urgently. It exposed how teacher education institutions and educators experience the trials and opportunities to carry on their jobs in such unexpected situations. (Flores & Gago 2020; Nasri et al. 2020; Quezada et al., 2020).

Conclusions

The study found that the academic conditions this group of Mexican pre-service teachers experienced in kindergarten contexts during their practicum worked as a catalytic agent to grow and learn how to use platforms with technologies that they had not used before. Among the challenges these kindergarten pre-service English teachers faced were the infrastructure of schools and homes, the level of parent involvement, necessary at that age, and the instructional methodology the teachers were forced to develop in order to provide their young learners with appropriate instruction during the pandemic. They overcame these challenges with technology and the support and collaboration from schools, students, teachers, and parents.

Kindergarten instruction during the pandemic made these Mexican pre-service teachers modify their instructional techniques and activities for their young learners. The adequate development of online classes required time, effort, and further preparation as teaching in the virtual mode was radically different from what these pre-service teachers learned during their initial-teaching preparation courses. Finally, the participants reflected that their practicum made them see the need to adapt to changes not only to deliver teaching but also to support their own growth as teachers. The pre-service teachers recognized that they needed guidance through this period, but they could overcome these challenges in a virtual setting nobody imagined for kindergarten instruction before.

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Appendix 1. The questionnaire

1. What challenges did you face teaching kindergarten students during your professional practicum?

2. How well did you feel with your digital expertise to face the shift from face-to-face classes to online ones?

3. In your opinion, what was the role of parents during the period of online classes you had with kindergarten students?

4. Did you look for special digital training during this Pandemic period?

5. How did you perceive kids' attitudes toward your classes online?

6. What online platforms did you use during your practicum in your classes?

7. From the platforms mentioned above, which one(s) worked better for your classes?

8. Talking about lesson Planning, what were some changes you made to address online classes?

9. Was there any desertion in your classes during the course?

10. If the answer was yes, do you know the main reasons why it happened?

11. Did you receive any (academic, mentoring, monetary, training) support from the institution where you made your practicum?

**FOREIGN LANGUAGE CENTER
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CALLS TO PUBLISH IN ITS SIXTEENTH ISSUE OF THE CIEX
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This call is addressed to: Professors – Researchers, undergraduate and graduate students from the BA in English Letters and Masters in Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics at CIEX and any researcher and scholar who wish to publish research articles, research essays, or thesis results, all related to the main topic of the Journal: Language, Culture and Teaching. The sections of the Journal are:

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1. Title: in English and in Spanish.

2. Summary (in English and in Spanish, 100 words), containing the following aspects:

- a) Introduction:** This section describes the context where the research was carried out, reason why the topic was selected, importance of the study, reason why the research was carried out.
- b) Purpose:** Here the writer states and explains the research objectives, intentions, questions or hypothesis.
- c) Research method:** In this part, the author mentions and justifies the research method that was selected, describes briefly the subjects, the context and the research procedures, as well as the instruments that were used for the data and information collection.
- d) Product:** Here, the writer presents the main findings, the degree to which the research objectives were reached and the answers to the research questions.
- e) Conclusion:** This section suggests the importance of the findings, considering the contribution to the theory, the research area and professional practice and suggest practical uses as well as possible applications for further research.

3. Body of the article:

- a) Key words:** Five, in English and in Spanish.
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- c) Literature review:** Present the main terms, concepts, and theoretical claims or principles, models, etc. analyzing and discussing the ideas presented by the main authors who have studied the topics related to the research or study presented. The references should not be more than 10 years old.
- d) Research methodology:** Describe the research approach: qualitative, quantitative or mixed.
- e) Describe the research method:** Case study, longitudinal research, transversal research, experimental research, cuasi-experimental research, etc. Describe the **data type** (describe

and justify the data base, or universe, or sample, etc.) Characterize the **subjects** (describe the participants in the research). **Context** (describe the geographic and the institutional context where the research was carried out). **Instruments** (describe the research instruments used to collect information and data). Data analysis methods (describe and justify the quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods).

- f) Main findings.** Synthesize, present, interpret and argue the most significant results found.
- g) Main limitations of the study** (related to the geographical or institutional context or knowledge area where the conclusions or suggestions could be applicable).
- h) Main applications and impact of the research.** Describe the main benefits of the research and the possible applications of the proposal.
- i) Conclusions.** Describe the main conclusions generated from the answers to the research questions.

Topics for the articles:

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2. Professional competencies development.
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4. Alternative language learning theories.
5. Curriculum design: design of language programs or language courses.
6. Design, selection and adaptation of language teaching materials.
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8. Language and culture.
9. Research and professional development.
10. Educational technology in languages.

Format:

- Title using Arial font, size 14
- Text using Arial font, size 12
- Margins: top 2.5, bottom 2.5, left 2.5, right 2.5.
- Spaces: 1.5
- No indented paragraphs

Length of the articles:

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LICENCIATURA EN INGLÉS

MAESTRÍA EN LA ENSEÑANZA DEL IDIOMA
INGLÉS Y LINGÜÍSTICA APLICADA



El Centro de Idiomas Extranjeros "Ignacio Manuel Altamirano"

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