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### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0p41p2vd>

### Journal

L2 Journal, 7(2)

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### Publication Date

2015

### DOI

10.5070/L27224444

Peer reviewed

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# Exploratory Practice in the FL Teaching Methods Course: A Case Study of Three Graduate Student Instructors' Experiences

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The foreign language (FL) teaching “methods” course—which serves an increasingly diverse population of graduate students with varied teaching and learning experiences, professional goals, and developmental trajectories (Allen & Negueruela-Azarola, 2010)—is often the only dedicated space for graduate student instructors (GSIs) to develop integrated theoretical and practical knowledge about collegiate language learning and teaching (Bourns & Melin, 2014). This article describes how the reflective teaching framework of exploratory practice (EP) (Allwright 2003, 2005) was used in a combined German/Spanish FL teaching methods course at a large state university in the U.S. in order to foster ongoing reflective teaching practice and provide learning opportunities for GSIs with different experiences and training. Through qualitative analysis of three learning teachers’ written reflections, the study shows how graduate students worked with EP to understand their own classrooms and teaching programs in personally-meaningful and developmentally-appropriate ways. Analysis of the GSIs’ reported learning outcomes and their ability to follow EP’s seven guiding principles in their journals reveals key differences between the novice and more experienced GSIs, suggesting it may take time for those new to teaching to understand and fully integrate the principles into their reflective practice. Implications for methods coursework are discussed.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the foreign language (FL) teaching methods course, considered essential to language teacher preparation programs, learning teachers<sup>1</sup> develop theoretical and practical knowledge about language learning and teaching with the aim of becoming self-directed practitioners able to make informed decisions about current and future instruction. For graduate students in university FL departments, the one-semester pedagogy seminar is often the only dedicated space within their graduate studies to foster deep understanding about teaching and learning through sustained, reflective inquiry (Bourns & Melin, 2014). An increasingly heterogeneous graduate student population with varied teaching and learning experiences, professional goals, and developmental trajectories (Allen & Negueruela-Azarola, 2010) and the growing trend toward offering “common” cross-departmental methods courses that serve different language programs (Bourns & Melin, 2014) mean that such seminars must provide well-designed learning opportunities for diverse learning teachers to explore practices in their specific instructional contexts.

## EXPLORATORY PRACTICE FOR LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

Over the past 25 years, reflective inquiry has become a main staple in second language teacher education for new teachers to connect and interrogate learned theories, practical knowledge, and prior beliefs and assumptions about learning and teaching (Wright, 2010). Of the many reflective teaching models available, exploratory practice (EP) (Allwright, 2003, 2005; Allwright & Hanks, 2009) has gained in popularity among experienced teachers who seek to understand more fully their instructional practice and students' learning in a sustainable way. As a practitioner-based research model, EP encourages both teachers *and* learners to develop understanding about classroom life through the act of *puzzling* (i.e., asking questions for the sake of learning), rather than through solving problems in the classroom (the orientation typically found in other reflective teaching models, such as action research). At the center of EP is a commitment to understanding and supporting *quality of life* for teachers and learners (Gieve & Miller, 2006), which translates into several ethically-driven global principles informing how the reflective work is to be done (Allwright, 2003):

1. Put quality of life first.
2. Work primarily to understand language classroom life.
3. Involve everybody.
4. Work to bring people together.
5. Work also for mutual development.
6. Integrate the work for understanding into the classroom practice.
7. Make the work a continuous enterprise.

(Allwright, 2003, p. 128-130)

Meant to serve as non-prescriptive guidelines for teachers' reflective practice (Allwright, 2005), these tenets suggest a pedagogical outlook that extends beyond the learning of languages to more of a way of being. Indeed, Johnson (2002) notes that "an important characteristic of EP is that insight should be attained without disruption to routine" (p. 61). To make reflection both unobtrusive and meaningful, practitioners should thus integrate the inquiry into established classroom practices (i.e., teaching strategies and activities) and involve learners in the reflective practice in a mutually-beneficial way. By situating the reflection within one's classroom, teachers can then discover and construct with their learners personally relevant, localized understandings about learning and teaching.

Teacher-researchers working with EP have noted numerous benefits to their professional lives as teachers, including newfound awareness of their learners' experiences (Gunn, 2010; Rose, 2007; Silver, 2008), renewed enthusiasm for the learning-teaching experience (Crane, Sadler, Ha, & Ojiambo, 2013; Johnson, 2002), the space to study personal, affective issues related to language teaching (Lyra, Fish, & Braga, 2003), opportunities to develop common understanding with colleagues about curricula (Slimani-Rolls, 2003), and greater understanding of the reflective process itself (Kuschnir & Machado, 2003). While this research has tended to focus on seasoned teachers' experiences with the framework for *professional development* purposes, EP is likely to serve as a productive model for beginning FL instructors who are learning to become reflective, thinking practitioners (Freeman, 2002; Wright, 2010) in an educational landscape that increasingly demands of its teachers a sophisticated understanding of learners and learning (Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Kramsch, 2009). In point of fact, EP's third principle, which welcomes learners'

participation in teachers' puzzles, makes this framework a potentially rich model through which novice instructors can explore learner-centered pedagogies.

This paper describes a reflective teaching portfolio designed for a FL teaching methods course for graduate student instructors (GSIs) in which the reflective teaching framework of exploratory practice was used. Analyses of three GSIs' written reflections from this portfolio project show how three graduate students, with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and teaching experiences, used the EP model to understand their own classrooms and teaching programs. Rigorous qualitative methods of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) of the graduate students' written reflections were adopted to study how these learning teachers developed their own theories of language teaching and learning through EP and what aspects of the model they drew on most frequently in the reflective process. Two research questions guided the study: (1) What do GSIs report learning through a reflective teaching project based on EP? (2) How do GSIs in a methods course work with and interpret EP?

Together, the two analyses can provide language teacher educators, particularly methods instructors, with a rich picture of the benefits and potential limitations of using EP in FL teacher preparation courses. Additionally, given the varied backgrounds and teaching experiences of the three learning teachers under study, this analysis contributes to a growing discussion of differentiated teacher development within the methods course.<sup>2</sup>

## METHOD

### Participants

The FL teaching methods course in which this study took place consisted of graduate students teaching German and Spanish at a large, public U.S. university. Of the 11 graduate students enrolled in the course, three agreed to be part of the study: Olivia, Esteban, and Paula (all pseudonyms). Table 1 outlines the diverse linguistic backgrounds and teaching and teacher training experiences of the three participants.

	Olivia	Esteban	Paula
Age	24	29	26
Degree sought	M.A. in German	M.A. in Spanish	M.A. in German
Highest degree completed	B.A.	B.A.	M.A. in teaching ( <i>Lehramtsstudium</i> )
Native language(s)	English	Spanish/English	German
Current teaching assignment	Beginning German (second semester)	Beginning Spanish (first semester)	Intermediate German (fourth semester)
Prior teaching	1 year tutoring German; 1 year	Some English tutoring in high	2 years teaching collegiate German in

experiences	teaching high school ESL	school	Austria
Prior teacher education	Online TEFL training course	None	B.A./M.A. in teaching German and English in secondary schools (4.5 years); certificate in German as a FL/SL

*Table 1: The GSI's Background Information*

At the time of data collection, the instructor—also the researcher of the present study—was teaching the methods course to graduate students for the sixth consecutive year and using EP for the first time in the seminar, a decision she made after working with EP in a reflective teaching group in Spring 2010 with more experienced GSIs and language program coordinators (see Crane et al., 2013).

### **Instructional Setting: The Methods Course and the EP Portfolio**

In the EP portfolio developed for the teaching methods course in Fall 2010 (see Appendix A), the GSIs were asked to write five journals over a 15-week semester on a “puzzle” about teaching and learning. In preparation for their individual projects, one class period at the start of the semester was devoted to readings on EP, i.e., Allwright (2003) and Chapter 12 in Allwright & Hanks (2009). In their first journal, graduate students were to write about puzzles that interested them. Following this, the course instructor met with each graduate student individually to provide feedback and discuss potential resources to draw on in developing understanding on their specific topics. In the second and third journals, the GSIs explored their puzzles through various resources typically available to teachers in collegiate environments, i.e., conversations with others, classroom observation, and feedback from students, faculty, or supervisors. For their fourth journal, the GSIs wrote a mini-annotated bibliography of three academic articles. The final reflection was meant to tie together insights gained on the puzzle and reflect on the entire EP process. The portfolio made up 40% of the total course grade.

As a formal assessment tool, EP was used in the methods course in a more structured and guided manner than tends to be characterized in the literature on EP for professional development. First, the graduate students were required to write their experiences for an external audience (the instructor) and try out specific resources for inquiry, including developing an abbreviated literature review. Second, they received regular feedback from the course instructor for the project, including individual guidance in clarifying their puzzle topic. Thus, this study can be described most accurately as a “guided EP” model.

### **Methods of Analysis**

Data collection for the EP project began in Spring 2011 after the methods course officially ended. In addition to the reflection journals, data included a questionnaire

completed after the semester that elicited participants' background information and experiences using EP (see Appendix B).

The three participating GSIs produced on average 28 (double-spaced) pages for their portfolios, which included supplementary surveys and interview questions. Their journals reflected a mix of genres typical of reflective writing found in academic environments, e.g., narrating and reporting events, evaluating and positioning self to emerging theories and understandings, questioning and entertaining ideas, and planning ahead.

Case narratives for the three graduate students were first created to capture the GSIs' evolving beliefs and theories about teaching and learning as they moved through different stages of the EP process. Following this, a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) consisting of complete coding, multiple readings of the data, data- and researcher-derived coding, and pattern identification was undertaken to identify common patterns and recurring themes across the entire data in relationship to the two main research questions. This paper features these two related qualitative analyses. Narrative portraits of the graduate students' experiences are first presented to chronicle their individual experiences using EP and identify the GSIs' developing knowledge base as teachers (RQ 1; see section "Narrative Accounts of the GSIs"). A second analysis addresses the GSIs' integration of EP's main tenets into their reflective practice (RQ 2; see section "GSIs' Realization of EP Principles"). In line with qualitative inquiry methods (Gibbs, 2007), direct voices of the three participants are embedded within the analyses to illustrate and provide evidence for the interpretations. The following abbreviations were used to identify the different data sources cited in the "GSIs' Realization of EP Principles" section: "J" for the EP journals, followed by the journal number (e.g., "J1" to "J5")<sup>3</sup> and "EQ" for the exit questionnaire.

## NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF THE GSIs

### Olivia

Olivia, a 24-year old native speaker of English and first-year M.A. candidate of German literature, came to the course with limited previous teaching experience and teacher education (see Table 1). The methods course was Olivia's first formal training in teaching language in collegiate settings, and this was the first time she was responsible for teaching and grading her own course (second-semester German). Olivia identified herself as a "beginning teacher."

In Olivia's first journal, she entertained potential puzzle topics stemming from her language learning experiences and current teaching assignment, posing a set of questions on the differences between native speaker (NS) and nonnative speaker (NNS) teachers: "Is there a significant difference between how much students learn from a native speaker as opposed to instruction from a non-native?" The puzzle's personal nature soon became evident in Olivia's reflection:

[The students] know I am not a native speaker, and so this makes me wonder if I have credibility in their eyes. I feel really bad when they ask me how some English word is said in German and I am not able to come up with the German equivalent. I feel like I let the student down when I am confronted with the fact that I do not have a native German's rich vocabulary in my head or a native German's natural intuition.

In a subsequent one-on-one meeting with Olivia, the course instructor discovered her questions came from a recent teaching situation where Olivia noted a lack of confidence in teaching prepositions. In their conversation, they discussed reframing the puzzle so as to explore the source of Olivia's insecurities (prepositions) rather than focusing on her status as a NNS through a deficiency lens. In her second journal, Olivia's puzzle took on new shape as she asked: "Why are [prepositions] difficult to teach and learn in a foreign language?" This was a question Olivia felt would also address her initial interest in how to further a teacher's "intuition" of language, "especially for non-native speakers."

In this second journal, Olivia interviewed three experienced graduate student teachers about their experiences teaching prepositions in German and found she was "not alone in having difficulty." While one NNS teacher surprised Olivia by stating that teaching prepositions was not difficult for him, the other two (a NS and NNS) agreed with Olivia and offered their own theories for their difficulty. In reflecting on these conversations, Olivia connected her peers' views to discussions and readings from the methods course, such as the role of repetition in classroom discourse to promote internalization of linguistic forms.

In her third journal, Olivia interviewed five peers from the methods course focusing on learning—rather than teaching—prepositions. Olivia saw "two interesting themes" emerge across the interviews: a "lack of one-to-one equivalency between prepositions in L1 and L2," and the difference between having students "lear[n] rules versus having them appl[y] them in conversation." In this reflection, Olivia responded to her colleagues' ideas while presenting her own developing theories on the best conditions for learning prepositions. She noted, for example, the importance of introducing prepositions as chunks to be memorized, using songs as mnemonic devices, and encouraging students to develop unique explanations about preposition use. She also discussed at length the importance of using the language in "continuous conversation (listening and producing) with a native speaker" through which "one can really get a firmer grasp on prepositions."

In the fourth journal, she turned to four articles on teaching and learning prepositions that gave her "information that [she] had never really thought about before." In her annotated bibliography and accompanying critical synthesis of the articles, she connected new insights with course readings on SLA theories in a critical and contrastive way, stating clearly how her own viewpoints figured in within this dialogue. In these articles, she found confirmation for her developing theory about the powerful learning potential of memorization in learning prepositions, discovered how pictorials could be used to teach the forms, and learned how common it was for FL learners to avoid producing prepositions in spoken discourse.

Throughout the project, Olivia approached the puzzle with much interest, took the assignments seriously, and persistently synthesized her understandings against her fellow teachers and the course readings to establish her own theories of learning prepositions. Yet, in most of these reflections, her own learners were curiously absent. As she did not write about her learners or classroom, she displayed no sign of developing this part of her classroom understanding. Instead, Olivia's puzzle led her to develop new insights about language, language learning and teaching, and especially herself as a foreign language teacher.

As Olivia developed knowledge about learning and teaching prepositions, allusions to her initial question regarding her perceived teaching/linguistic competence as a NNS of German continued to surface. Indeed, this underlying puzzle hidden in the shadows revealed itself subtly in continued references to NNS teachers as subordinate to NSs, e.g., "A non-

native speaking teacher must also tread lightly when it comes to relaying information from his or her intuition of the language” (J2); and “As a non-native speaker, one rarely ever attains perfection” (J5). Through conversations with her peers, Olivia learned of strategies for preventing and coping with moments of insecurity regarding language competence, citing two key take-away recommendations: always come prepared to class able to anticipate student questions, and rely on the authority of the book when questions arise. With such assurances in place, Olivia’s understanding of language proficiency appears to have transformed itself from one rooted in a NS ideal to one equated with a “pedagogic proficiency” within reach of a NNS. Despite the continued focus on her NNS status throughout the EP project, Olivia noted that more than anything the experience had “made [her] more aware of [herself] as a proficient speaker of German, which maintain[ed] [her] confidence as a teacher of the language” (EQ). Her improved self-esteem as a competent teacher of German was similarly visible in her final journal where she identified herself for the first time as “an advanced non-native speaker” who could “certainly draw on [her] advanced knowledge ... about a preposition and its use” (J5). Thus, through her more concrete and foregrounded puzzle on prepositions, Olivia was able to continue exploring her initial questions about self-worth as a NNS teacher and, importantly, find productive ways to deal with teaching aspects of language that she found personally challenging as well as build her confidence as a teacher.

## Esteban

Esteban, who identified as a Spanish-English bilingual, had no previous teacher education beyond a three-day teaching orientation for Spanish GSIs before the semester began. Initially, his puzzle was closely tied to his own childhood experiences in learning English as a second language when his family emigrated from a South American country to the United States. In his first reflection, Esteban wrote of his desire to “inspire [his] students to appreciate the value of knowing a second language” and sought to “explore how [he] [could] help [his] students get more out of their experience by relating it to [his] own.” The Spanish program where Esteban was teaching had a strict target-language-only policy, which led Esteban to see similarities between his and his students’ language learning experiences. Specifically, he was concerned about “no option of getting things explained in the L1 (at least during class time for my students)” and empathized with his students’ experiences: “I had a native speaker talking to me at a rate I could not understand, and at times I feel that I really need to slow and simplify my speech for students to get the gist of what I say in class.” Because his puzzle was “about finding a way to inspire [his] students through [his] own experiences,” Esteban planned to involve his own students in the inquiry though he was “not exactly sure how to go about it yet.”

In his individual meeting with the course instructor, Esteban revealed the source of his inquiry, namely that he was worried how his status as a NS of Spanish was impacting his students’ ability to comprehend him. In his second journal, he formulated a more specific puzzle that would “serv[e] to maintain focus on the student experience while also taking into account what [he] [could] do to improve [his] teaching.” The puzzle became: “What do my students understand?” Esteban reported that just “awareness of [his] puzzle” was beginning to help him deal with certain problems in the classroom. With this new “heightened awareness,” Esteban observed himself “paying attention to [his] students’ reactions in class,” repeating his language more, and pondering how to simplify his language in terms of



syntactic structures and vocabulary. “Using these techniques,” he reported, “I have been able to improve my connection with the students, and also maximize the opportunities for me to know when they understand.”

Similar to Olivia, Esteban looked to fellow teachers for guidance and received practical advice on “visual aids and more interactive activities” to support student comprehension. Esteban wrote that “by far, the best thing to come from [the] conversation was [his colleague’s] comment about noting that it is easy to see that students understand when they are having fun with the material.” This idea provided “inspiration” for Esteban’s puzzle, as he wrote that his “puzzle [was] developing into a study of what is fun for students in [his] class.” For the next EP reflection, he planned to investigate this part of the puzzle with his students.

A month later in his third reflection, however, Esteban was forced to change his plans as “class morale took a downward turn shortly before the midterm and worsened after it.” Students were concerned about grades, had expressed frustration with Esteban in understanding the material, and displayed “non-cooperative classroom behavior,” primarily in the form of speaking English. To Esteban, it was clear this resistance to speaking the target language was “a sign that ‘fun’ was not happening and understanding was in jeopardy.” At this mid-point, Esteban was observed by his teaching supervisor. Despite not feeling as prepared as he normally was and his students acting especially “challenging” on the day of the observation, Esteban saw the value in getting helpful feedback for his classroom and elected to use the observation as an opportunity to explore his puzzle. His supervisor pointed out that Esteban’s input was primarily oral and recommended using more visual aids so that he “would not have to talk so much.” She also recommended changing the seating arrangement to deal with distracting side conversations. Following this discussion, Esteban created PowerPoint presentations with images from the Internet, “an extremely simple way,” as he put it, “of getting the students to talk and easily understandable.” He also began “writing out the activities to be completed for class on overhead transparencies,” and found that through this preparation, he was “more able to elicit examples from the students” and could “continue to monitor them” since he was now facing them.

In his fourth reflection, he summarized three articles on teacher talk, communicative teaching styles, and student attitudes towards communicative and non-communicative activities. While he did not integrate these articles directly into his puzzle in this reflection, he noted in the final journal how the articles “validated the relevance of [his] puzzle in the teaching profession,” and “gave [him] ideas about how [he] could measure the ‘enjoyment’ of certain activities or attitudes toward different communication styles,” which he planned to do in his future classes.

In investigating his puzzle on student comprehension, Esteban reported developing understanding in three related areas: language teaching, awareness of his learners, and his own development as a language teacher. In contrast to Olivia, he made little reference to language learning theories or linguistic knowledge in his reflections.

Esteban cited greatest gains in his comfort level in the classroom and in his actual teaching. Awareness of his puzzle, he noted, “almost immediately had an impact on [his] teaching” (J5), as it “helped to organize and pace [his] classes” (J2) as well as forced him to observe his learners more closely. Similar to Olivia, Esteban felt the EP experience helped him step more comfortably into the role of teacher: “The focus on my teaching and the improvements I made over the semester led me to feel less stressed about being a teacher of

language” (EQ).

## Paula

In contrast to Olivia and Esteban, Paula had extensive teaching and teacher training experience, having successfully completed her *Lehrstudium* (an M.A. degree to teach German and English in secondary schools in Austria), earning an additional teaching certificate for German as a second language, and having taught college-level German classes in Europe for international students, including Americans. During the time of the study, she was teaching a fourth-semester, content-based German course on Austria.

Already in Paula’s first journal, it was clear she was interested in exploring big educational issues, as she asked the following “underlying basic question” in a long “Question Catalogue” of 19 sub-questions: “How is it even possible to reconcile [the] two seemingly contradicting and conflicting principles of *standardization and individualized language learning* that are constantly discussed by learners, teachers and scholars?” This was a question that Paula came to through systematic analysis of “collect[ing] ... questions, select[ing] the most useful ones, revis[ing] them and finally, link[ing] [them] to [her] chosen topic and grouping them into smaller thematic units.” Paula was especially interested in working with her class on her puzzle and planned to develop short questionnaires to elicit her students’ perspectives.

In written feedback on her first journal and in a one-on-one meeting, her methods instructor encouraged Paula to consider more concretely how she might investigate in her own classroom and with her own learners her questions regarding the tensions between teacher autonomy and program standardization. In her next journal, Paula decided to refocus her questions in light of developing “localized understanding,” one of EP’s guiding principles, deciding to look to the main pedagogical approach informing her current course assignment, content-based instruction (CBI). Paula’s new puzzle became: “How do you teach content through language and how do you teach language through content?,” a question she noted in her second journal as “relevant [...] for both [her] and [her] students.”

For her second journal, Paula interviewed another GSI who had taught the same course on Austria and was investigating CBI for her Ph.D. work. Paula was interested in hearing an insider perspective and probed her fellow teacher’s thoughts about perceived benefits and challenges of CBI, and the extent to which the department’s German course on Austria could be considered truly content-based. Through this exchange, Paula learned about the teacher’s burden of having to know both language and content, the difficulty for learners in transitioning from traditional language courses to content-based ones, and challenges in assessing content-based learning in university language programs.

In Paula’s third journal, she surveyed her own students directly through a questionnaire about their perceptions of the course, adding four questions that targeted her students’ understanding of content-based language learning to an existing informal mid-semester survey instrument used in the lower-division German curriculum. To Paula’s surprise, she discovered that “most of [the students] showed a good understanding” of the goals of the course. Much of the reflection consisted of Paula considering her learners’ perspectives—empathizing with their complaints of a heavier workload in the course and having to do more “grammar work” on their own. As Paula processed the student responses in this reflection, new questions appeared, including: “How can we guide our students in studying

independently and how can we raise their awareness with regard to self-responsible learning?” This led her to acknowledge how “demanding and challenging” it is for students to learn simultaneously language and content. She also reflected on the course’s structure and materials, referring back to recent conversations with the program director about the lower-division curriculum.

For the fourth journal, Paula read three articles on CBI, two of which represented studies on teaching practitioners’ experiences with the approach. In her reflection, Paula revealed a new appreciation for the “knowledge and know-how” required of teachers “to successfully and professionally integrate and implement CBI curricula.” She also found confirmation for her initial hypotheses that CBI motivates learners and connected insights from the new articles to readings from the methods course, e.g., how engaging L2 learners with complex content matter can foster complex language use (Kong, 2009), a point that “reminded [her] of [...] Donato & Brooks (2004),” an assigned course reading on supporting advanced L2 speaking abilities in FL undergraduate coursework.

In Paula’s final reflection, she reported that the EP process “deepened [her] own understanding on a topic [she] found personally relevant for [her] [...] growth as a FL teacher” and noted “the greatest pleasure and the best moments” in the connections “between [her] research and [her] everyday teaching experience.” Throughout Paula’s reflection, she integrated the different voices of the individuals she came into contact with, especially those of her learners.

Paula, the most experienced of the three GSIs, wrote comparatively little about her own personal development as a teacher. Instead, her reported learning gains from the EP project came primarily in the form of deepened knowledge of teaching and learning in CBI, including from a broader curricular perspective (e.g., thinking about course design and the interlinking of thematic units) and greater understanding of her learners within this instructional context (e.g., becoming cognizant of her students’ struggles in learning grammar more independently and of the cognitive demands inherent in the instructional approach). Paula’s developing knowledge about CBI also related to decision-making at the course and curricular level, as she drew on multiple viewpoints (of her students, fellow CBI teacher, and coordinator) to consider how best to support student learning. By the end of the EP project, Paula was able to articulate several benefits and challenges of CBI from learner and teacher vantage points, as well as provide informed recommendations for successful implementation of CBI for teachers and course developers.

## **Reported Learning Outcomes through EP**

All three GSIs created successful EP projects that demonstrated an ability to connect theory and practice continuously and recursively as well as a commitment to developing personally-meaningful knowledge about learning and teaching, though in different ways. Analysis of the GSIs’ reported learning outcomes revealed six major areas related to teacher knowledge and abilities (summarized in Table 2). While individual differences arose among the graduate students, most salient and most frequently reported in all three GSIs’ journals was increased knowledge about language teaching, visible in reference to learning new techniques for the classroom (Olivia and Esteban) and deepened understanding of particular pedagogical approaches (Paula).

Understandings about ...	Olivia	Esteban	Paula
Language teaching	✓	✓	✓
Language learning (including SLA theories)	✓	--	✓
Nature of language	✓	--	--
Language learners	--	✓	✓
Course and curricular structures	--	--	✓
The GSIs as language teachers	✓	✓	--

*Table 2: Reported Learning Outcomes among the GSIs*

A key theme from the analysis concerns differences between the novice and more experienced GSIs in conducting EP. Perhaps not surprisingly, analysis of the GSIs' learning outcomes reflects the spaces in which these teachers chose to conduct their reflective practice. Olivia and Esteban, the two more novice learning teachers, looked to their communities of fellow teachers in their new graduate departments to learn about teacher expectations and classroom ideas (Olivia) and develop strategies for interpreting student comprehension (Esteban). In contrast, Paula drew on her classroom and the larger curricular context—in addition to her teaching peers—in order to develop insights on her new content-based course, thereby embodying EP's principle of localized understanding most closely.

## THE GSIs' REALIZATION OF EP PRINCIPLES

To understand how well the GSIs worked with the EP framework as a “continuously cyclical process of global and local thought and action” (Allwright, 2003, p. 114), the GSIs' written reflections and background questionnaires were analyzed against the seven guiding principles recommended for EP (Allwright, 2003, 2005). Because the GSIs had considerable autonomy in how they approached their puzzles (see Appendix A for portfolio guidelines), the analysis provides valuable insight into what aspects of EP new GSIs grasp and gravitate toward in the methods course and how they make use of available resources, including their own classrooms.<sup>4</sup>

### Principle 1: Put Quality of Life First

Allwright (2003) describes this first principle about life in (and beyond) the classroom as the most important for reflective practitioners to remember while puzzling. All three GSIs expressed interest and concern for the wellbeing of their classes, with differences emerging in regards to the GSIs' prior teaching experience.

Olivia and Esteban's initial, deeply-personal puzzles revealed a strong interest in interpersonal dimensions of life in the classroom and their lives as teachers figured prominently in their reflections. Both learning teachers also expressed a desire to build relationships with their students and reported finding particular comfort in learning new teaching techniques and strategies to make their teaching easier, leading by extension to a more harmonious classroom culture. Paula and Esteban extended the notion of classroom life to their students as they frequently expressed interest in learning more about their learners' experiences. For Paula, the notion of quality of life applied especially to her students, particularly evident in the steps she took to investigate their opinions of the class

and seen in her ongoing interest in how structural aspects of the course syllabus related to student needs.

## **Principle 2: Work Primarily to Understand Classroom Life**

The second principle, with its prioritized focus on *understanding* over *improvement* in reflective practice, ran throughout all the reflections, with the greatest number of instances coded for this principle for all three GSIs. While the data do not reveal the extent to which understanding was prioritized in the GSIs' EP work, the mere existence of the puzzles the GSIs created and probed shows these learning teachers as interested in and committed to understanding classroom life, e.g., in trying to understand the difficulty of learning and teaching grammar (Olivia), their students' needs (Esteban), or how certain instructional approaches work in their classes (Paula).

As Allwright & Hanks (2009) note, the EP framework is not opposed to *change* in the classroom, but rather acknowledges that improvements can happen through sustained work toward understanding. For Esteban, mere awareness of his new puzzle served as a catalyst for developing his teaching: "I have learned that sometimes a simple question to keep in mind while teaching can lead to bigger answers that have definite impacts on how I conduct class and on the effectiveness of my lessons" (J5).

Considering that understanding must involve effort on the part of the practitioner (Allwright, 2003), instances of dialoguing with other voices were also looked to as evidence for moments of *working to understand classroom life*. All three GSIs displayed regular interactions with other viewpoints in the form of validating and confirming theories (Olivia, Paula), entertaining and in some cases adopting new insights (Olivia, Esteban, Paula), questioning previously held assumptions (Olivia, Paula), empathizing with their learners (Esteban, Paula), making connections to insights outside of the EP project (Olivia, Paula), and simply wondering out loud (Olivia, Esteban, Paula). In sum, the three GSIs engaged actively in reflection and knowledge construction with others to deepen their understanding about teaching and learning.

## **Principle 3: Involve Everybody**

EP was originally conceived as an inclusive practitioner research model that would break down barriers between researchers and teachers, as well as between teachers and learners. The ways in which the GSIs invited others to participate in their puzzles were quite divergent, resulting in differences between the two novice GSIs (Olivia and Esteban) on the one hand and the more experienced GSI (Paula) on the other.

Olivia drew on faculty, peers, and scholarly literature to investigate her puzzle. Notably missing, however, were her learners in the EP process. Despite expressing deep concern for what her students thought of her as a teacher (J1), interviewing other graduate students about their learning experiences (J2, J3), and becoming increasingly interested in learner-centered pedagogies (J3, J4), Olivia never wrote about her own classroom or her students and did not seem to be aware that her own students should be part of the EP model, with no discussion of future plans to actively involve them in her reflective practice.

Esteban showed a similar pattern of exclusion to Olivia. However, unlike Olivia, he involved two of his teaching supervisors in his puzzle, who were able to provide him with

helpful information about student comprehension through class observation (J3). Although Esteban had initially planned to interview his students (J2), the crisis moment following his supervisory teaching observation forced him to redirect his attention to other aspects of instruction. In effect, maintaining *quality of classroom life* (EP principle 1) by addressing immediate classroom needs appears here to have trumped this third principle of inclusivity. At the end of the project, Esteban hoped to elicit feedback from students the following semester (J5).

In stark contrast to the two novice GSIs, Paula's EP work was consistently centered on her learners' experiences with CBI, and she drew on a wide resource of individuals to deepen her understanding of her classroom. Right from the start, Paula expressed interest in involving her students in the process (J1), and her third journal, where she reported on the results of the student survey, contained numerous student quotes that she identified as representative statements for the class. She found "analyzing the students' answers" to be the most powerful part of the EP process (EQ) and hoped to collect more data from her students with new, follow-up questions. While Paula's students participated in the survey and it was clear she considered their comments thoughtfully, there is, however, no evidence in her written reflections that she shared the results of the questionnaire with her students or that they were aware of her puzzle on CBI, beyond the four additional questions she included on the program's standard mid-semester survey.

Curiously, outside of program coordinators and teaching supervisors, the three GSIs did not involve faculty from their home departments in investigating their puzzles. The GSIs may have been more comfortable or expected to find more relevant insights in consulting with methods instructors and coordinators who were familiar with their specific teaching assignments. Nevertheless, professors' absence in the study also suggests continued disparity between lower-division language programs and upper-division content courses for which collegiate FL departments in the U.S. are unfortunately all too well known (MLA Report, 2007).

### **Principles 4 and 5: Work to Bring People Together. Work for Mutual Development**

Principles 4 and 5, both focused on developing collegiality and supporting others in understanding teaching and learning, were minimally addressed in the GSIs' written reflections. Little evidence—with the notable exception of Paula's survey—could be found to show that learners were directly involved in the teachers' EP projects. This finding may not be all that surprising when one considers that the data used for the present analysis consisted of reflections written by teachers, not learners. All three GSIs were very interested in developing rapport with their students and ensuring that their learners had a positive learning experience in their classrooms. Moreover, they saw the EP work as directly benefiting their students through improvements in their own teaching (Esteban) and an expanded knowledge base of foreign language pedagogy (Paula).

### **Principle 6: Integrate the Work for Understanding into the Classroom Practice**

Principle 6 focuses on working with existing resources, especially those found within the classroom, to develop understanding by minimizing the burden on teachers and learners in reflective work. In the EP literature (e.g., Allwright & Hanks, 2009), teachers are encouraged

to look to pedagogical tools they already use in their own teaching for help in developing understanding about classroom life. Yet, little use of “Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities” (PEPAs)—e.g., class discussion, pair work activities, or homework—could be found among the three GSIs in their EP projects. Only Paula entertained early on in her project ways to solicit her students’ participation, considering “discussion, or an activity in class” (Paula, J2) alongside “small questionnaires,” a more research-oriented tool that she ultimately opted for.

Despite not drawing on their own pedagogic activities for their puzzles, two of the teachers did tap into resources made available to them through their language departments: Paula’s questionnaire and Esteban’s class observations. Thus, the spirit of this EP principle was realized primarily in terms of *curricular* resources available to the GSIs, rather than as *pedagogical* activities teachers are familiar with in classroom practice.

### **Principle 7: Make the Work a Continuous Enterprise**

The seventh EP principle, which addresses the ability to sustain EP over time, is difficult to assess here given the short duration (i.e., one semester) of teacher participation in the study. In this analysis, therefore, sustainability of reflective practice was measured in terms of continuous engagement during the EP project and the teachers’ stated plans for reflective practice after the methods course.

Evidence for this principle was found in all three GSIs’ reflections in three key ways: (1) ongoing puzzle development over the semester (Olivia, Esteban, and Paula), (2) the development of a toolbox of teaching techniques for future teaching (Olivia and Esteban), and (3) interest in pursuing new questions following the EP project (Olivia and Esteban). For her new German teaching assignment the following semester, Olivia expressed interest in now “trying to think of ways to get [her] students to speak more” (EQ). “Going forward,” Esteban wrote in his last EP journal that he “would like to explore this idea of targeted speech input,” a topic that brought him “back to [his] original puzzle about [his] bilingualism and how it can be used to the benefit of [his] students” (J5). While Paula did not articulate any new puzzles to explore, she expected to “integrate [her] understanding of the puzzle in the classroom” in future semesters (J5).

Despite the overall positive experiences working with EP that the GSIs reported throughout the project, two of the GSIs (Esteban and Paula) noted in their end questionnaires that time limitations would play a decisive role in their ability to participate in any future EP group. Esteban explained how he envisioned balancing his work as a graduate student and teacher: “I would be more willing to treat [EP] as a passive project, more in the background of the teaching process” (EQ). Paula, while expressing desire for a more “intense” EP project in the methods course with other course assignments lessened (EQ), wrote that participation in future EP groups would “depend on [her] schedules and the time [she] ha[s] within these schedules” (EQ). Thus, contrary to EP’s original goal to provide a sustainable way for teachers to reflect on their practice (Allwright, 2005), these statements reveal the GSIs’ interpretations of EP as a valuable yet still time-consuming practitioner research model.

## DISCUSSION

The qualitative analyses presented above confirm that the teaching methods course for graduate students serves diverse GSIs who differ in regards to prior teaching experiences and teacher education (novice to more experienced) and speaker status relative to the target language (native speaker, nonnative speaker, bilingual).

Because both new teachers (Olivia and Esteban) wrote about new strategies, tools, and methods for instruction in their reflections, it may seem at first glance as if they were practicing EP from a “technicist” mindset that favors practical problem-solving over understanding, an approach that EP practitioners generally try to avoid (Allwright, 2005). Indeed, Esteban wrote more than once about solving problems in his teaching, and both Esteban and Olivia wrote enthusiastically about new techniques to aid in the classroom. From a developmental standpoint, however, these novice teachers may have needed this more practical knowledge as a means for “mediating” (Childs, 2011; Johnson, 2009) their developing teacher knowledge. Theories on developmental stages of teachers (Sprague & Nyquist, 1991) have suggested that learning teachers go through a developmental process of shifting focus on self and survival to awareness of learners’ needs and larger curricular matters. Seen from this light, it is perhaps not surprising that the two novice teachers chose to center their puzzles on themselves (as in Olivia’s case) or urgent classroom matters (as in Esteban’s situation). Certainly, both Olivia and Esteban showed a steady commitment to EP’s focus on seeking to *understand* classroom life just as they were “learning the ropes” as teachers. Moreover, Esteban showed signs of developing deeper understanding about the nature of his puzzle through the various adjustments he made in his teaching.

The case studies thus suggest that it may take some time for those new to teaching to understand and fully integrate EP values into their reflective practice. While the GSIs all showed evidence of embracing the first two and most central principles of EP (*Put quality of life first* and *Work primarily for understanding*), they attended as a group much less to principles 3, 4, and 5 that focus on inclusivity and collegiality and assume learners to be “key learning practitioners” (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 235). Only the most experienced GSI, Paula, succeeded in actually drawing her learners into her inquiry, as Esteban was forced to refocus attention on particular aspects of his teaching following a supervisory visit, and Olivia avoided her learners’ participation in the project altogether. Several reasons may explain why Olivia as a novice teacher did not include her students in her puzzle, e.g., avoidance of potential face-threatening acts that might call into question her authority as teacher, a desire to maintain harmony in her classroom, or survival strategies for the first semester of college-level teaching. Allwright (2003) and Breen (2006) point out that EP is concerned foremost with getting teachers’ lives right. It may be the case that some language teachers—particularly novice ones—may need special guidance or support in thinking how to invite their learners into their reflective practice; or they may not be quite ready for that step in their teaching, as discussed in the literature on “stage” theories of teacher development (Sprague & Nyquist, 1991; Hammersness et al., 2004).<sup>5</sup>

Of course, given the demands put upon graduate students to balance their teaching with full lives as M.A. and Ph.D. candidates, not only is expecting GSIs to “involve everybody” within a semester-long reflective teaching project not particularly viable, but such an expectation might run counter to EP’s concern for minimizing burden in the lives of teachers and learners (Allwright, 2005). Nevertheless, looking at who is and is *not* invited to the discussion and what their participant roles look like can tell language teacher educators



much about the comfort level of learning teachers (especially GSIs) and the benefit they see different actors involved in classroom learning potentially offering to the learning and teaching enterprise. While the learners were mostly absent in the puzzles, all three GSIs did seek out advice and insight from fellow instructors. This latter observation is corroborated in studies on graduate student teacher education that point to the important mentoring role peer teachers offer each other (Bourns & Melin, 2014; Brandl, 2000; Mills & Allen, 2008) and is further supported in research on the integral role that teaching communities play in the development of expertise in language teaching (Tsui, 2003).

Olivia's experience with EP in particular highlights the challenges and anxieties that NNS learning teachers may encounter in teaching FLs, especially for the first time (Horwitz, 1996; Mills & Allen, 2008; Thomas, 1999). Her enduring "shadow puzzle," which was arguably just as much about Olivia as a language *learner* as it was about her as a language teacher, reminds methods instructors of the complex identity issues that can impact teachers' reflective work as well as lead to the development of specific teacher knowledge.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Though the three case studies represent a typical cross-section of GSIs in terms of native speaker status, prior teaching experiences, and prior teacher education, the study is localized and therefore caution is needed in extending the findings to larger populations. Future research could expand the scope of investigation to track multiple GSIs' experiences using EP. Additionally, longitudinal studies on reflective practice that continue beyond the methods course (see, e.g., Crookes & Chandler 2001, who studied the use of action research during and after a methods course) would provide important information as to what extent and under which circumstances GSIs might continue EP on their own or with others, an especially relevant concern given the framework's goal of sustainable reflective practice.

Because the study presents the teachers' experiences only, the constellations of participation among the GSIs' learners, their peers, and anyone else potentially involved in the puzzle could not be accounted for in this analysis. Future research on EP that attempts to capture these larger networks can show how principles 3-5 on mutual learning in particular are met.

Finally, the study brings to light several questions that could not be explored due to space constraints but would contribute to understanding how EP and related reflective teaching models function within official teacher preparation coursework. These include the GSIs' evolving discourse surrounding their reflective work (e.g., in negotiating the language of puzzling with that of problem-solving, as observed in Esteban's reflections) and the mentoring relationship between GSI and methods instructor in the EP process, especially during the puzzle formation stage.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE METHODS COURSE AND BEYOND

Since the method course is likely to continue to be one of the few, if only, occasions for formal instruction in pedagogy that GSIs will receive during their graduate study (Bourns & Melin, 2014),<sup>6</sup> the course must consider thoughtfully how to provide GSIs at all levels of experience with meaningful opportunities to grow as informed, reflective teachers. Using EP in the methods course, as shown here, can support GSIs who enter new programs with

different backgrounds and teaching and learning experiences to explore and develop understanding about issues that are developmentally appropriate and personally meaningful.

That the teachers did not report on integrating their puzzles into their own instruction may be due to the ease and availability of using certain curricular tools (e.g., established surveys and teaching observations), and, by contrast, the relative unfamiliarity in identifying class activities that could be used to tap into learners' feedback. Thus, GSIs in methods courses might benefit from learning about appropriate learning activity types to use with their students. Having an arsenal of concrete activities that make space for learners' voices can help beginning language teachers understand better the nature of learner-centered instruction and thereby address the oft-heard wish among beginning learning teachers for more practical teaching guidance in methods coursework (Bourns & Melin, 2014).<sup>7</sup>

FL graduate departments can play an important mentoring role in providing their instructors with resources to learn about teaching and learning and in promoting such tools and practices as part of their own culture, e.g., by encouraging GSIs to see formal teaching observations by supervisors as occasions to practice reflective inquiry and to understand informal student feedback as part of expected best practices. Tsui (2003) identifies "constant engagement in exploration and experimentation" (p. 277) as a key characteristic of (language) teacher expertise. For graduate students who are juggling many professional identities in addition to teaching (e.g., student, scholar/researcher, departmental member), regular reflection on one's teaching is likely to be best ensured through institutionally-framed groups that provide continued structural support to teachers (see Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Crane et al., 2013; Lyra et al., 2003).

The EP portfolio—by foregrounding choice in exploration—provides one way to support individual reflective practice at a pace and place where the learning teachers are. For the methods instructor, the project offers a way to index GSIs' concerns about the classroom, their developing knowledge base as language teachers, and their socialization into their graduate programs and the wider teaching profession.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 8th Annual International Conference on Language Teacher Education in Washington, DC (May 2013). I am grateful to Darcy Lear for her insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Above all, I would like to thank the three graduate students who participated in the study and through whom I was able to further my own understanding of the learning-to-teach process.

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## Appendix A: Exploratory Practice Portfolio Guidelines

An important goal of this pedagogy seminar is to introduce novice teachers to sustainable reflective teaching practices that they can use beyond the teaching methods course. In the seminar, you will have the opportunity to deepen your understanding of classroom life through the creation and presentation of a portfolio that is rooted in the reflective teaching model *Exploratory Practice* (Allwright, 2003). This project will allow you to explore topics and questions that are personally meaningful to you as a teacher.

### What is Exploratory Practice?

Dick Allwright, a language teacher educator, developed Exploratory Practice (EP) in response to his own dissatisfaction with Action Research and the difficult demands he found it placed on teachers. Exploratory Practice is meant to support **ongoing** teacher reflection without leading to teacher burnout. In the model, there are no “problems” or “solutions” to teaching. Rather, everything is framed in terms of “puzzles” that teachers work to understand better. Seven main principles guide the practice:

1. Put quality of life first.
2. Work primarily to understand language classroom life.
3. Involve everybody.
4. Work to bring people together.
5. Work also for mutual development.
6. Integrate the work for understanding into the classroom practice.
7. Make the work a continuous enterprise.

### The EP Portfolio Guidelines

Reflection #1: Description of your “puzzle”

**September 8**

*This reflection should focus on topics and questions you would like to learn more about. Please expound on why you are interested in the topic or have the questions you have. Do they come from past learning or teaching experiences? Do they come from other conversations with teachers? Or are you just curious about them for curiosity’s sake? Please write approximately 2-3 pages (double-spaced).*

Meet individually with the professor to discuss your puzzle and your plans for the portfolio project

**September 12-16**

Reflections #2 and #3: Interview, Observation, or Feedback

**October 4 and 25**

- Interview with an experienced teacher from your home department
- Classroom observation: Self, peer teachers, faculty from your home department
- Feedback from students, faculty, or supervisor

*Please choose one of the above for the two reflections. In order to develop a more balanced look at your puzzle, do not draw on the same category (i.e., interview/conversation, observation, feedback) for both reflective pieces. Please describe the nature of the conversation, observation, or feedback; and what you found personally relevant. What did you learn about your learners, the learning process, or teaching through this interaction? How is your puzzle growing? Where is your puzzle taking you now? Please write approximately 3-4 pages (double-spaced).*

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**Reflection #4: Mini-annotated bibliography with reflection****November 15**

*For this reflection, you will look to scholarly literature to expand and deepen your knowledge about your puzzle. Peer-reviewed journal articles are likely to be the most appropriate sources for finding meaningful work on your topic. Articles may be about pedagogical ideas, empirical studies, and/or theoretical work. Please make sure that the works selected for the annotations are relevant to your puzzle. Annotations should include the full citation (in APA format) and be both descriptive and evaluative/critical.*

*Following your three annotations, you will write a short reflection about the process and insights gained from reading into the literature. What new perspectives does this literature open you up to? Which pieces did you find most relevant? Why? What are you learning about your puzzle? Did you find confirmation for certain thoughts or theories you had been developing on your puzzle? Did you find surprising insights? Do you think you will integrate these insights into your own classroom?*

*Each annotation should be approximately 1-1.5 pages long (double-spaced). The reflection should be approximately 2-3 pages long (double-spaced).*

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**Reflection #5: Final Reflection****December 1**

*The final reflection for the portfolio should provide you with an opportunity to survey, evaluate, and understand your reflective teaching process over the semester. In the reflection, please describe: (1) what you initially set out to learn, (2) what you learned through the various assignments (or through the use of other, outside resources) about your puzzle, and (3) how you expect to integrate the insights into your current and future teaching. Please write approximately 3-6 pages (double-spaced).*

## Appendix B: Exit Questionnaire

### *A. Background Information*

1. Name
2. Age
3. Your native language(s)
4. Department
5. Area of study
6. Current degree sought (please check one):  M.A.       Ph.D.
7. Previous Language Teaching Experiences. Please specify: (1) the language taught; (2) the institution where you taught (e.g., high school, summer camp, college, etc.); (3) the instructional level you taught (e.g., beginning, intermediate, advanced); and (4) when you taught:
8. Any additional teaching experiences. Please specify: when, what, and where you taught:
9. Previous teacher training and education. Please note any courses or workshops you have taken previous to this semester on teaching:

### *B. Reflections on the Exploratory Practice Project (Fall 2010)*

1. What were your most and least favorite aspects of the EP project? Which reflections were easiest to carry out, which ones most challenging?
2. Did you experience any “Aha!” moments during the EP project that deepened your understanding of the puzzle?
3. Do any questions still remain for you about the topic you selected?
4. Has this project led you to new insights in other parts of your life (e.g., academic work, outside activities, etc.)?
5. Have you integrated, or do you expect to integrate your understanding of the puzzle into future classroom teaching? If so, how have you done so, or plan to do so?

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<sup>1</sup> Adopted from Wright (2010), the term *learning teacher* is used here to refer to any individual who is learning to teach, e.g., in teacher education programs or under programmatic supervision/mentorship. Thus, graduate students instructors—whether novice or more experienced practitioners—fall under the larger category of *learning teachers*. In this manuscript, the term is preferred to *apprenticing teacher* so as to highlight the developmental nature of learning to teach.

<sup>2</sup> Much of the research on FL teaching methods coursework has studied course content through comparative analyses of syllabi and foreign language education programs (Huhn, 2012; Hlas & Conroy, 2012; Uber Grosse, 1993; Wilbur, 2007). Because this research is largely concerned with the preparation of secondary school teachers, rather than future collegiate FL instructors (see, however, Bourns & Melin, 2014), there remains a great need to understand how learning happens in graduate-level FL pedagogy seminars.

<sup>3</sup> The five EP journals were spaced out over the 15-week semester in three-week intervals. See Appendix A for exact dates.

<sup>4</sup> The analysis addresses only those thoughts and experiences reported on by the writers. It is therefore possible that certain principles not explicitly referenced in the GSIs' written data nonetheless represented areas of concern or interest for them.

<sup>5</sup> Research also points to the difficulty more advanced instructors may experience in integrating learners into their reflective practice. Childs (2011), for example, describes how Daniel, a more experienced ESL teacher, initially struggled to elicit feedback from his students noting the “very vulnerable position” (p. 122) he felt in his own classroom.

<sup>6</sup> Although some collegiate FL departments have reported offering—and requiring—advanced pedagogy coursework for their graduate students (e.g., Byrnes, 2001), by and large such programmatic efforts appear to be in the minority. In surveying collegiate FL methods instructors' departmental teacher training practices, Bourns & Melin (2014) found that among the 55 respondents only “a few departments offer additional courses or certificates beyond the methods course” (p. 93).

<sup>7</sup> In the researcher's current methods course, adjustments to the EP portfolio project were made in order to account for these gaps, including brainstorming with seminar participants concrete ways to invite their students into the EP process through meaning-based pedagogical activities.