

A REFLECTIVE PERSPECTIVE FOR THE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS OF THE DISCIPLINE *FLT METHODOLOGY* AT “FÉLIX VARELA” PEDAGOGICAL UNIVERSITY

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One of the crucial factors in the success of learning anything depends on what the learners themselves bring to the learning situation. As psychologists assert, learning is more efficient when the learner interacts with what has to be learned in a particular situation.

Following this assumption, one of the latest tendencies in teacher's education (teacher training and teacher development) is based on a reflective model. The philosophy behind this approach is to provide teachers with a controlled teaching experience and a chance to consider the nature of teaching thoughtfully and objectively (Richards, Jack C. Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics; 1997).

Teachers of Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) Methodology at “Félix Varela” Pedagogical University have experienced the need to introduce reflective teaching as the approach of the subject, considering that it is a good way to improve classroom practices and the theories behind them. Therefore, a reflective teaching model was put into practice taking into account three areas of reflection and the results have been successful. The present paper is intended to exemplify how to integrate **knowledge**, **practice** and **reflection** as essential elements in FLT Methodology.

KEYWORDS: foreign language teaching methodology, teaching models, reflective teaching, teacher training, development, education

ABSTRACT

El éxito que alcanza el estudiante en su proceso de aprendizaje depende en gran medida de cuánto se involucre en su auto aprendizaje y de lo que sea capaz de aprender por sí mismo. Algunos psicólogos plantean al respecto que el aprendizaje es mejor si el estudiante es consciente de lo que debe aprender y si dicho aprendizaje es significativo para él. Partiendo de esta idea, una de las tendencias más actuales en la formación permanente (inicial y continua) de profesores de lenguas extranjeras aboga por el uso de un modelo reflexivo de enseñanza – aprendizaje, encaminado a propiciar una formación desarrolladora a partir de procesos reflexivos.

En la disciplina Metodología de la Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras que se imparte en la UCP “Félix Varela”, se ha introducido como su enfoque fundamental este modelo de enseñanza reflexiva con el objetivo de mejorar la formación académica, laboral e investigativa de los profesores en formación con lo cual se han logrado resultados satisfactorios en la formación inicial. El presente trabajo está dirigido a presentar cómo se integran el conocimiento académico la experiencia práctica y la reflexión como elementos esenciales del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de la MELE.

PALABRAS CLAVE: metodología de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, modelos de enseñanza, enseñanza reflexiva, formación inicial, continua y permanente del docente

Foreign Language Teaching Methodology plays an important role in teacher education; that is why it has always been included as a basic discipline of the curriculum in Cuban teacher education programs.

Throughout this discipline the student-teachers are provided with the necessary knowledge about the different approaches and methods that have been used in FLT along history. But knowledge is not enough to train student-teachers, they also need to put them into practice; that is to say, to experience how theory works so as to develop teaching abilities. As Penny Ur (1996: 318) asserts, one's own experiences and reflection on daily classroom events, and the interaction with other teachers about their own, contributes to teachers' personal progress. So, **knowledge, practice and reflection** are essential elements in FLT Methodology. But, **how can these three elements integrate in the teaching-learning process (TLP) of this discipline?** This is precisely the intention of this paper.

Teaching is a difficult and complex work. As Diane Larsen–Freeman and Marti Anderson (2011) assert, it is simultaneously mental and social, physical, emotional, practical, behavioral, political, experiential, historical, cultural, spiritual, and personal. What is more, the complexity increases if the work of teaching implies teaching how to teach, and it is even more complex if it involves how to teach a foreign language (FL) without being a native speaker of that FL in a context where the FL is not spoken.

A common question teachers of student-teachers ask themselves is: **how do FL teachers learn to teach?** There have been different views to this problem.

Teacher education, as it is perceived, refers to the policies and procedures designed to equip teachers with the knowledge, attitudes, behaviors and skills they require to perform their tasks effectively in the classroom, school and wider community.

Although, ideally, it should be conceived and organized as a seamless continuum, teacher education is often divided into these stages:

- initial teacher training / education (a pre-service course before entering the classroom as a fully responsible teacher);

- induction (the process of providing training and support during the first few years of teaching or the first year in a particular school);
- teacher development or continuing professional development (CPD) (an in-service process for practicing teachers).

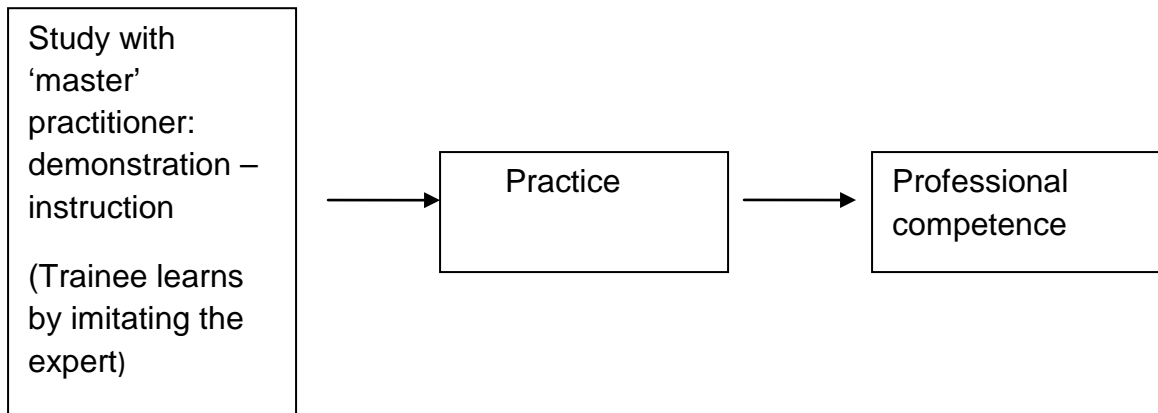
In all the previously mentioned stages three basic models have been used. But what is a model of teacher education? Richard I. Arends states that “a model is more than a specific method or strategy. It is an overall plan, or pattern, for helping the students to learn specific kinds of knowledge, attitude or skills. It has a theoretical basis or philosophy behind it and also encompasses a set of specific teaching steps designed to accomplish desired educational outcomes” (Arends, 1994:14).

The specialized literature (Ur P., 1996; Wallace M., 1995) recognizes:

- The craft / apprentice model
- The applied science model
- The reflective model

The first two models are considered by these authors as traditional, each one focuses on different directions. In **The craft / apprentice model**, learning takes place by imitating the expert’s techniques, instruction and advice. So, learning is based on the example of a ‘**master teacher**’ who is given an authoritative role as s/he is the example to be followed. Among the limitations of this model, experts find that it is essentially static and imitative, and that it does not pay attention to scientific knowledge. Wallace (1995: 6) represented this model as in figure 1.

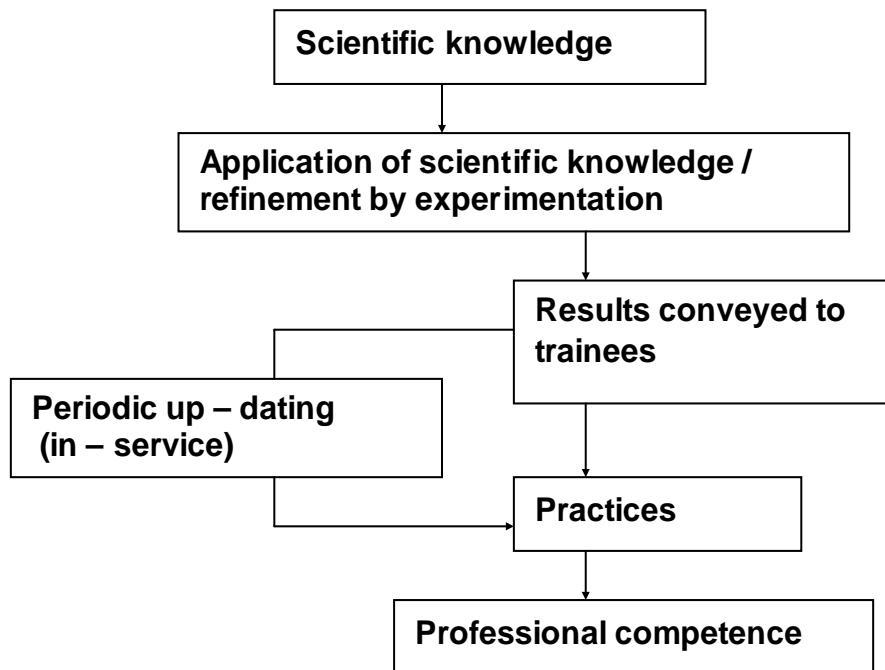
Figure 1. Wallace’s graphic representation of the craft model



In **The applied science model**, on the other hand, the trainee studies theoretical courses in applied linguistics and other associated subjects, which are then, through the construction of an appropriate methodology, applied to classroom practice (Ur, 1996). This has been a very strong way of training teachers, since today, as Ur states, many university- and college-based training courses follow this idea of teacher learning. The users of this model argue that teaching problems can be solved by the application of empirical sciences to the desired objective. As it can be observed, this model also gives the teacher an authoritative role, as the source of theory which the teacher is to interpret in practice. Among its limitations are the downgrading of the classroom teacher's experience; the separation of research and professional practice, as researchers are separated from the classroom practice. It is also seen as a one-way or linear process (Patterson, 2000). This model was represented by Wallace (1995: 9) as in the figure below:

Figure 2. Wallace's graphic representation of the applied science model

Applied science model



The **reflective model** emerged as a reaction against the Craft and the Applied Science models. As Richards (2008 cited in Diane-Laiser Freeman, 2011) argues while traditional views of teacher-learning often viewed the teacher's task as the application of theory to practice, more recent views see teacher-learning as the theorization of practice. So, teacher education serves two functions: to teach the skills of reflectivity and to provide the discourse and vocabulary that can serve participants in renaming their experience. As it is observed, **reflection** is a key element in this model.

The term **reflection** means meditation, thoughtfulness, or careful consideration of some subject matter, idea or purpose. The reflective process involves a critical examination of one's experiences in order to derive new levels of understanding by which to guide the future actions (Holborn. P; Becoming a reflective practitioner; 1988: 197)

Thus, **reflective teaching** is an approach to teaching and to teacher education which is based on the assumption that teachers (and of course student-teachers in their

practicum) can improve their understanding of teaching and the quality of their own teaching by reflecting critically on their teaching experience (Richards, 1997).

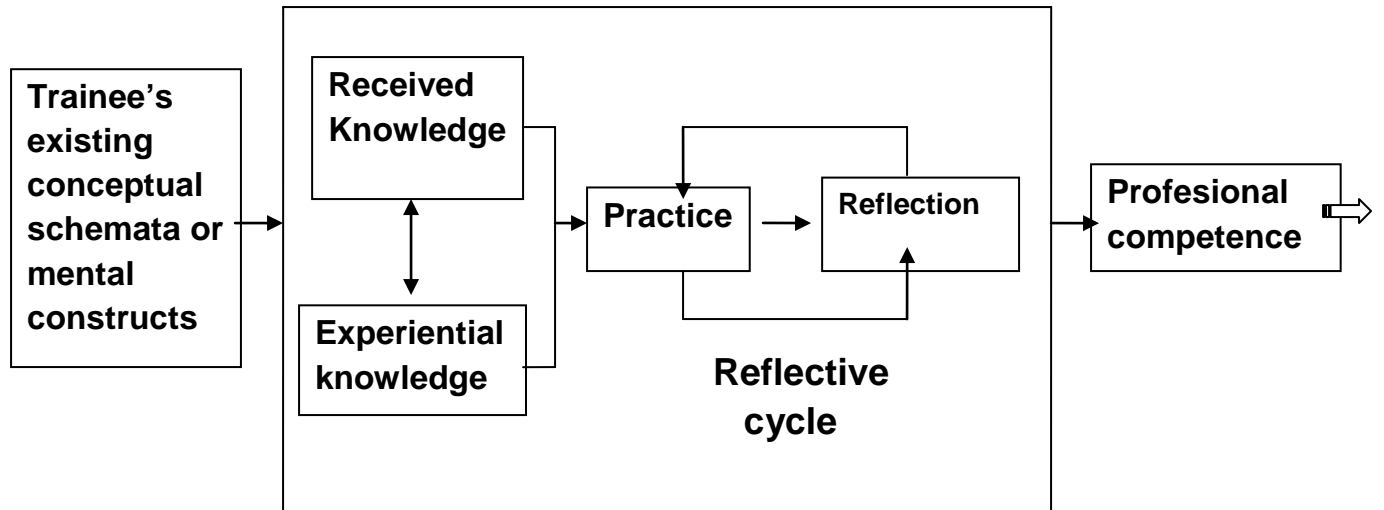
In this model, as Wallace suggests, the trainee learns reflecting upon two main dimensions:

- **Received knowledge**, which refers to the trainee's reflection upon the theories, principles, and all necessary elements of scientific research that trainees learn through the academic formation (what experts say)
- **Experiential knowledge**, which refers to the teacher's ongoing experience; in other words, the knowledge trainees obtain through their professional action (classroom practice)

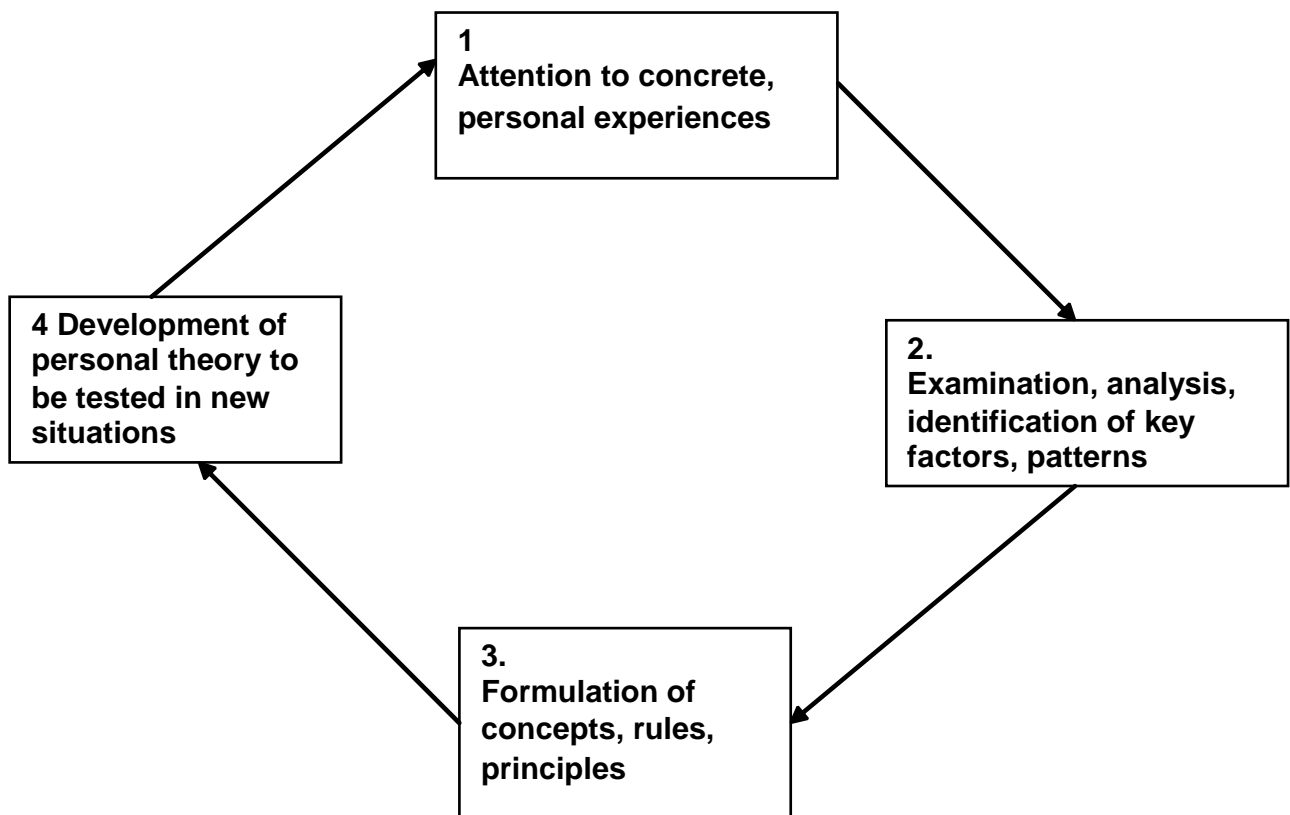
In this model scientific knowledge and classroom teacher's experience are given equal importance in the process of teacher education.

The role of the teacher in this model, unlike the others, is that of 'facilitator' or 'developer'; i.e., he or she gives little or no information, but encourages trainees to develop their own body of knowledge. Wallace represented this model as in the figure below.

Figure 3. Wallace's graphic representation of the reflective model

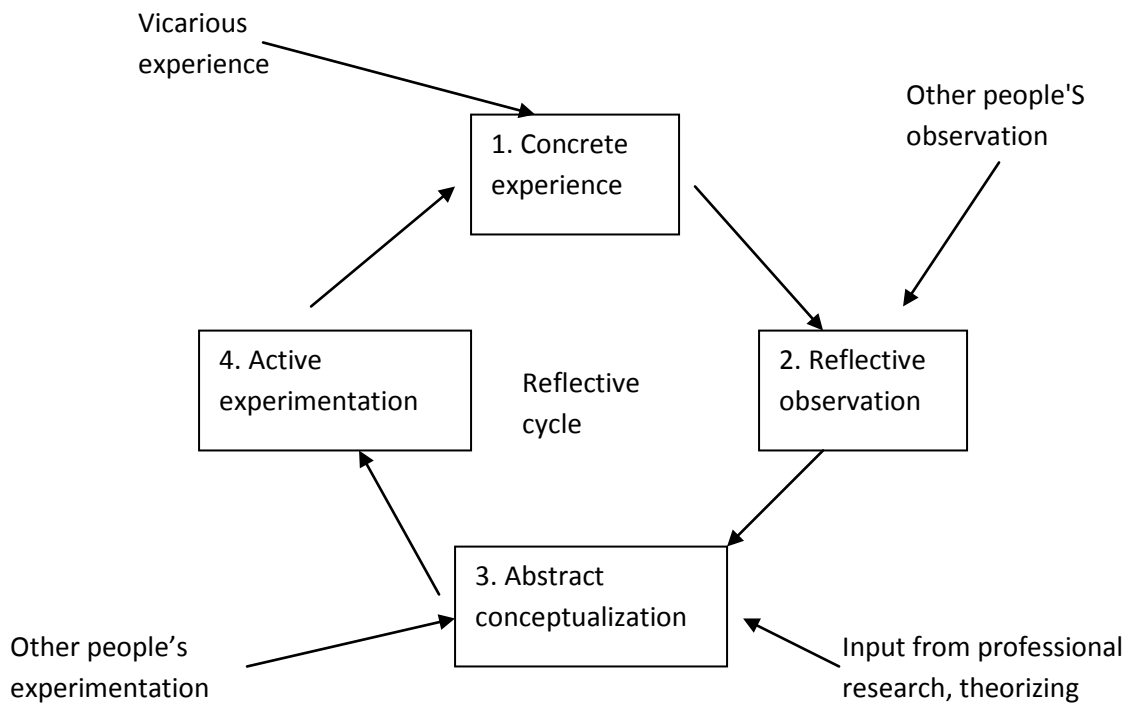


According to Holborn (1988: 197) the cycle of the reflection process includes four steps.
Figure 4. Representation of the four steps of the reflective cycle



In relation to the use of a reflective model for learning how to teach, P. Ur (1995) states that although she herself has learned most through his own teaching experience, there are other sources of knowledge that should be taken into consideration too. In other words, she thinks that sources of knowledge may be either personal experience and thought or input from outside; but in either case this knowledge should be integrated into the trainees' own reflective cycle so that effective learning may take place. Based on this belief he calls his model 'Enriched Reflection' because he added some external elements to each stage of Korb's circle of reflection (1984). He represented his 'Enriched reflection' as follows.

Figure 5. Ur's enriched representation of the reflective cycle



As represented above, Kolb's four modes of learning are: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. He argued that the

knowledge acquired in any one mode needs to be followed by further processing in next, and so on, in a recursive cycle.

1. Concrete experience: something that happened in the classroom.
2. Reflective observation: step back at what took place which involves watching and perception
3. Abstract conceptualization: the principle or concept that can be formulated which will account for this event. It involves intellectual thought.
4. Active experimentation: to implement the idea in practice. It involves real-time action which will entail further concrete experience.

The external sources included by Penny Ur to Kolb's are:

1. Vicarious experience: experience can be second-hand such as observations, anecdotes, videos, transcriptions.
2. Other people's observation: descriptions of other people's observations can be added to our own.
3. Input from professional research, theorizing: theoretical concepts can come from FL researchers and thinkers.
4. Other people's experiments: ideas for or descriptions of experiments from writers or other professionals.

FLT literature also acknowledges two main types of **tools for reflections**, they are the following:

- Formats in which you write about your practicum experiences following the four stages of the reflective process
- Places to capture important ideas which might be otherwise forgotten.

Some examples of these tools are:

- Autobiographies
- Reaction sheets or lesson reports
- Questioning
- Observation (peer or self)
- Surveys or questionnaires
- Analysis of case study

- Professional journal

The reflective model in action at “Félix Varela” Pedagogical University

Although some teacher trainers think that pre-service courses cannot produce fully competent practitioners who can immediately vie with their experienced colleagues (Ur, 1996), it is important to initiate student-teachers in a process of critical examination of their practicum experiences in order to derive new levels of understanding of their acquired and experiential knowledge by which to guide the future classroom actions.

FLT pre-service courses in Cuba are aimed at giving student-teachers the necessary preparation to become competent professionals. This preparation is based on academic knowledge, the development of teaching skills and the development of research skills in on-going practice experience. In general, their training should combine: the application of theory to practice and the theorization of practice experience, viewing the student-teachers as builders of their personal and peer knowledge through the development of skills of reflectivity which provide the discourse and vocabulary that can serve student-teachers in renaming personal and peer experience. Based on the above assumptions some attempts have been carried out in FLT pre-service courses in Villa Clara.

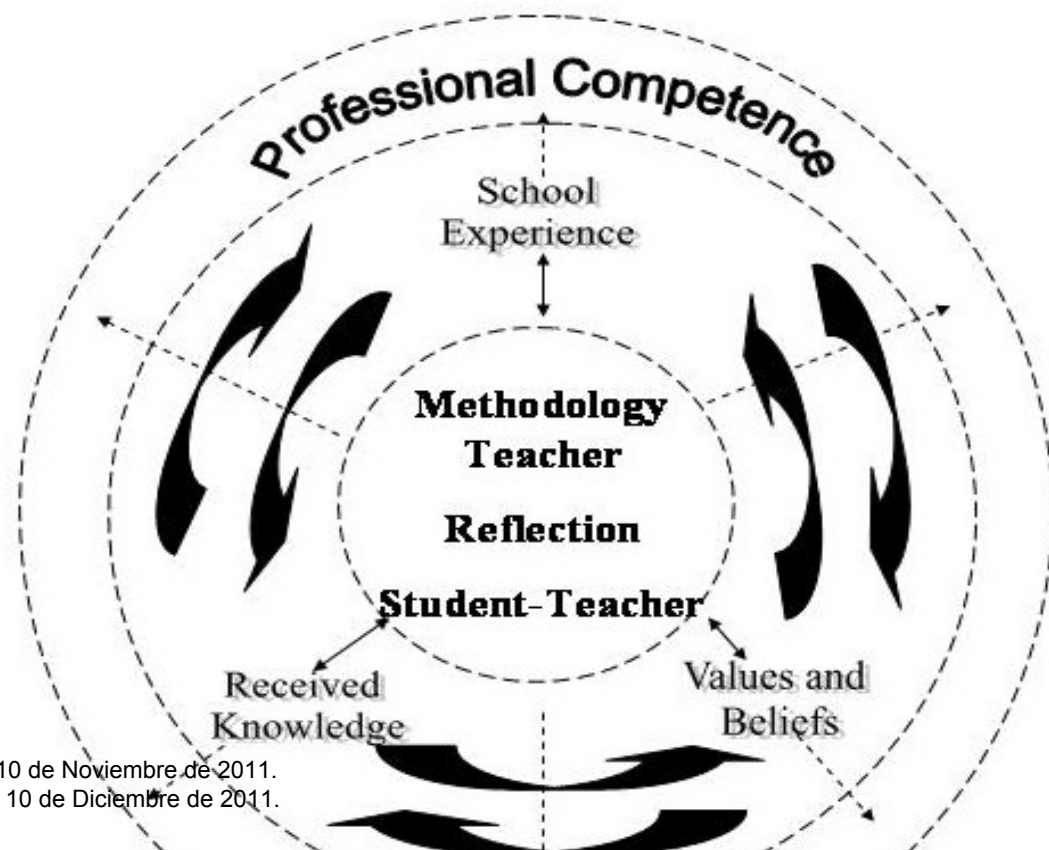
The implementation of the reflective model in the discipline FLT Methodology at “Félix Varela” Pedagogical University has been the result of a process that started back in 2001 when Professor Marisol Patterson Peña suggested a reflective model in her Master’s thesis (See graphic representation below). She considered the key components of teacher preparation stated by Wallace in 1991: **inner values and beliefs, experiential knowledge** and **received knowledge** together with **practice** or **classroom action**. Her view suggests different arrangements to these components, as she states, for there is no one component more important than the other. In her model reflection appears in an inner central circle indicating the importance it has in the process of developing the reflective teacher that the province needed at that moment. The Methodology teacher appears in the same scene as the students to show the way the teacher joins in the students’ reflective process. Unlike Wallace’s model, who encloses the elements in boxes and uses arrows in only one direction, in Patterson

Peña's model the elements that surround reflection have no boundaries so as to give them equal importance and to show that each one may influence the other. School experience, as Patterson Peña states, feeds back into theory as received knowledge and vice versa and they both enrich the inner values and beliefs which contribute to the experiential knowledge. Student-teachers, different from experienced teachers who have built a teaching style, have developed a range techniques based on personal beliefs about good teaching. As Wallace, Patterson Peña considers that knowledge in action by practice of the profession is coming from the observation of practice.

Her model involves a three-part process:

- The reflection event itself: the focus of critical reflection is usually the students' own learning or teaching; reflection can also be stimulated by observing another person's teaching
- Recollection of the event: to produce an account of what happened. Different tools may be used: diary, portfolio, and others.
- Review and response to the event: the students or teacher review and question the events. The goal is to process it at a deeper level.

Figure 5. Patterson Peña's graphic representation of the reflective model



As it can be observed Patterson Peña gives to her model more flexibility using dot-line circles instead of boxes so as to avoid boundaries and also so as to highlight equal influence of elements.

This model was designed to be used in the third year of the regular pre-service course since it is in this school year that:

- Student teachers have developed the necessary communicative competence that permits them reflecting in the foreign language;
- They begin to experience classroom practice through their practicum; and
- They have received the necessary knowledge in terms of theories, principles and concepts of FLT and Pedagogy that allows them to back up and explain the problems they face in their practicum periods.

In short, it is in third year when the student teachers are able to explore both their classroom practice and received knowledge to re-appraise their beliefs and values of what good FLT is.

The implementation of this model as a new way of approaching the discipline FLT Methodology was undoubtedly fruitful, and the results were evident in student-teachers' knowledge. Nevertheless, when the authoresses of this paper started to teach the subject, it was difficult for student teachers to put it into practice. Some questions had to be answered for them:

- Does the model apply to the teaching learning process (TLP) of any of the contents dealt with in the discipline?

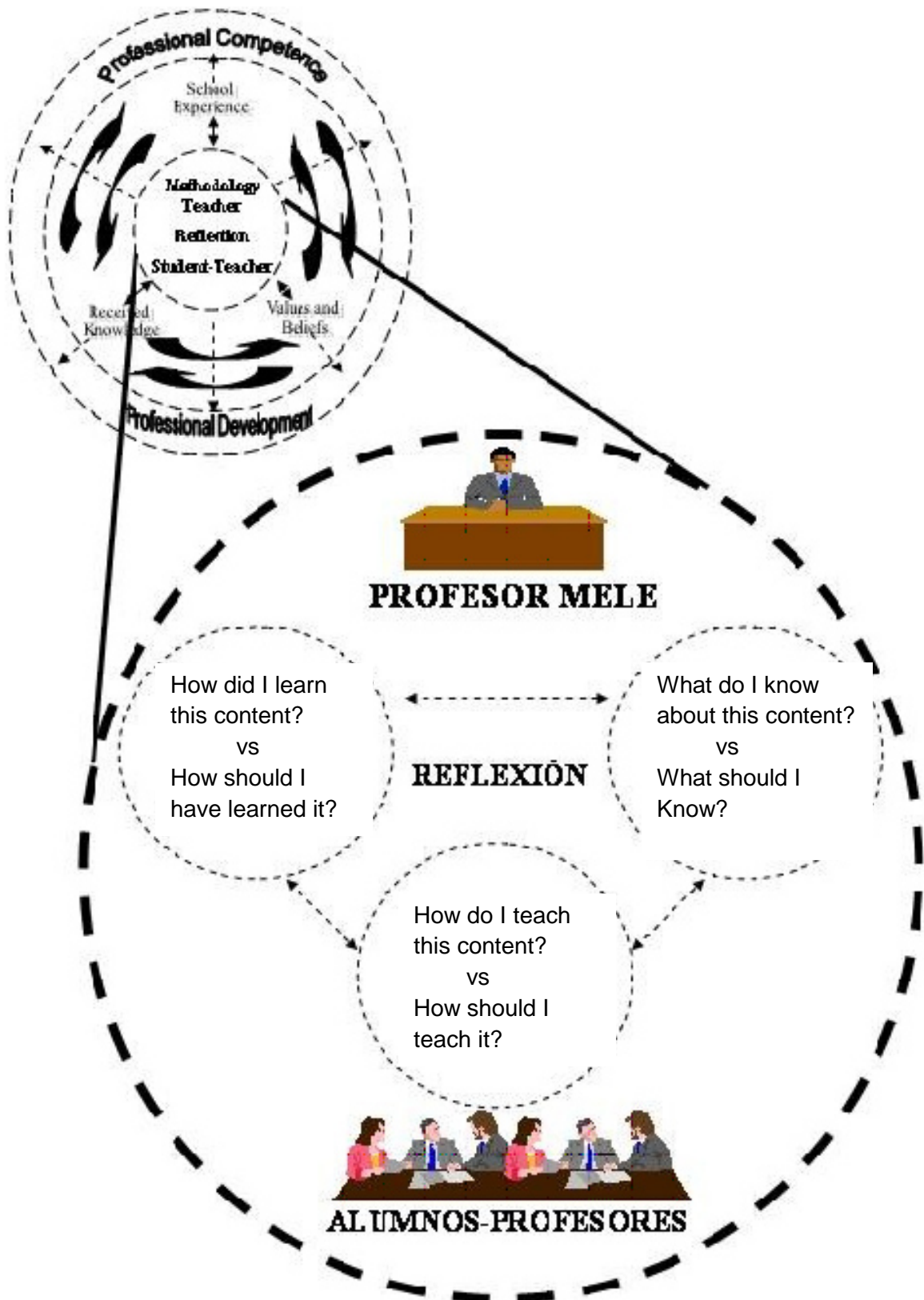
- How can the teacher facilitate the process of reflection in the classroom?
- What methodological and teaching resources are needed?

So as to answer these questions, and also to understand better how the process of critical reflection should be developed in the classroom, they assumed **reflective teaching** as a process of looking at what the teacher does in the classroom, thinking about why he/she does it, and thinking about whether it works or not– a process of self-observation and self-evaluation. By collecting information about what goes on in the classroom, and analyzing and evaluating this information, the teacher identifies and explores his/her practices and underlying beliefs. This may then lead to changes and improvements in teaching. Therefore this is a means of professional development which begins in the pre-service classroom (adapted from Tice, Article published in INTERNET, Jun 15, 2011). Based on this definition a re-design of **the inner central circle of Patterson Peña's model** was carried out by García Cabrera (2005) and three areas of critical reflection were added so as to improve the students learning process of FLT Methodology through reflection.

- 1st area: related to the personal learning experience the student-teachers experimented back in time when they were at first taught the content. Two main questions may guide the process of critical reflection in this area: How did I learn this content? Vs. How should I have learned it?
- 2nd area: related to a critical examination of the knowledge they have about the particular content or topic dealt with in the subject (received knowledge). The questions that guide reflection may be: What do I know about it? Vs. What should I know about it?
- 3rd area: related to a critical view about their teaching experience and the methodological preparation they have to teach the topic (approaches and methods, procedures and techniques they know and use). The questions that guide reflection may be: How did I teach this? Vs. How should I have taught it? And Why?

Below there is a graphic representation of it.

Figure 6. Representation of the reflective circle



The concept of metacognition played an important role in it. **Metacognition** is understood as a type of strategy that student teachers can use to enhance their learning of FL teaching. It involves: planning, regulating, and managing learning on how to teach (problem solving, making decisions and evaluating their learning processes). Thus, metacognition gives student teachers an overview for monitoring their errors and evaluate the way they learn to teach.

To make the cycle of reflection operate in the TLP of the discipline some necessary resources were also designed:

- A digital book entitled **Fundamentals for FL Teaching** as a useful tool for both undergraduates and English teachers, which provides a compilation of theoretical and practical materials, as well as methodological procedures, ideas, and examples that cover a wide range of up-to-date topics concerning the teaching-learning process of English language. It provides a better understanding of all the issues dealt with and facilitates an easy access to the fundamentals of foreign language teaching in order to succeed in such a task.
- Study guides for the digital book aimed at developing study skills and encouraging the process of reflection (based on the areas of reflection of the model).
- A teaching journal as a tool in which student teachers collect data about their personal or peer experiences for further examination or reflection on events, knowledge, and practice.
- Microteaching and lesson observation (personal and peer) as points of departure for discussion.

The experience in the classroom

Subject: FLT Methodology

School yeas: 3rd

Topic: The teaching of reading

1st Lesson: Lecture

Procedures:

1. Have the student teachers reflect individually on the topic. Possible pivotal questions:
 - How did I learn to read in the foreign language?
 - Was it the main goal of the subject?
 - How did my junior/senior high school teacher of English teach reading?
 - Did I read to learn about the language or to develop reading skills?
 - Can I remember some of the procedures or techniques the teacher followed?
 - In relation to my learning outcomes, what was right? And wrong?
 - Were reading materials authentic?
 - What would I do similar? Different?
2. Have the students reflect on what they know about the topic in terms of: goals/skills that should be developed (according to the syllabus program), main contents, stages of the reading lesson, approaches and techniques, others. Have them list them down.
3. Have the student teachers reflect on what they should know about the topic.
4. Deliver the lecture.
5. Have the students check their speculations on 1, 2 and 3.
6. Orient the study guide for the next lesson (a seminar) where the student teachers will deepen their knowledge on the topic, they will use the digital book.

2nd lesson: Seminar

Procedures:

1. Have the student teachers answer the questionnaire from the study guide.
2. Have them reflect on their received knowledge and on what they still do not know. Have them self-evaluate their knowledge and then evaluate their peers.
3. Orient a practical activity (microteaching) for next class.
 - Student teachers are divided into small groups of 4 to 6 taking as criterion that they all carry out their practicum in the same school and grade.

- Each group is given identical reading material to plan a lesson that will be presented and discussed next meeting.
- Each group, in their teaching diaries, will keep a record of significant experiences while planning the lesson.

3rd lesson: Microteaching

Procedures:

1. Have the students exchange their significant experiences while planning the lesson.
2. Re-arrange teams in such a way that student teachers from different schools can exchange their experiences and lesson plans so as to improve it and present it to class.
3. Have the class select a student teacher to teach the lesson to the group while the rest of the class will register what goes well and what does not.
4. Have the student teachers reflect individually for a few minutes on what they registered
5. Open a reflective session to focus on the quality and effects of the lesson observed.
6. Orient a re-reading session to go deeper into the topic consulting other available sources of information.
7. Orient and individual and improved re-planning of the lesson to be handed in.

Student teachers are given a three time opportunity to re-plan the lesson so as to get to a better version.

Summing up, in the reflective model, as P. Ur states, the student teacher **teaches** or **observes** lessons, or **recalls past experiences**; then **reflects** alone or in discussion with others, in order to work out theories about teaching, then tries these out again in practice. Such a cycle, as it can be observed, aims for continuous improvement and the

development of personal theories of action. Having the students integrate knowledge, practice and reflection upon the three areas suggested in this paper contributes to learn how to teach.

Teaching how to teach, thus, involves the use of a wide body of knowledge not only about the foreign language, but also about the most effective ways of teaching it to different kinds of student-teachers; therefore it requires teachers to undertake a complex set of tasks and ample experience in FLT to provide student teachers with the necessary support to help them develop a professional identity and to further develop the basic competences that were dealt with in college.

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