LANGUAGE LEARNING AND LANGUAGE USING STRATEGIES - FOCUS ON TEACHING APPROACH TRANSFERABILITY

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Abstract

This study presents research in embedding language learning strategies and language using strategies in an ESP course designed for engineering tertiary education, whose focus is on the transferability and generalizability of the approach. An enlarged sample of students was created by including a second teacher in the experimental research, who was thoroughly instructed on how to teach the experimental module, as one hypothesis was to check to what extent transfer of the proposed instructional construct was feasible. The findings analysis shows there are good chances of transferring the approach, with necessary amendments, towards other teachers and/or educational contexts.

Keywords: language learning strategies, language using strategies, ESP, transferability, teaching approach..

1. Introduction – Aims and Background

The study emerged as one of the objectives of empirical research in the field of embedding *language learning strategies* (LLS) and *language using strategies* (LUS) in an ESP module. The main aim was to ensure higher efficiency of the instructional process in the author's concrete educational context, namely University POLITEHNICA of Bucharest (UPB) - Computer Science Faculty. The context was mainly characterized by severe course time constraints, as well as an acute lack of LLS and LUS among the students.

The concept of *strategy* represents the core of vast literature, with two main issues still being quite controversial, viz.: (i) an exact definition of the concept, and (ii) the most appropriate ways of introducing LLS and LUS in EFL and the related domains, ESP including. One very productive manner of seeing this conceptual and/or terminological issue (Cohen, 1996: 6) is that of accepting the existence of a *continuum*. This extends from very comprehensive senses of the notion, useful mostly for research studies in this respect, and up to the specific direct interactions with the learners. In the latter case, it is enough to elucidate the large strategic

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categories. Already in the 1990s, strategies were no longer seen as independent entities (Rodon & Sesé, 2008: 1), but as elements interwoven so as to form - using an excellent musical metaphor - *polyphonies* that can be *orchestrated* in a manner appropriate to the context they were to be studied / taught in. Additionally, the literature (Oxford, 2003: 2) emphasizes that strategy pedagogy will be enhanced in terms of efficiency and acceptability if it is in *harmony* with the combination of instructional methodology and materials used. Therefore, the essentially communicative core pedagogic approach, with eclectic additions, that was used in our research, is capable, I believe, to ensure sincere positive responses from the students.

As we have stepped into an era placed *beyond* method (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006: 169-193), methodological eclecticism is, in our opinion, advisable, for reasons of pragmatism, flexibility and as an asset for investigative research. There are two main views on embedding LLS and LUS in an English language course, such as an ESP one:

1) either by designing especially created course books in this respect (Ellis, 2002: 3), or
2) by inserting, more or less explicitly, such strategy-focused activities directly in the ESP course book, commensurate with the learners' needs and the contextual constraints - as pointed out in the literature (Kinoshita, 2005: 3).

I actually consider that one productive manner of understanding and implementing strategy-focused activities is to see the possibilities located at various points on a *continuum*. Therefore, in quite numerous educational settings, such as the one described in this study, time available, the nature of the discipline, the students' profile and other features may require such a mixed approach.

An aspect that should be analyzed at this point is the double-faceted issue of *transferability – generalizability* of a certain teaching approach. In the context described here, one main point of interest was not only to study ways of ensuring success in learning by embedding LLS and LUS in the ESP course, but also to *identify and confirm the most efficient manner(s) of achieving the transferability and, consequently, generalizability of our approach*. The leap from one sample population to a much larger one, as *transferability* was defined (Barnes et al., 1994: 1), requires careful analysis of the variables involved. It is a useful warning for the researcher, but also, as experience showed me, a requirement which is quite difficult to observe in practice. As emphasized in the literature (Rodon & Sesé, 2008: 2), transferability of results from one setting to another – and from one teacher to another, requires as a necessary precondition a substantial overlap between the common features and the specific ones of the respective educational settings. The entire background of the research presented in this study should therefore be seen as the effort of a foreign language teacher in a country (Romania) that only recently (2007) became a Member State of the European Union, to

respond to the imperatives of the present, and particularly of the future, in terms of tertiary level foreign language education efficiency and quality. More specifically, the main *objectives* of the teacher/researcher were to identify ways of attaining success in learning by her ESP students.

A set of working hypotheses was designed. The basic assumption was that if a strategy awareness raising package of activities is introduced, in an explicit coherent systematic manner within the *English for Computer Science* module, then one can expect an increase in the learners' progress and, consequently, in their communication competence. As the research study was also meant to check the *transferability* potential of the approach, with a view to attempting further possible *generalization*, at least in the author's education context, another hypothesis was included, in a correlated manner with the main one, namely: "If the teachers adopting the introduction of LLS and LUS in an explicit coherent manner intensify their professional development in this respect by pertinent pedagogic means and ways, then their endeavor will have good chances of success". Hence, an increased interest in organizing optimal collaboration relationships between me as a research designer and also as a teacher, and the co-participant teacher in the experiment, respectively. These mainly refer to ensuring an acceptable internal consistency level of the experiment. That could be ensured by maintaining good control over certain individual differences regarding the quality of the activities taking place in class, as well as the characteristics of the two teachers participating in the research.

From the very beginning, I was aware that, in order to ensure good transferability, it was also necessary that the participants in the thus extended experiment should receive as much adequate training as possible – a fact fully confirmed by the findings. Although only a relatively small-scale one, as it covered one 14-week term, based on a sample of 200 students, the experiment can be seen as having significance, by: (i) its results and preliminary conclusions, and (ii) its potential to be continued and developed, in terms of the transferability of an approach focused on LLS and LUS embedding in an ESP course.

2. Materials and Methods

The research had the following main features. Firstly, it had an experimental empirical applicative character, with a declared *ameliorative* purpose. It was conceived as a process, with initial, ongoing and summative forms. The *qualitative and quantitative data*, later processed in order to check the entire set of hypotheses, were obtained on the basis of especially created instruments: student tests and portfolios, student and participant teacher diaries, Good Language Learner interviews, co-participant teacher case study.

A Student Questionnaire comprising sets of questions focusing on: (i) what elements / skills of the ESP course were seen as interesting and useful for their present and future needs; (ii) what types of: working classroom patterns, resources and teacher's actions are seen as useful; (iii) frequency of use by the respondents of a package of 26 LLS and LUS - cognitive, metacognitive, affective, social, of compensation and of memory - was also created (see Table 1).

Table 1 LLS & LUS in the Student Questionnaire

Code	Strategy
1	Memorizing by classifying new elements in already known groups of meaning
2	Memorizing by associating new information to already familiar one
3	Memorizing by using new words/phrases in a logical context
4	Remembering new information by associating it with a certain mental image
5	Remembering new information by relating it to familiar sounds/words in mother tongue/foreign language (associations, rhymes etc.)
6	Revising new information at regular intervals
7	Permanent (re)-organization of learned material in chapters/sections of notebook, on cards etc.
8	Repetition of learned material for consolidation (e.g. pronunciation, spelling etc.)
9	Recombining various already known linguistic elements in new sentences
10	Using the foreign language to communicate/understand (reading, listening, writing, speaking) in real situations /simulating real ones
11	Rapid understanding of the message by an adequate implementation of strategies of approaching the read/listened to input text (scanning, skimming, key-ideas)
12	Using various resources to facilitate the understanding of read/listened to input (e.g. dictionaries, Internet etc.)
13	Transfer of knowledge (e.g. words/grammar issues or any other information from L1 to L2)
14	Taking well-organized logical notes in a consistent manner
15	Highlighting the information considered important in a contrast color
16	Deducing meaning while reading/listening by using various linguistic clues (e.g. prefixes or word order) and nonverbal ones (voice, gestures)
17	Compensating for the limited level of knowledge in speaking/writing by various methods: asking for help, mimicking, approximating the message, using synonyms, creating a new word
18	Focusing one's attention on the learning activity, despite distractors
19	Optimal organization of learning (schedule, notebook, positive environment)
20	Setting clear learning objectives (e.g. elimination of pronunciation or spelling errors etc.)
21	Identifying/creating opportunities for foreign language practice
22	Self-monitoring/evaluating of the progress in foreign language learning
23	Consciously assuming the risk of using the foreign language, despite the probability of making errors/encountering difficulty
24	Asking questions for clarification/checking/correction purposes
25	Cooperating in learning with colleagues or with very proficient users of L2
26	Developing an empathic attitude/understanding of the cultural specificity of L2

The data were triangulated in order to ensure good *validity* and *reliability* of the experiment. It was a *provoked transversal* experiment, as it compared experimental and witness groups of students. It was carried out as a *field activity*, with an acceptable level of internal and external *control*. Nevertheless, there were certain *limitations* of the study, which are worth specifying in brief. Thus, one such limitation refers to the fact that initially I had wished to extend the research over to other tertiary education centers in Romania. That was not actually possible when the project was initiated, as I was unable to identify any university that should have an identical structuring of the content, level, objectives and time frame of the English courses to our one in the UPB. That would have therefore been conducive to a substantial reduction of the level of control over the experimental frame. However, in our opinion there is a possibility that in the future such an inter-institutional extension could be implemented, provided that the above mentioned features could be harmonized in detail. I believe that it could: support teachers in universities to develop professionally and contribute to a higher level of teaching standardization at national level.

Secondly, as to the sizing of our research team, in order to have a larger and more statistically significant student sample, and equally in order to check the proposed approach *transferability*, I opted for the participation in the experiment of two teachers, thus covering the normal size of two teaching loads. Maintaining full control over the contextual features was not always 100% possible, due to certain unavoidable technical and human problems. Those were however rare, therefore not significant for the results. In our opinion, the key *differentiating factors* that characterize the personal and professional profile of the teachers should necessarily be taken into account. Consequently, in the project those factors were kept as much as possible under control, by:

1) devising the seminar plans in detail and having them discussed before each seminar and then used by both teachers,
2) mutual classroom observation,
3) permanent exchanges of opinions, ideas, views throughout the entire experiment,
4) continuous feedback – even if sometimes it was of the semi-formal or even informal type.

Thirdly, other *limitations* refer to the content of the materials taught in the experimental and the witness groups. I tried to keep those, too, under control as much as possible, by:

1) ensuring similar basic content of the teaching materials to both the experimental groups and to the witness ones,
2) similar forms of evaluation (student portfolios and tests),
3) similar IT means used in class,
4) attendance and other aspects regarding the students' activity in class a.s.o.

In what follows, a brief presentation of the experiment is provided. The author designed and then taught to second year engineering students throughout an academic term (14 weeks) the following:

I. an *Experimental module* (English for Computer Science experimental - ECSexp), having embedded in it a package of LLS and LUS focused activities,
II. a *Witness module* (English for Computer Science witness - ECSmrt), pre-existent, also based on a communicative/eclectic approach, in which the strategy focused activities were missing; they were replaced by supplementary language and skills focused activities.

While the Witness module comprised units designed in accordance with the communicative views, mainly focused in terms of topic, skills and functions on the domain of Computer Science, in response to the identified *needs* of the learners, the Experimental module included a set of activities aimed to integrating in an explicit and/or implicit way certain tasks based on LLS and LUS for English language learning. I preferred a mixed approach for the embedding of LLS and LUS focused activities in the course. There were activities with a common path to a certain extent for both modules, and also some sections which were different.

Sketchy presentations are provided of the way the two modules were designed, based on several examples. Thus, for seminar 11, focused on paragraph writing in accordance with the requirements and expectations in English speaking countries/cultures, mainly the UK and USA, the first half of the activities were different conceptually, but the final part was identical in both modules. The *Objectives* for the Witness module specified: 'paragraph writing observing requirements of English speaking cultures in preparation for essay writing'. For the Experimental module, the *Objectives* read: 'raising learners' awareness by heuristic activities and support discussions after each task about the strategies used in solving them'. Next, the Witness module *Plan* included typical communicative tasks of Reading focused on paragraph structure, while the Experimental module had a series of eight heuristic activities asking the students to 'identify the structure and essential requirements for paragraph writing'. The common trunk required both categories of trainees to write a *common* set of activities, with a view to developing and refining paragraph writing skills.

Another example can be the seminar focused on *technical translation*, in which the main difference was that, on the basis of translating the same technical texts, with a discussion of the specific style and language problems encountered, for the Experimental module a *Working Protocol* was introduced, by means of which the students had to observe their own ways of approaching and solving the difficulties they encountered.

The range of LLS and LUS focused activities in the Experimental module also included a range of other tasks comprising explicit and/or implicit embedding, of which some are briefly listed in what follows:

- discussing/explaining the *Student Diary* rubrics and filling them in at the end of each seminar;
- taking an online test to determine their own learning style;
- derived homework from the test solving task, i.e. analyzing the test results in accordance with a list of indicators, for instance: LLS you confirm you use, LLS you consider are worth trying, reasons for extending the strategies repertory for the increase of success in learning and for the enhancement of its quality;
- discussion for awareness raising as to learning for technical subjects *vs* learning a foreign language;
- explicit discussing activities of the various aspects specific to foreign language learning – by incorporating them into, and relying on, communication activities viz. speaking, reading, listening;
- a chain of activities focused on the Good Language Learner (GLL) in each experimental group: voting for the GLLs, interviewing GLLs who were invited to share their learning behavior and tips;
- a range of speaking activities of heuristic type focused on: motivation of learning L2, various strategies of organizing one own's learning, the role of homework, the role of grammar in language learning, the causes for the most frequently encountered errors of English made by Romanian speakers.

With a view to checking the capacity of transferability of the project, two teachers taught the Witness and the Experimental modules, viz. the researcher-teacher (coded YC) and another co-participant teacher (coded FP). Although there were differences in terms of their previous training and experience and between their teaching styles, the manner of organizing the experiment, as well as the communication channels and vehicles established between YC and FP were aimed to ensure a good level of homogeneity / transferability.

Here are some examples in this respect:

1) all the seminars took place in the same classrooms, with identical multimedia equipment (computers, projectors, Internet access, audio/video equipment, document camera etc.);
2) regular mutual classroom observation sessions were organized, especially in the first weeks of the experiment, as far as the timetable permitted, taking care that such observation should not impede upon the intrinsical development of the assisted classes;
3) for each seminar/week, two documents were designed by the teacher/researcher for information transmittal from her to the co-participant, on electronic support, viz. (i) the seminar detailed plan, as *Students' Pages* and also the *Teacher's Pages*. They included the seminar plan and teaching

instructions, respectively, sent at least one week in advance from the author to the co-participant to allow study time; (ii) after each seminar taught by the author, the co-participant was communicated a document with the detailed description of the class as it had taken place in real time, together with remarks and suggestions. The co-participant studied those documents before teaching the seminar. Then she sent feedback to the author about the materials received and, after her class, about the way her own seminar had taken place;

4) the sample comprised groups of students of the same year, randomly selected to belong to the experimental or witness groups, having the same structure and number of students with quite similar profiles. The participation of a second teacher also contributed to enlarging the sample, thus finally getting nine student groups altogether, which increased the validity of the experiment results;
5) the distribution of the groups was made completely randomly to YC and FP, taking into account only the size of each teacher's teaching load. However, care was taken to set a timetable that should permit the author/researcher to be the first one to carry out the seminar and then pass the guiding documents to the co-participant for study in due time.

It was of interest for the researcher to obtain as accurate feedback as possible from the co-participant regarding the communication vehicles implemented, as well as the possible forms of resistance, of experiential, mental or attitudinal kind, that might have occured. Such remarks were considered useful by YC in designing appropriate paths of transfer of the proposed approach towards other contexts.

Also with a view to obtaining detailed feedback from FP, an *interview* (approx. 1,500 word transcript) was designed and implemented with the co-participant upon the conclusion of the experiment. That, together with the permanent oral feedback received by YC from FP throughout the 14 weeks, was useful in the interpretation of the findings. The interview taken to FP had a semi-structured character. It aimed to clarify the following main aspects: *age, previous pedagogic experience, post-graduate and in-service training courses on communicative approach teaching and strategy pedagogy, whether any professional and/or personal change occured as a result of participating in the experiment, feedback as to the transmittal system of the seminar plans and proposals of improvement, solutions adopted when something did not take place according to the plan (for example technical problems), the extent to which the seminar plans were followed by the co-participant and her solutions of crisis, if the case required them, (dis)satisfactions and difficulties generated by her participation in the experiment, opinions as regards the usefulness for the students of the Experimental module and of the strategy-focused approach in general, other comments on aspects which could not be anticipated by the teacher-researcher as an interviewer.*

A *case study* was then devised, based on the co-participant teacher in the experiment, for whom qualitative and quantitative data were collected (e.g. interview, teacher's diary, classroom observation, the researcher-teacher's own diary). They contributed, by triangulation with the data on the students' learning process, to the checking of the initial hypotheses, in particular of the hypothesis regarding the approach transferability potential.

3. Discussion of results

From our analysis of the data collected by means of the entire set of instruments, certain answers to the issues aimed at in the research could be identified, as well as certain trends conducive to identifying directions. By triangulating the qualitative and quantitative data obtained, a complex image of the experiment results was generated.

It comprised the following main aspects:

I) success in learning;
II) level of communication competence in English;
III) progress in the domain of reading and writing skills;
IV) learners' enhanced awareness of their LLS and LUS repertory;
V) level of students' motivation and commitment to their learning process;
VI) assuming responsibility by the students for their own learning process;
VII) optimizing the teaching process.

Thus, it is to be noted that all the hypotheses were confirmed. In what follows, only a selection of the findings are illustrated and discussed, viz. those focused on the issue of *transferability* of the approach to the teaching of LLS and LUS in the described educational setting. It should be pointed out that the hypothesis centered on transferability was confirmed to a large extent, although there were differences between the results of the two teachers.

As can be seen from the findings, although the trends were invariably similar for YC and FP in most cases and for all the instruments, still the data collected from FP were systematically inferior in intensity and/or size compared to those obtained from YC. I tried to interpret and identify the causes of that situation.

This aspect is selectively presented in what follows, but in a non-prioritized order, as it is the *combined triangulated image of all the aspects* that can indeed provide a veridical complex answer.

Firstly, one such source of quantitative data, meant to investigate whether there was an increase of *motivation* and *commitment* of the learners to their own learning

process of English is represented by the comparative data as regards the response rate to the *Student Questionnaire* for the experimental and witness groups.

Our analysis refers to the number of respondents in the groups of teacher YC, as compared to those of teacher FP.

As can be seen from Table 2, the values are frequently higher for the experimental groups for both teachers, with 100% for YC and with only 91.55% for FP.

Table 2. Response rate (%) - motivation in study of foreign language (Student Questionnaires)

Teacher	Group	No. Students	No. Respondents	% Answer
YC	Exp.	43	43	100.00%
	Witness	*44*	*41*	*93.18%*
	Total YC	87	84	96.55%
FP	Exp.	71	65	91.55%
	Witness	*42*	*29*	*69.05%*
	Total FP	113	94	83.19%
	Total YC + FP	**200**	**178**	**89.00%**

The difference, as compared to the rate of response of the witness groups, is not significant for YC (only 93.18%). However, for FP, the co-participant teacher, the response rate of the witness groups was of only 69.05%, therefore a considerable 22.5% difference. This seems to point to the fact that her witness group students were less committed and participative.

Certain differences also occured, although the general trends were again consistently identical for both YC and FP, as far as the rate of completing the four rubrics of the weekly post-seminar *Student Diary* throughout the entire experiment duration is concerned. Synthetically these can be seen in Table 3. As can be noted from the table, the main emphasis and consequently the higher values were, in function of the students' interest, for both teachers on the same seminars (nos. 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13) in a consistent manner. For the last three seminars though, FP encountered difficulties in recuperating the students' diaries out of organizational reasons – a fact that could not have been anticipated. Similarly, the general trend in the case of FP's students' *level of diary completion* - as an important indicator - is also decreasing.

As the two teachers used the same materials and administered the same evaluation forms, viz. tests and portfolios (which were considered as instruments pointing to the learners' level of efficiency at the beginning, middle and end of the experiemental term), a comparison of the results obtained by the students in YC and FP groups was also useful. Again, the test results were situated within the same range of trends, with minor / insignificant differences in scoring, most probably caused by the lack of specialized training in team test scoring and to the occurence of certain (minimal, though!) effects of subjectiveness, which are mentioned in the literature as unavoidable.

From the data obtained by interviewing FP, certain explanations for that situation could be identified. Those were included in the *case study* based on FP, from which several excerpts are briefly presented below.

Table 3. Number of respondents per student diary rubrics (%)

1. Sem. Topic	2. What Exactly I Did	3. What I Have Learned	4. Comments	1. Sem. Topic	2. What Exactly I Did	3. What I Have Learned	4. Comments
Groups of YC				***Groups of FP***			
83.72%	83.72%	76.74%	69.77%	46.48%	47.89%	45.07%	33.80%
86.05%	83.72%	81.40%	74.42%	42.25%	43.66%	39.44%	28.17%
100.00%	100.00%	90.70%	76.74%	39.44%	42.25%	35.21%	29.58%
79.07%	83.72%	81.40%	72.09%	33.80%	33.80%	33.80%	23.94%
44.19%	51.16%	51.16%	46.51%	28.17%	28.17%	23.94%	26.76%
60.47%	60.47%	53.49%	48.84%	23.94%	23.94%	21.13%	16.90%
20.93%	16.28%	16.28%	18.60%	22.54%	22.54%	18.31%	15.49%
53.49%	53.49%	46.51%	32.56%	4.23%	4.23%	4.23%	4.23%
58.14%	69.77%	46.51%	41.86%	14.08%	14.08%	11.27%	11.27%
69.77%	69.77%	62.79%	41.86%	16.90%	18.31%	16.90%	15.49%
95.35%	95.35%	93.02%	69.77%	11.27%	11.27%	9.86%	8.45%
60.47%	60.47%	58.14%	41.86%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
62.79%	62.79%	62.79%	46.51%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
2.33%	2.33%	0.00%	2.33%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
62.62%	***63.79%***	***58.64%***	***48.84%***	***20.22%***	***20.72%***	***18.51%***	***15.29%***

The case study is entitled *From acceptance to involvement*. The profile of FP is the following in broad lines: a graduate of the faculty just two years before participating in the research; a member of the department for one year and a half; having a CV pointing to her sound professional background; chosen from among

the department members due to previous excellent collaboration relationships with the researcher-teacher YC (co-authoring scientific papers, designing tests and teaching materials, classroom observation and so on). As could be seen from FP's interview, she saw her participation as an opportunity and as a stage in her professional development, which considerably increased her motivation and commitment for an entire term. Her remarks, questions and suggestions determined the author/researcher YC to reflect on identifying even better ways and means of ensuring homogeneity of the experiment conditions and its transferability potential. FP's interview answers are presented in their essence below, insofar as they can guide us in identifying the best paths towards transferring our experience to other teachers / contexts:

1) lack of pedagogical training other than an ESP course in faculty was considered by FP as a major drawback;
2) her participation in the experiment was considered by her as an opportunity to use materials that were considered interesting by the students, to permanently reflect to a range of methodological questions, to enrich her own repertoire of teaching skills, to learn from classroom observation and to become more aware of the lacks in her pedagogic training;
3) her permanent (and fair!) concern to teach as close to the modalities suggested by YC as possible, as she had observed them during her classroom observation episodes – this was conducive to having very few (notable) differences between the two teachers, and hence to getting a good validity of the entire experiment;
4) she felt encouraged towards developing an attitude of reflection on her own pedagogic activity and of looking for the rationale underlying her teaching decisions and options in both important and minor cases;
5) FP pointed out that such a professional experience could be useful to other members of the "teaching guild".

4. Conclusions

The experiment provided statistically significant data that confirmed all the hypotheses. As our focus here is mainly on the issue of approach *transferability*, our concluding remarks are meant to derive some recommendations in this respect.

Firstly, the results obtained are encouraging in firmly maintaining that the embedding of LLS and LUS in ESP courses can be successfully achieved in other educational settings as well, if harmonization is ensured at least in terms of the: main foci of the module taught, teaching style, level, profile and needs of the learners, facilities and equipment, time frame.

Then, on the long run, such an experience could become a real signpost for what is called *team teaching*, an approach that can produce positive effects in the study of foreign languages, as well as benefits for the participating teachers.

To conclude, the need has emerged of specialized teacher training, by: (i) creating an organized classroom observation framework, as well as by (ii) a common orientation of didactic practitioners from all generations toward scientific research areas meant to contribute to the optimization of the instructional process in a pedagogically well-justified manner. This should be conducive to an increase in the students' learning process quality.

At the same time, I consider that participation in such activities can also contribute to the permanent process of professional and personal development of the teachers involved in them.

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