Progressive Teaching amidst Standardization

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Abstract: Current U.S. educational policies set high standards for students' achievements, but reduce students' opportunities to interact and thus learn effectively. Also, current focusing on standardized tests promotes teaching students to memorize facts and successfully take tests rather than developing students' higher order thinking skills that turn the students into responsible decision makers. My study describes the results of the reflection process of a K-12 ESL teacher Barbara whose case shows that a K-12 ESL teacher can work on achieving the existing educational standards without having a negative impact on ESL students.

Keywords: ESL teacher, standardized test.

Introduction

Current U.S. educational policies set high standards for students' achievement (Madaus & Clarke, 2001), but reject the fundamental belief related to people's learning - people co-construct knowledge through social interaction (Valenzuela, 2005). Such a mismatch deprives students of an opportunity to learn effectively (Valenzuela, 2005). Another feature of current education is focusing on standardized tests, which promotes teaching students to memorize facts (Sacks, 2000) and successfully take tests rather than developing students' higher order thinking skills that turn the students into responsible decision makers (Valenzuela, 2005). Also, since the existing North

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American education overemphasizes standardized tests, it narrows the curriculum by tempting teachers to cover only those topics that can appear on a test (Sacks, 2000; Smith, 1991; Valenzuela, 2005). In addition, the current system reduces the choice of teaching methods and materials (Smith, 1991) and does not consider ESL students' personal, cultural, and academic needs (Madaus & Clarke, 2001; Valenzuela, 2005). What is more, the present educational system lowers students' self-esteem by equaling their worth to their test scores (Sacks, 2000; Valenzuela, 2005) and decreases students' motivation by not allowing them to move ahead in pursuing their favorite careers (Sacks, 2000).

My study describes the results of the reflection process of a K-12 ESL teacher Barbara who successfully negotiates present educational policies with developing students' individualities. Barbara is a native speaker of English, a Caucasian woman, age 53, who received her TESOL training in the U.S. At the time of the study, Barbara was teaching ESL for the second year. Before teaching ESL, she had taught French for eight years. During the study, Barbara was teaching seven and eight graders at an urban school district. Her students had entering, emerging, and transitioning levels of English proficiency, and some of them had mental and physical disabilities. During the study, Barbara reflected on knowledge and beliefs she had when planning instruction, on how the classroom contextual factors affected her in-class thinking and classroom practices, and on the relation between her planning phase knowledge and beliefs and her classroom practices.

Barbara's Planning Phase Knowledge and Beliefs

When planning her classes, Barbara knew that her professional goal was to develop the students' problem-solving skills, that is, abilities to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956; Common Core Curriculum, 2012; Skehan, 2001). For example, with that goal in mind, Barbara had her students "describe their favorite season[s]" (planning interview transcript). Barbara viewed that activity as a means to teach the students to express their ideas in a well-organized way (Block, 1986; Bloom et al., 1956). Barbara also taught her students how to fill in "the KWL chart" (stimulated recall interview transcript) requiring that the students analyze their prior knowledge on the topic under discussion, determine what knowledge on the topic they lacked and wanted to gain through instruction, and then summarize what they had learned after participating in instruction. To teach the students how to evaluate information, Barbara asked them, "'Do you think … [global warming] is a good

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thing?' 'Do you think it's a bad thing?'" (stimulated recall interview transcript) and asked the students to say "what they find interesting or surprising about the new learning" (planning interview transcript). To teach her students how to evaluate the effectiveness of their learning strategies, Barbara advised them, "If it helps for you to write the word in order to come up with the digit, then great" (stimulated recall interview transcript).

Another element of Barbara's planning phase knowledge was knowledge about her students that researchers consider an integral element of a teacher's expertise (Andrews, 2007; Johnson, 1999; Porter & Brophy, 1988; Shulman, 1987). Barbara recognized, "I have such a wide range of students in my class ranging from students who already read and write in Spanish and are learning to read and write in English to students who read and write in neither language" (document review transcript). She also said, that her students have "kind of a built-in negativity" (stimulated recall interview transcript). According to Barbara, "they want to say, 'No' first and then they will come up with something, but there's always 'No' first *((laughs a little))*" (stimulated recall interview transcript).

When planning instruction, Barbara also had knowledge about herself – another essential part of a teacher's knowledge base (Johnson, 1999). Barbara said that she "love[d the term] a reflective practitioner" (entry 1) and "like[d] the opportunity to modify a lesson when …[she] taught it for the first class, reflected on what went wrong, and …[was] able to make modifications before teaching it to a second class" (survey). Knowledge about her teaching assistant and the co-teacher was also part of Barbara's planning phase knowledge. Barbara's statement that her "TA and co-teacher do not have the same knowledge and beliefs about learning [as she does]" (entry 5) showed that she knew about her co-teachers' knowledge and beliefs. Also, Barbara's statement that "[she and her co-teachers] have no common planning time, so…[she] tr[ies] to meet them quickly at the beginning of class" (entry 5) expressed her belief in the importance for co-teachers to share knowledge and beliefs and collaborate. According to Honigsfeld (2010), such attributes make co-teaching effective.

Like a number of researchers, Barbara believed that people learn through interaction (Allwright, 1984; Gass, 1997; Gass & Mackey, 2007; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Krashen, 1981,

1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Newmann & Wehlage, 1993; Storch, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Wenger, 1998; Yule, 2009; Zhang, 2009). According to Barbara, "ALL *(emphasis is hers)* students benefit from student-student interaction, even when their language skills are so low in English" (entry 6). Also, following researchers, Barbara believed that to help students develop cognitively, a teacher should challenge them (Gass & Mackey, 2007; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Hursh, Haas, & Moore, 1983; Krashen, 1981, 1984; Newmann & Wehlage, 1993; Porter & Brophy, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). Barbara said that she was "trying to take … [the students] from wherever they are and move them forward" (document review transcript) and that she wanted to get the students "thinking about the material at the level you want them to think about that" (stimulated recall interview transcript).

In addition, Barbara shared researchers' belief that challenging students should be combined with providing them necessary support (Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, & Thwaite, 2001; Dewey, 1933; Ellis, 2009; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Kibler, Walqui, & Bunch, 2015; Krupnik, 1985; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Porter & Brophy, 1988). Barbara claimed that she tried to "give … [the students] whatever support even at the assessment stage" (document review transcript) and that to her, "a teacher is a coach who wants her athlete to work hard and excel. She provides ample opportunity to both practice and apply the skills learned" (survey).

According to Barbara, the means of facilitating students' learning include "engaging students deeply enough to promote [their] learning" (entry 5) (Lantolf & Johnson, 2007) and teaching them language-learning strategies (Gunning & Oxford, 2014; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1975), e.g., teaching the students how to "connect what they are going to learn to what they already know" (planning interview transcript) and how to "focus on reading and thinking through the question" (entry 8). Barbara believed that another way a teacher should use to facilitate students' learning is considering their individual characteristics including their personalities, prior knowledge, and learning styles (Breen et al., 2001; Delpit, 1988; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995; He & Miller, 2011; Huang, Tindall, & Nisbet, 2011; Ma, 2012b; Porter & Brophy, 1988). Barbara recognized:

> *[Students] will achieve more quickly in one modality than another depending on strengths and/or preferences, i.e., extremely shy students are slower to achieve oral fluency. Also learning styles can delay achievement when learning activities require use of area of weakness, i.e., students with visual processing delays will struggle with note-taking as a vehicle for acquiring new information. (Survey)*

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Barbara's described belief contradicts Yazdanpanah's (2015) finding that because of their need to focus on preparing students for tests, public school teachers are not interested in learning about their students' individual characteristics.

It is notable that Barbara's belief that a teacher should consider students' individual characteristics was in conflict with her knowledge about her professional goal – to develop students' cognitive abilities through teaching them the English Common Core Curriculum (ECCC), specifically, with some principles underlying teaching the ECCC. One of those principles is the expectation that all ESL students will learn English within a six-year period regardless of their individual learning needs (Clark-Gareca, 2016; Roy-Campbell, 2015). Another principle is the expectation that all ESL students will learn to use standard English (Kibler et al., 2015). Researchers reject the existence of one standard English because contexts of its use worldwide are different historically, educationally, and culturally. Additionally, people use English for different purposes – some use it to communicate with native speakers while some – to communicate with non-native speakers of English (Kachru, 1991, 1996; Johnson, 2009; Phillipson, 1992).

When planning instruction, Barbara also believed that one more way of helping students do a challenging task is scaffolding that includes modeling the task, focusing the students' attention on important information, or helping them stay on task (Ellis, 2008; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Shawer, 2010). Barbara shared that with "many of … [her] students who exhibit ADHD behaviors…. [she has to] stop the lesson and apply focusing strategies such as isolating important information through highlighting, reading, modeling, and co-writing to help them achieve the learning target" (entry 8). Barbara believed that sequencing activities in a way that the preceding activity prepares students for the next activity is another means of facilitating students' learning (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). For example, Barbara said, "Before they read the article, we are gonna have them look at underlined questions and read bolded text in the article to get them prepared for reading" (planning interview transcript). Barbara also said:

> *I think one of the reasons they quickly took to this partner activity is because they have a lot of practice doing this as a teacher-directed activity. I will need to make sure they are very comfortable with any future partner activity I assign by giving them lots of teacher-directed modeling before asking them to do it with a student partner. (Entry 6)*

Barbara believed that an additional way to promote students' success in learning is adjusting instruction according to the students' emerging needs, e.g., their comprehension, behaviors, performances, and affective states (Burns & Knox, 2011; Gass, 1997; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Porter & Brophy, 1988; Tudor, 2001; Wette, 2010). Barbara shared:

> *I think you are not a good teacher if you don't...you can't just say, 'Ok, this is my plan, I'm sticking to it regardless of what's going on in the class.' I think you need to be adaptive with the means of what's happening in the moment with the students who actually came to class that day. (Stimulated Recall Interview Transcript)*

Besides, Barbara believed that a teacher should help students learn by helping them increase their self-confidence (Bandura, 1993, 1997; Hursh et al., 1983). Barbara claimed that the students "need to feel successful [as language learners]" (document review transcript). Furthermore, Barbara believed that an ESL teacher should empower their students by developing their technology skills (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Norton, 2013). She said, "If a student has technical skills, this can help them demonstrate what they know non-verbally. Besides that, for a new language learner, they need to feel success, and that can give them success not linguistically" (survey).

Among Barbara's planning phase beliefs were also the beliefs that "giv[ing students] feedback" (survey) is an effective method to help them learn (Ellis, 2009; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Porter & Brophy, 1988) and that if "direct teacher instruction" (entry 6) can help a teacher better address their students' learning needs, the teacher should use it (Widodo, 2006). Regarding direct instruction, Widodo (2006) notes that some students make bigger progress in learning in the deductive instruction classroom than in the inductive instruction classroom.

Lastly, like a number of researchers, Barbara believed that an ESOL teacher's quality does not depend on the teacher's NEST or NNEST status; rather, it depends on the teacher's professional qualities (Andrews, 2007; Braine, 1999; Canagarajah, 2006; Nemtchinova, 2005; Park, 2012; Phillipson, 1992). Barbara claimed:

> *As long as the NNEST speaks fluently and with an accent that can be understood by most native speakers, there is no reason this factor should determine a teacher's effectiveness. The teacher's skill at providing adequate learning opportunities and feedback is a much more important determinant of student learning. (Survey)*

Thus, when planning instruction, Barbara knew the goal of her teaching and had some knowledge about her students, her co-teachers, and herself. Researchers argue that deep knowledge of their teaching context helps a teacher be productive (Andrews, 2007; Johnson, 1999; Porter &

Brophy, 1988; Shulman, 1987). Also, Barbara believed that students learn through interaction and need to be both challenged and supported. In addition, Barbara believed that an ESL teacher should empower their students and that a teacher's quality does not depend on their NEST or NNEST status.

How the Classroom Contextual Factors Affected Barbara's In-Class Thinking

My study showed that the classroom contextual factors influenced Barbara's in-class thinking. Thus, the study supported researchers' view on the classroom as a system of mutually related elements (e.g., Basturkmen, 2012; Borg, 2003; Burns & Knox, 2011). The study showed that the lesson plan and some of Barbara's knowledge and beliefs formed the basis for her in-class thoughts, and the state of the classroom computer, the students' engagement, performances, affective states, and prior knowledge prompted her in-class thoughts.

For example, during one of her classes, Barbara thought that her new student "would struggle with [the task]" (stimulated recall interview transcript). Barbara's thought was motivated by her following the lesson plan, and her knowledge about that particular task's complexity and the new student's language proficiency (e.g., Porter & Brophy, 1988) formed the basis for her thought. In another class, Barbara "tried to figure out what was preventing … [the particular student] from working independently" (stimulated recall interview transcript). Barbara's thought was prompted by that student's behavior, and Barbara's belief that a teacher should observe students' behaviors and performances (e.g., Hammond & Gibbons, 2005) formed the basis for that thought.

As the class developed, Barbara thought that one of the students seemed distracted. Barbara recalled after the class, "He seemed a little distracted" (stimulated recall interview transcript). The student seeming distraction prompted Barbara's thought, and her belief that a teacher should observe students' behaviors, performances, and emotional states (Burns, Edwards, Freeman, 2015; Tudor, 2001) formed the basis for Barbara's thought.

At another moment of the class, Barbara did not understand why the new student could not answer her question about the date the student's family pays their rent. Barbara shared:

> *I don't know what that means: … [her father] owns the house? I don't know if that means that she does not understand the word rent or I don't know if it means… she just*

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didn't know when he paid it. I'm not sure which of the three it is. (Stimulated Recall Interview Transcript)

The new student not being able to answer Barbara's question about the date their family pays the rent and the insufficiency of Barbara's knowledge about the new student stimulated Barbara's thought, and her belief that a teacher should have sufficient knowledge about their students (e.g., Andrews, 2007) formed the basis for her thought.

As the class went on, Barbara felt impressed by the students' doing more than she asked them to do. She shared, "I was so impressed…. they did more than I asked" (stimulated recall interview transcript). The students' doing more than Barbara asked them to do resulted in her feeling impressed by the students' performances. Barbara's knowledge that in the past, the students' engagement was not high (e.g., Porter & Brophy, 1988) formed the basis for her thought. Thus, the study showed that some classroom contextual factors formed the basis for Barbara's in-class thoughts and some prompted her thoughts.

How the Classroom Contextual Factors Affected Barbara's Classroom Practices

My study data showed that the classroom contextual factors affected Barbara's classroom practices. Thereby, the study confirmed researchers' claim that classroom practices are one of the multiple, mutually related elements of the classroom adaptive system (Burns et al., 2015; Burns & Knox, 2011; Tudor, 2001). The classroom contextual factors affected Barbara's classroom practices by forming the basis for them, by stimulating them, and by distorting the particular classroom activity. The lesson plan was the contextual factor that formed the basis for the classroom practices Barbara conducted as she planned. Such contextual factors as limited class time; the computer not starting right away; and the students' personality traits, behaviors, performances, comprehension, and affective states encouraged Barbara to conduct the unplanned classroom practices. Barbara's professional knowledge and beliefs were the contextual factors that formed the basis for her planned and unplanned classroom practices.

For example, one of the planned activities that Barbara conducted in the attended class was adding on the poster the new words necessary for doing the reading task. Barbara recollected, "I added … [the necessary vocabulary] to their list of "What they want to know more about" (stimulated recall interview transcript). Barbara's action was grounded on the lesson plan and her belief that a teacher should prepare students for doing a challenging task (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005).

Later in the class, Barbara helped the students see the connection between their prior knowledge and the new material. She recalled, "We registered all those words on our 'K' under the KWL chart, and that gave them some sense of where we are going. And they have background knowledge because we'd already studied the difference why the seasons are different in the Northern and Southern hemispheres" (stimulated recall interview transcript). The lesson plan and Barbara's belief that a teacher should teach students to connect their prior knowledge with new information (e.g., Porter & Brophy, 1988) formed the basis for her described practice.

At another moment in the attended lesson, Barbara asked the students to think about what they have learned in the class. Barbara said, "We'll close by thinking about what we've learned today'" (stimulated recall interview transcript). The lesson plan and Barbara's belief that a teacher should teach students to evaluate their learning (e.g., Oxford, 1990) served as the basis for the described classroom activity.

Among the unplanned classroom practices that Barbara conducted when teaching the attended class was praising how the new student did the reading task. Barbara recalled, "I articulated that to her that she's…she is not able or does not want to talk much in English, but wow was her comprehension, it was really strong, when she, when she answered the questions about the calendar" (stimulated recall interview transcript). Barbara's praise was prompted by the student's good performance and was based on Barbara's belief that a teacher should praise well-performing students to raise their sense of self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1993, 1997).

As the class went on, Barbara gave the new student a new task because the student finished the previous task faster that Barbara expected. Barbara reflected, "So I had luckily planned for her to go on Google classroom and practice some listening activities with numbers, so I was able to move her to that quicker than I thought cause I had anticipated that she wouldn't even finish the reading activity" (stimulated recall interview transcript). Thus, the student doing the previous task faster than Barbara expected resulted in Barbara's giving the student a new task, and Barbara's belief that a teacher should use class time productively (Nemtchinova, 2005) formed the basis for her teaching action.

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In the same class, Barbara "kept coming back trying to figure out what …[another student] needed to move forward" (stimulated recall interview transcript). Barbara's action was prompted by the student not being able to work independently that day. Barbara's teaching action was also grounded on her belief that a teacher should provide students with necessary support (e.g., Oxford, 1990; Vygotsky, 1990).

In a different class, such contextual factors as the students' disengagement, the presence of Barbara's co-teachers, the difference between the co-teachers' professional knowledge and beliefs and those of Barbara, and an absence of Barbara and the co-teachers' "common planning time" (entry 5) led to the distortion of the way Barbara's planned activity was conducted. The co-teachers did not promote the students' independence to the extent Barbara expected. Barbara recalled, "The students were particularly difficult to settle down, and I took the quickest path to settling them down: I broke them into groups to allow the adults in the classroom to help bring them to the lesson. Unfortunately, some students got a very watered-down learning experience because of it" (entry 5). In addition to the described classroom factors, some of Barbara's beliefs formed the basis for that particular classroom practice. The beliefs were: students learn well when they are highly engaged in learning (e.g., Larsen & Freeman, 2010), and co-teaching is an effective way to increase students' engagement (Honigsfeld (2010).

Regarding the difference between her and her co-teachers' views on teaching, Barbara said that the co-teachers tend to speak too much Spanish with the students and just 'give' them the answer in English rather than encouraging them to produce their own, imperfect, but authentic answers. It is definitely quicker to take this approach, but the students aren't getting the practice they need to process and produce language. (Entry 5)

Thus, the classroom contextual factors affected Barbara's classroom practices (Borg, 2003; Burns & Knox, 2011; Johnson, 1999; Tudor, 2001; Woods, 1996). They did it by encouraging Barbara to conduct the unplanned practices, by forming the bases for her planned and unplanned practices, and by distorting one of her planned activities.

The Relation Between Barbara's Planning Phase Knowledge and Beliefs and her Classroom Practices

To explore the relation between her planning phase knowledge and beliefs and her classroom practices, Barbara determined knowledge and beliefs underlying her classroom practices

and compared and contrasted those knowledge and beliefs with her planning phase knowledge and beliefs. That comparing and contrasting showed that some of the knowledge and the beliefs were the same. The finding showed that unlike researchers' participants, whose classroom practices did not correspond with their stated knowledge and beliefs (Basturkmen et al., 2004; Borg & Burns, 2008; Breen et al., 2001; Farrell & Bennis, 2013), Barbara aligned her classroom practices with some of her planning phase knowledge and beliefs.

In addition, Barbara's classroom practices revealed some of her implicit knowledge and beliefs. My finding corresponded with researchers' claim that it is hard for teachers to articulate knowledge and beliefs embodied in their classroom practices; therefore, those knowledge and beliefs can be implicit (Basturkmen, 2012; Breen et al., 2001). Furthermore, my study showed that Barbara's implicit knowledge and beliefs were in alignment with her planning phase knowledge and beliefs. Such an alignment meant that Barbara's explicit and implicit knowledge and beliefs formed an integrated whole – a sign characteristic for an expert teacher's knowledge base (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004; Phipps & Borg, 2009).

For example, when reminding her students about a forthcoming quiz and asking them to take their learning seriously, Barbara realized her planning phase belief that to help students learn, a teacher should teach them language-learning strategies including the strategy of taking responsibility for their learning (e.g., Lantolf & Johnson, 2007). Barbara told her students, "Listen, you have a quiz on Monday. You have to take it serious" (stimulated recall interview transcript). She also noted, "I am coming around to believe that quality one-on-one instruction makes students more **individually accountable** (*emphasis is Barbara's*) to learning the material" (entry 2).

When reacting to some of her students' overuse of Spanish during their task completion, Barbara asked those particular students to repeat the task in English. Barbara recalled, "I said, 'Now you need to say it in English' because …[one of the students] was holding up the picture and saying it in Spanish" (stimulated recall interview transcript). By asking the students to repeat the task in English, Barbara realized her planning phase belief that a teacher should help students learn by maximizing their opportunities to practice English (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Nemtchinova, 2005). When "help[ing] …[the students] distinguish between nineteen and ninety with the *teen* versus the

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ty" (stimulated recall interview transcript), Barbara realized her planning phase belief that a teacher should help students learn English by teaching them such language-learning strategies as paying attention and comparing (Oxford, 1990).

When asking the students "if they wanted to take the test right then" (entry 4), not in the next lesson as she planned it, Barbara revealed her implicit belief that a teacher should show students that he or she respects their opinion (e.g., Lantolf & Johnson, 2007). When Barbara "had to send…[the disruptive student] to the help zone to calm down" (entry 8), she revealed her other implicit belief - a teacher should help all students in the classroom realize their right for learning by stopping disruptive behavior (Brown, 2003; Waring, Reddington, & Tadic, 2016). Also, when Barbara had the students work together "helping each other IN ENGLISH *(emphasis is Barbara's)*" (entry 6), she used her implicit knowledge that "the students prefer to work together rather than separately or with a teacher" (entry 6). Thus, the data showed that Barbara's classroom practices reflected some of her planning phase knowledge and beliefs and revealed some of her implicit knowledge and beliefs.

Conclusion

My study showed how the K-12 ESL teacher Barbara negotiated the present educational policies of standardization with developing her students' individualities. While current educational practices lead to reducing classroom interaction, reducing interest to students' individual needs (Valenzuela, 2005), teaching students to memorize facts, lowering students' self-esteem and motivation to study (Sacks, 2000), and reducing the choice of teaching methods and materials (Smith, 1991), Barbara developed her students' individualities through the use of progressive teaching methods (Dewey, 1938). In other words, Barbara's case showed that a K-12 ESL teacher can work on achieving high educational standards without negatively affecting their students.

As a progressive educator, when planning instruction, Barbara knew that her professional goal was to develop her students cognitively (e.g., Dewey, 1933, 1938) and had knowledge about her students, herself, and her colleagues (e.g., Andrews, 2007; Johnson, 1999). Also, as a progressive teacher, Barbara believed that an ESL teacher's quality depends on their ability to facilitate students' cognitive development by using the following progressive teaching methods: engaging students in interaction (e.g., Gass & Mackey, 2007), helping students feel successful (e.g., Hattie, 2012), learning students' individual characteristics and considering them in instruction,

challenging students, scaffolding students' work, sequencing activities in a way that the preceding activity prepares students for the next activity (e.g., Hammond & Gibbons, 2005), teaching students language learning strategies (e.g., Oxford, 1990), and is adjusting instruction according to the students' emerging needs such as their comprehension, behaviors, performances, and affective states (e.g., Burns & Knox, 2011; Tudor, 2001; Wette, 2010). Importantly, Barbara followed her beliefs in her practice. Finally, since the study findings were the results of Barbara' reflection, the study showed that she was able to critically reflect on her work and thus grow professionally.

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