

Issues in Language Instruction

A Journal for Practicing and Interpreting Teaching English as an Additional Language

An Immersive Learning Experience for Teachers and the Change of Teaching Practices

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Introduction

This essay is nothing less than a happy result of an enriching experience the authors had during a short training program in early 2023. The program took place at the University of Kansas and granted the opportunity of learning more about teaching methods, technology, phonetics and pronunciation, and cultural interaction.

We would like to start this essay by introducing ourselves so that our readers understand a little of our background and the path that led us here. We met during the PDPI Program in 2023 and spent a total of seven weeks sharing a room, ideas, laughter, difficulties and thus, becoming real friends. But our life stories before that January night when we first saw each other happened miles apart and under different circumstances.

Inspired by a teacher from her school days, Laila wanted to help others to learn more and motivate others to have access to a new culture, knowledge, and perspectives without being limited by the language. This is why she became a teacher. Currently, she is a college professor and high school teacher in the state of Rio de Janeiro, where she teaches all levels of English at college and basic English in high school.

Professional development is what keeps her going. This is why the PDPI program was such a good fit for her. Although it seemed so unreachable at first due to personal insecurities, the program offered the real-life experience she lacked, where her theoretical knowledge could finally be put into practice and culture would be experienced first-hand. The program offered a course on pronunciation, communication, teaching methodologies, and technology as well as opportunities for socializing. This would help Laila turn her classroom into a fruitful learning environment and would be a remarkable first experience abroad.

Kathia always loved the English language, especially music from the U.S. and Great Britain. She started studying the language at age 13 and never stopped. Inspired by the idea of passing this passion on and granting others the opportunity of learning a second language, she went to college to be a Portuguese and English teacher. Since then, she has kept on studying to improve her teaching skills. She started teaching English in private language schools and then in public schools. She also participated in professional development programs, including the 2014 PDPI program at the University of Delaware and, more recently, the 2023 PDPI program at the University of Kansas. Currently she is studying to get a master's degree and intends to do research in the field of English teaching and learning.

Today, Kathia teaches at two different public schools in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Her students are middle and high schoolers, and she also teaches adults in the state program *Educação de Jovens e Adultos*, which freely translates as Education for Youth and Adults. It is an opportunity for older students to return to their studies or to continue their

studies. The lessons are at a basic level, and the classes have an average of 20 to 40 students. Since there are so many students in the classroom, it is difficult to develop listening and speaking activities with them. The lessons end up focusing more on grammar, vocabulary, and reading. Reading is especially emphasized in high school classes because of its relevance to university entrance exams and other high stakes tests.

We applied for this PDPI program in 2019 before the coronavirus pandemic. Although it was a great opportunity to enrich our personal and professional experience, it was not easy to think about leaving our home country and family for six weeks. The anxiety and mixed feelings were difficult to handle. When the pandemic came, everything stopped, and we had to wait. On the one hand, it was a relief not having to handle this soon and, on the other hand, it was sad to put this dream on hold. It took so long that we thought this ship had sunk. Fortunately, we learned that the program was going to happen. We could dream and be anxious again over planning the trip. But feelings set aside, the will to live this experience one more time in another U.S. state and at another university and to have the opportunity to learn more and further develop professionally was more important.

Our Experience in the PDPI Program at the University of Kansas

A lot was going through our minds before going into the PDPI program. Kathia had done this before, but for Laila, being in an English-speaking country was a completely new experience, and doing so in the winter was another scary element to add to everything else such as leaving family behind, facing insecurities, and spending money at an unfavorable exchange rate. Although there was a lot going on and much too quickly, it all felt natural somehow.

We did not expect as much support as we had; the infrastructure offered by the program was beyond imagination. Our living arrangements, the campus beauty, and how much we felt like any other Kansas University student were joyful surprises that added to the incredible lessons and teachers, which made our goodbyes hard and filled with tears and mixed feelings.

It was impossible not to take every moment available to explore the campus, in the snow or under the sun, with the group or by ourselves, simply to gather our thoughts and feel the sadness when missing our families was too hard to handle. The daily scenario offered by the jaw-dropping KU campus and charming town of Lawrence drew us to explore not only the nightlife, but to go on outings, picnics, visit lakes, museums and get to know more of the history of the United States, more specifically the Midwest and the struggles of the school system against racism. In particular, we were interested in the management of resources to provide proper education for all races, the reality of teachers when teaching in the state of Kansas, and how similar our challenges are. The program made it possible for us to meet with school and college staff, visit school sites, and ask as much as our curiosity demanded.

Although Kathia had already had the PDPI Program experience years before, this was now completely different due to the elapse of nine years and a lot of major changes in life and her career. The University of Kansas was a happy surprise. Although it was not possible for the participants to choose the university, the choice could not have been better. The teachers and the classes were brilliant and enriched our teaching knowledge. The most important thing was that we not only had methodology, pronunciation, technology, and communication classes, the teachers really wanted to listen to our teaching reality in Brazil and took our reality into consideration when designing their lessons. We learned how to put new methods into practice and how to adapt them to our classrooms and students.

What can we say about the friends we made? We will always remember the Brazilians, Americans, Kuwaitis, South Africans, Costa Ricans, Afghans, younger and older people of all genders. Some were people we stopped on the street and started a conversation with, others we “begged” into recording a podcast with us. In class and outside, we learned more than idioms or pronunciation, we learned that there is much more when it comes to language learning. For example, culture involves unseen or invisible aspects. We experienced that in class and on the street with our new friends, Uber drivers, restaurant servers, and in our everyday interactions.

These cultural interactions opened our eyes to a new kind of English teaching we never really paid attention to. Until this point, teaching culture in the Brazilian EFL classroom was limited to the visible elements of Edward Hall’s well-known cultural iceberg analogy. Now that we have lived and discussed in depth the invisible and deep cultural elements in our communication classes, we know and feel more comfortable exploring culture on another level, so our students not only have deeper insights into other cultures, but also their own. Hopefully, this kind of language instruction will lead to more respect and appreciation.

The university also provided important moments outside the classroom. We had the opportunity to engage in volunteer work, which was a rich and beautiful experience. Kathia went to the Ecumenical Campus Ministries (ECM) veggie lunch. ECM is a place where everyone is welcome. They serve a vegetarian lunch every Thursday, and we went there to help prepare and serve the food. It is a very warm space surrounded by music and books. Every week they offer workshops about interesting and important topics, cultural events, and fun events, like karaoke nights. Laila also did volunteer work, but at the Jubilee Cafe, where socially struggling people would go to have a decent breakfast served at tables, in a warm place and with a delicious menu. This is a place where the reality beyond the stereotypical American dream could be seen, and we were given the chance to help provide at least one actual meal in a day for many people.

We also visited different cities in Kansas, like Kansas City, for some shopping and Topeka to visit the Kansas State Capitol building and hear about the political organization of the state. We went up to the Capitol dome to see a fantastic view of the city and face the fear of being in such a high place. We also went to Monroe School, the national historical site of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case.¹ We learned a lot about segregation and the Black children's struggle to have the right to study.

The work in class and homework kept us busy, but the group seized every moment to walk around the city and experience the cold weather, which was quite different from the weather in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Going downtown, taking the bus, walking around the campus were all amazing moments. There is no doubt that the Brazilians in the group and the friends we made are for life. This is what the PDPI experience can provide us: six weeks living in the same place, going to the same classes, laughing and crying together, and counting on each other. It connected us in a particular way forever. We will always have Lawrence and the University of Kansas in common.

How the PDPI Program Influenced our English Language Instruction at our Home Institutions

After such immersive learning, it is impossible for us, as teachers, to keep doing things the same way in our classrooms. This experience has changed the way we see our students and the teaching and learning process. The methodology lessons taught us much more than new concepts. They taught us to look at our students as human beings, with needs and expectations and to listen to them, engage in their lives, and let them see us teachers as human beings too, with flaws and personal lives. Although sometimes it is difficult to handle this in large classes, this perspective changed our teaching. We learned that if we cannot reach all students, to reach at least one of them and make a change in that student's life is something we should be proud of.

The technology classes provided new information, too. We were exposed to several technological tools and activities online and offline, since not all teachers have access to the Internet in our classrooms. That way multiple materials can be developed and shared with our peers. Every week we had the opportunity to research and share new websites and apps that provide games, quizzes, and activities we can use with our students. The Education technology classes helped us plan and record a podcast with three guests: a KU student, a KU professor, and a member of the KU International Short Programs staff. With the podcast, we got to know more about the similarities and differences of high school life and university life on campus, as well as the reality of a Brazilian professor living and working at an American university. It was an amazing experience to record the podcast, something we had never done before. The campus sound studio structure was amazing, with soundproof booths, computers, microphones, and we could count on the staff to edit the podcast with high quality. After recording the podcasts, we could share them with our teacher and colleagues. Each group thought about a different and interesting topic to be discussed and recorded.

The pronunciation classes were also very useful to our practice too, especially in making us better speakers of the English language and enriching our lessons as well. When our students realize we really know what we are talking about and speak the language well, our credibility is enhanced. The instructor was very thoughtful and provided individual attention to help us improve. We had a wonderful time learning more about pronunciation topics, presenting in class, and mainly practicing together.

The communication classes were remarkable mainly in giving us the understanding of the concept of deep culture. We have always included cultural aspects in our classes, but the discussion about a deeper side of culture opened our eyes to the importance of carrying this knowledge to our classrooms. We were presented with the well-known concept

¹ *Brown v. Board of Education* is a U.S. Supreme Court case that ruled that racial segregation was not constitutional in public schools.

of a “cultural iceberg.” Normally, what we used to teach was the visible part of the iceberg such as age, clothes, gender, language, behavior, physical characteristics, as well as special dates typical of English-speaking countries, like Valentine’s Day and Saint Patrick’s Day. We learned, however, that it is even more important to discuss the “hidden” parts of the iceberg, what is called the deep culture, such as family traditions, political and social issues, religion, beliefs, racism, and all types of prejudice. We now more fully understand that there is so much more to discuss and understand about cultural differences than what we were teaching. Due to space limitations, we do not elaborate on deep culture here. For more information, the reader is referred to Hall (1976) and the discussion of Hall in Shaules (2019).

Suggestions for the Program

As said before, PDPI is an incredible program that allows us to live the experience of being a student at a North American university along with having an amazing cultural immersion experience and, more importantly, improving our teaching skills. The suggestions that could be given to make a change in the program are about the tight schedule. Understandably, there is so much to be done in so little time, but we would have liked to enjoy and learn even more about a place or an event on our own. We did not seem to have enough time to do so, or when we had the time, we did not have the energy.

This change would improve the program in the sense that the participants would be able to really experience being part of the university and the city, being able to immerse even more in the culture, get to know more people, practice more English outside the classroom and, consequently, enrich our vocabulary, pronunciation, and cultural knowledge to pass it on to our students.

Conclusion

At this point, we believe our teaching has been transformed by the valuable learning experience we went through. We feel forever changed by the PDPI program. We are now considering more professional development ideas, including contacting the U.S. State Department Regional English Language Office, the Fulbright program, and other organizations. In 2023, Kathia enrolled in a master’s degree program, and Laila started on a Ph.D. degree. After the PDPI program, both research projects will certainly be influenced by what was seen, heard and experienced.

In terms of language improvement, Laila is about to get her TESOL Certificate from Arizona State University and was selected as a trainer by *World Learning*.² Kathia definitely felt a significant increase in her ability to speak English as a second language, which will help her in the classroom as a teacher and in her research in the master’s degree program.

Not only do we offer our gratitude to all involved in the PDPI program, from the ones we did not have the pleasure of thanking, such as the many administrative employees who dealt with all the bureaucracy (Brazilian and American) to the staff that helped us on a daily basis indulging our doubts, and listening to our victories and losses. We also thank both governments and hope that they keep valuing us, English teachers, and more importantly that they keep valuing the teaching and learning of English as a way for us to help our students to change their perspective in life.

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² An organization associated with the American Embassy and National Geographic to help English teachers around the world improve their language and teaching skills. <https://learn.eltngl.com/>