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A Journey of Self-Improvement with the PDPI Program

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Introduction

As an educator, I have been teaching English since 2008 in divergent contexts, such as private English schools, public schools, private schools, and private tutorials. I have a degree in Language Arts specializing in Portuguese and English from UNISUAM – Centro Universitario Augusto Motta (UNISUAM – the University Center Augusto Motta). My first experience as an educator was with high school and junior high groups in a private school and some months later in an English school. Later, in 2011, I started working simultaneously in public schools at the elementary and junior high levels, which constitute most classes I currently have.

From 2016 to 2021, I felt I needed to take a break from teaching in private schools and English language schools. Although I kept teaching in public school, I realized that I needed more English language practice, or I would lose the language. Consequently, I decided to teach in English language schools again. I worked with groups from all levels, which allowed me to speak English almost full time throughout the day.

At this point I realized I wanted not only to improve my speaking skills but I also wanted to improve as an educator, more generally. Undoubtedly, the PDPI program was one of those chances. It offered the possibility of being immersed in an English-speaking country, learning about the culture, improving my English, and enhancing my skills through academic studies. Hence, I decided to participate in the selection, and, as a result, I was approved.

The schools where I have taught for the last 10 years are mostly located in poor urban communities known as *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro. It is relevant to mention this fact since the social condition of my students limits them in terms of access to different cultures. Moreover, the number of students per class varies from 28 to 35, and I teach 11 groups in the same school.

My main goals with my students are, firstly, to get them excited about English. Pushing the boundaries of shyness is of great importance. The more students feel comfortable with a new language and comprehend its applicability, the more they will be open minded to anything they need to learn and be less reactive to what might look difficult at first sight. That said, what is emphasized during my lessons at public schools is vocabulary, especially words and phrases concerning social interactions, personal interests, and global language used in small talk, short trips, and food.

My Experience in the PDPI Program at the University of Kansas

I have never traveled abroad before participating in the PDPI program. According to my own research on Kansas, I expected to find nice people who would be fans of sports and the University. I also expected a city where I could find a peaceful environment provided with services that worked well. Moreover, my research revealed that winter weather in Kansas can be very cold, which did concern me. Once I got to Lawrence, Kansas, my expectations were confirmed. For instance, people are fanatics for basketball, albeit I had not been aware of how big an NCAA game is. The city is also full of cultural attractions beyond sports, and the public transportation worked much better than I had expected.

As a PDPI participant, I attended short courses on teaching methodology, culture, communication, and pronunciation. In each course, different activities were developed such as group work activities, brainstorming about teaching

strategies and approaches, lesson planning, podcasts, short presentations, classroom observations and demonstrations of lessons. Through theory and practice, I was able to open my mind to self-assessment, work on my flaws, learn from the teachers and other colleagues, understand different points of view and, as a result, improve my abilities.

Non-campus activities, such as volunteer work, were also a point of considerable importance regarding social interaction with native speakers. For example, I helped people prepare food which was served for free to anyone who was in need or just wanted to get to know more about the nonprofit organization. PDPI participants also went on outings such as the trip to downtown Topeka, the state capitol of Kansas, and the museum *Brown v. Board of Education*, where I was able to learn more about the history of Kansas.¹ The PDPI program also included lectures by education experts on campus, and these were paramount to guiding me to a better understanding of how the educational system in the US works and consequently allowed me to compare it with the Brazilian school system. As far as I could see, all activities contributed positively to my personal growth, and I am very grateful to have taken part as much as I could.

As a result of my experiences, I was able to make a number of observations of how English is used in the U.S. Some examples include the dynamic way people communicate on a daily basis, including idioms, how North Americans respond to basic greetings, and how people can ask for help. I also observed some unique aspects of local culture such as the sales tax system.

When it comes to language pedagogy, the lessons I attended were incredibly relevant to me. I learned some teaching strategies, improved my way of working in groups with my students, worked on my classroom management to give students clearer instructions toward a specific goal, and learned to use a variety of activities to build a strong classroom community. I was also able to identify specific vocabulary that I can use in my own lessons.

One important experience I had in the PDPI program was a presentation I gave with colleagues contrasting U.S. and Brazilian culture. Differences included greetings, food, weather, tipping and payment methods, school systems, measurements, and sports. These topics will fascinate my students and that is why I intend to incorporate them in my language instruction.

How the PDPI program Influenced my English Language Instruction at my Home Institution

The PDPI program had a great influence on the way I teach. I can now answer some questions with more certainty concerning how people actually use English in the U.S. For example, when asked by students how to respond to “what’s up?” or “how’s it going?” now I can give my students an answer based on authentic English usage. Moreover, I now know that formulaic greetings such as “how are you?” are more of a conversation starter. The person does not actually expect a detailed response to the question.

To be immersed in a culturally different environment and to communicate and interact well reinforced my own beliefs on how important it is to have solid use of social skills, especially related to respecting personal space. For example, physical distance between conversation partners varies from culture to culture. In the U.S., North Americans tend to keep a greater social distance from their conversation partners than Brazilians do. Therefore, respecting personal space in the U.S. requires more physical distance than in Brazil.

Vocabulary is another aspect of language that I was able to develop along with pronunciation and rhythm. With a wider range of vocabulary, I now can speak more fluently and understand better since I did not know many words before participating in the PDPI program. In addition, I am now more aware of how to speak with an English rhythm, emphasize specific words, and use thought groups. This has made me a better English teacher. For example, when students try to read word by word separately and sound out all the phonemes of every word, afraid to make mistakes, I tell them that grouping words together brings naturalness to speech. This point is important to address in class because students often complain about the speed of the listening activities. For example, my students tend to listen for individual words such as “going” and “to” for the future tense. However, North American English speakers group these words together and pronounce them as “gonna.” Grouping these words together and reducing the forms from “going to” to “gonna” gives the perception of fast speech, and is more natural sounding to English speakers in the U.S. It is important to help students work on contextualized pronunciation and use thought groups to prevent them from sounding robotic.

¹ *Brown v. Board of Education* was a 1954 supreme court case that made racial segregation in US public schools illegal.

Thanks to the courses in methodology and technology in education, we learned that some approaches are important, like splitting the class into groups for warm up activities (such as memory games) and giving instructions to students before delivering handouts. This improved my classroom management during lessons.

I now use much more technology in my instruction. I now use technology to develop quizzes and crossword puzzles. I also use Google Drive and I record podcasts. Another software program I use is Kahoot, which is a fun gaming program to help students review vocabulary and grammar.

Improvements or Changes to the Program

As far as I could see, the program does not need any improvement. Perhaps, if more weeks were provided, I would have had more chances to interact with native and international speakers of English and improve my own English proficiency skills. After all, practice makes perfect.

Conclusion

In conclusion, everything I have learned from the PDPI program enriched my soul and already made me a better teacher and human being. I definitely have plans to return a second time for professional growth; I have a lot of room for improvement. But that is not all. I am conscious of the responsibility I have as a teacher to be committed to my ongoing development. Having said that, I intend to put into practice everything I acquired during the program. Moreover, I will seek other programs of improvement for teachers and possibly get a master's degree.

Brazil is definitely not an easy place for teachers to make a living. I hope that professional development opportunities such as the PDPI program will help me advance in my career so that I can work more comfortably and fewer hours a day, which will give me time to create world-class lessons for my students.