Resumen
El esfuerzo por mantenerse al día con los métodos pedagógicos y las herramientas de enseñanza más recientes, sin mencionar las expectativas diferentes de los estudiantes respecto al entorno de aprendizaje, puede hacer que los profesores se sientan irrelevantes o dejados de lado. Este artículo examina las implicaciones para profesores de los cambios en la filosofía y la práctica de la enseñanza-aprendizaje en el siglo XXI. Después de examinar algunas perspectivas sobre lo que significa ser profesor/estudiante/aprendiz y mirar brevemente la relación profesor-estudiante y cómo esto se negocia, concluye enfatizando lo que debería ser el principio central de la enseñanza: un enfoque en el/la estudiante.

Abstract
The scramble to keep up with the latest teaching methods and classroom tools, not to mention students’ differing expectations of their learning environment, may result in teachers feeling that they are being left behind or that their role is becoming irrelevant. This paper examines the implications for teachers of the changes in the philosophy and the practice of teaching-learning in the 21st century. After discussing some of the different perspectives on what it is to be a teacher/student/learner and looking briefly at the teacher-student relationship and how this is negotiated, it concludes by emphasizing what the central tenet of teaching should be: a focus on the student.

Palabras clave: filosofía de enseñanza; estudiantes universitarios; constructivismo; relación profesor-estudiante.

Key words: teaching philosophy; university students; constructivism; teacher-student relationship.

A new philosophy of teaching-learning
Trends in pedagogy often reflect societal changes: the methods used in language classrooms represent the zeitgeist of each period in time, from the authoritarian, “teacher knows best” ethos of the 1950s through the laid-back and optimistic 1970s to 21st century individualism and insecurities. The most recent transformation of language pedagogy has involved a shift from “method” or “approach” to what we might call a “philosophy” of teaching-learning, with a constructivist emphasis on personal experience and the individual’s role in the creation of meaning.

The role of the teacher has become unclear. Do we instruct, suggest, guide, model, facilitate or moderate? Are we experts or fellow learners? As the traditional methods of language teaching gradually made way for the learner-centred approaches of the 1970s and 1980s, teachers were often referred to as “guides” or “facilitators”. Camilleri (1997: 36) describes the teacher as a sort of jack of all trades as ‘a manager, a resource person and a counsellor’, and Al Asmari (2013: 1) uses the phrase ‘facilitator and counselor’. The teacher’s role as a source of knowledge is downplayed even more in a constructivist learning environment, where ‘[s]tudents become the centre of the instructional curriculum. Students’ prior knowledge and conceptions form the starting point for learning experiences’ (Murphy 2000: n.p.). As learners become more au-
tonomous, what then is the function of the teacher? Williams and Burden (1997, cited in Murphy ibid.: n.p.), list ten propositions meant to serve as a guide for teaching and learning languages in the 21st century. These include challenges such as 'Teachers must ... have a sound grasp of what their learners see as important and meaningful' (quite a challenge if reality is, as constructivism suggests, uniquely individual) and ‘a learning experience should contribute to a person’s whole education as well as to their learning of an aspect of the language’. At least these authors concede that ‘There is a significant role for the teacher as mediator in the language classroom.’ But they then go on to elaborate that ‘The teacher fosters the right climate for individual respect, for confidence building, for appropriate learning strategies and for learner autonomy.’ So it seems that instead of teaching language, what we actually do in the classroom is more akin to the role of a social mediator!

As the above suggests, there is often a chasm between research and practice and it is hard to tell whether the research “chicken” or the classroom practice “egg” came first. It can take years for trends in second and foreign language research to be transformed into techniques that are usable in the classroom. It takes even longer for new ideas to appear in the form of textbooks or software applications, which tend to be driven by market economics. Except in small universities, where most professors are both teachers and researchers, there may be a marked lack of communication between those whose interest is primarily research and those who work in the classroom.

Perspectives
Teachers are often portrayed by researchers as traditionalists who are unwilling and resistant to change. Murphy (op.cit.) promotes this assumption in her discussion of what will happen when this type of teacher ‘meets the potentially constructivist environment of the Internet’ and frets that ‘teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning FSFL [French as a second or foreign language] using OLEs [online learning environments] will result in nothing more than old wine in new bottles.’ Kaufman (2004: 310) cites ‘prior educational experiences that contribute to teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning and shape their teaching behavior in ways that are resistant to change.’ In a similar vein, Barillaro (2011: n.p.) asserts that ‘Teachers’ beliefs are difficult to change.’ Teachers, with their frontline perspective, of course often have their own views of the usefulness and relevance of researchers!

This question of the applicability of different methods to different teaching environments brings us back to the central issue of perspective, which I will examine in more detail in the next section. As we have seen, assumptions are often made about teachers (all teachers? certain groups of teachers?) being “resistant” to change (all the time? under what circumstances?) or about certain techniques, for example the assertion that TBLT [task-based language teaching] is a ‘learner-centred approach which does not assume … that languages can be learnt through a “one size fits all” lesson built exclusively around what the teacher thinks learners should learn at any given time’ (Klapper 2003: 39). But is it really so black and white? Is it so easy to categorize what happens in the classroom as “teacher-centred” or “learner-centred”? What does “learner-centred” even mean in most contexts? If a teacher uses TBLT to design an activity for her students and then steps back into the role of facilitator, is this a teacher-led or a learner-led lesson? And if all students are carrying out the same task, albeit in individual ways, is this not a “one size fits all” lesson in many ways? We might also question the role of the student/learner. What do these individuals want or expect from the experience of learning a second or foreign language? Do we call them students or learners? Language
users (Ogilvie and Dunn 2010)? Language researchers (Sayer 2010)? Is there a difference between student-centred and student-directed learning? As a teacher, one must weigh the merits of different approaches to second language acquisition and find a balance between personal teaching preferences and the extremes of being thought to be either too old fashioned or too trendy or insubstantial. In addition, teachers find themselves having to respond to other people’s perspectives regarding their role in the classroom. There are now so many players in the game – students, parents, teachers, departmental units, school or university administrations – that we cannot speak of perspectives without asking “Whose?” The following section will look at the three main groups involved in the process of language teaching: the theorists and policy makers, including the different levels of administration, the teachers themselves, and, of course, the students.

Administrators and policy makers
As we have seen, researchers have their own views of what does or what should happen in a language teaching environment, but their ideas are not necessarily implemented (Ellis 1997: 71). On the other hand, policy makers make profound changes that affect many aspects of the education process, as with the reforms instigated by the Bologna Process in Europe in 1999. Many of these reforms, especially those dealing with mobility among university programs, may well have a positive impact on education, some of them look good on paper but will probably be difficult to implement, and others have, not surprisingly, been met with resistance and foot-dragging. Jones (2006: 317) includes the ‘massification of higher education’ (that is, the transition from elite to mass higher education) as one of the external factors which has had the greatest impact on the nature of academic work. Universities are autonomous at some levels, but in the larger universities there are often common syllabi for multi-sectioned courses which impose certain teaching methods on the instructors. Administrators, who have their own issues and interests to consider, also expect teachers to devote time to activities such as committee work and/or research if they wish to be considered for promotion. Adding to the confusion about the role of the teacher, there are continual and increasing expectations of teachers in terms of availability and willingness to solve minor problems for their students. Where a previous generation of professors left the administrative work to secretaries, professors are now often expected to field technical or organizational questions from students at any time of the day and often by email. Like middle management, teachers are frequently caught between the conflicting expectations of their superiors and their students.

Teachers
Program or curriculum changes have an impact on what is expected of teachers and can affect the teacher-student relationship; uncertainty over the respective roles of teacher and student makes it difficult to know exactly what is expected from each player. With the increasing emphasis on learner-centred education, the role of the teacher becomes more nebulous. They are not necessarily considered to be the experts they once were: anyone can look something up on Wikipedia and become an instant expert on any topic. In higher education, as students’ expectations change about precisely what a university education entails, it becomes more difficult to define the respective roles of student and teacher. What do our students expect of us in the classroom? How relevant is the physical presence of a teacher in an online world? What demands can we as teachers realistically make of the students? What assumptions can we make about their prior education? What indeed are the teachers’ perceptions of the teaching-learning process?

Technology is another area of high ex-
pectations. Even though the actual content may not have changed significantly, language technology has made amazing developments in some ways and teachers are expected to be up to date with new technologies and to use them in the classroom. The very existence of these new programs and applications heightens expectations regarding innovation and detail: where once a teacher could scrawl something quickly on a blackboard, she is now expected to present material in a sophisticated PowerPoint, complete with jokey animations. Not only does this require time spent on the development of this material, it also stifles spontaneity, as a PowerPoint presentation is recycled from one class to the next and may be used year after year with few modifications. Nevertheless, students now want and expect a certain level of technical expertise from their instructors. Technology in the classroom is a double-edged sword: the idea that its use can free up class time for more productive activities is often a misconception.

Students

Although it is self-evident that students are the raison d'être and the most important element of the education system, there is surprisingly little examination of what they themselves think of it all. Especially in universities, students these days are very different from those of even twenty years ago. For one thing, they have invested more in an increasingly expensive university education and often have very clear ideas of what they expect once having made that investment. The idea of the student as a “client” or “customer” is a recent one, and a common complaint heard from teachers is the increased sense of entitlement they feel from their students. Leaving aside arguments regarding the validity of this impression, it is true that the student body has changed a great deal since the innocence of the mid-twentieth century: students today are more sophisticated than they were 50 years ago and come from a much wider range of backgrounds.

The current use of the term “learner” instead of “student” makes an assumption about that individual that may or may not be valid, as does the focus on student-centred learning: is learning in fact a top priority for any one individual or is it rather to earn a university degree that will help to further career goals? Is a student at university because of parental expectations, to delay the job search, because s/he did not know what else to do after high school? Assumptions are made about students, but they are rarely asked to contribute their thoughts on the process of learning. We speak of teaching “a class”, but each class is made up of many individuals. Theorists and policy makers often portray student-learners en masse as passive recipients of whichever theory is being propounded, as if they are not actively involved in making their own choices about how they learn or even whether or not they learn at all. A student may have many reasons for behaving in a certain way. Rampton (2004: 5) comments on how the secondary school students in one study were in fact ‘people interacting together in social activities (emphasis in the original)’, giving an interesting example which showed that what the teacher had interpreted as misbehaviour when students who had been asked to be quiet went on talking, showed in fact that the students were respecting their own norms of politeness by finishing off conversations with their neighbours.

It is well known that students have different cognitive styles that affect how (or if) they learn, but apart from academic research, students are not usually asked about their perceptions of how they learn. An informal survey of about half of the students in two introductory Spanish courses, asking them to comment on how they learned languages, what did or did not help in the classroom, the role of technology, group learning and anything else they wanted to mention, showed surprisingly disparate results. It is in-
interesting that many of the respondents had a very clear idea of how they learn, suggesting that an increased emphasis on metacognitive factors may be helpful both to students and to teachers.

**Negotiation**

Teaching-learning has probably always been a delicate balance of negotiation. At the institutional level, when students choose their program of studies and select courses, this process involves decisions about which courses to take and who to take them from. Especially at the introductory level, there may be numerous sections of any one course, and students negotiate in concrete ways by deciding to take or not to take a certain course or to take it from a particular instructor. It is not uncommon to hear students comment that they decided to enroll in a particular course because they had heard positive things about the instructor, and the opposite is of course equally true. This kind of information is important to students, hence the popularity of websites such as “Rate My Professors” in spite of their obvious limitations. If students avoid a particular professor, perhaps because s/he is perceived as being a “hard marker”, the department or university administration can put pressure on the professor to fall into line. The pressure to be “popular” is particularly insidious for the growing number of instructors who are hired on a per-course basis and have little or no job security.

Another type of negotiation takes place in the classroom, where the student-teacher relationship is central. Here, students have more input into whether or not they learn than we may give them credit for. They can carry out a type of conscious or unconscious “civil disobedience” by their passive resistance to a suggestion or technique they are not comfortable with or do not see the point of: we have surely all felt the effect of a wall of silent incomprehension emanating from a group of students. A teacher can impose a certain teaching style on the students, but s/he cannot make them learn: in order for learning to occur some negotiation of process must take place. Students are not passive recipients; they interact with the teacher and with the learning environment by asking questions (sometimes purposefully distracting the teacher from a topic they have no wish to explore) or by trying out different ideas.

The use of the term “learner” rather than “student” imposes a blanket characteristic on all of them: an individual may study but not learn or may not even want to learn (much) about a subject, given that there are required courses in all disciplines that may not be of much interest to all the students enrolled in that course. Phrases such as ‘the new learning style’ (Education International: 33) are equally presumptuous in their double assumption that this learning style is superior to those that have come before and that all students benefit from it equally.

Even in situations where students are willing at least to make an attempt to learn, individual differences and cognitive styles can make it difficult to reach all of the students even some of the time. Nevertheless, we need to maintain the belief that what we do in the classroom is important and desirable, so the question becomes how to negotiate the learning process in practical terms. All but the most hidebound of teachers will make allowances for the differences among their students and adapt or modify their own underlying theories of learning as needed to help the students. This process involves a delicate balance among several factors: covering the material in the syllabus or the tasks for a particular lesson, persuading students that what you are asking them to do will help them to learn, and, often, using their overt or covert feedback to make unplanned changes to what is presented or to suggested activities. On a practical level, this often involves communication, for example, about the need
to cover a certain topic because it is on the departmental syllabus or to cut short an activity because of time constraints: students, like anyone else, are much more willing to do something when they understand why they are being asked to do it. It is important too for a teacher to be flexible. We all know the importance of a Plan B for those moments when a lesson starts to derail because of technical difficulties or because an activity clearly is not suitable for a particular group of students. And of course, at the most basic level, language learning itself involves a process of constant negotiation of meaning and/or of form, between the student and the task or text, among students, and between the student and the teacher, who acts to monitor and moderate these interactions.

A teacher must resolve conflicting needs and interests including his or her own, and decide what and when to negotiate and how to do so. Learning is a continuous two-way process and a teacher reacts and responds to his or her students just as they do to their teacher. No approach or technique works with all groups of students, and an activity that was received with polite boredom in one class might be greeted enthusiastically by another group. In addition, individual students vary greatly in their reactions to different techniques and have very different learning styles. Although we speak of teaching “a class”, it is important to maintain a focus on the students as individuals, who each has different reasons for being in the class at all, and who once there has his or her own strategies for learning.

Focus on the student
All of the above presents obvious practical challenges for the teacher, who must decipher what the students want and need from him or her, and then decide how it will be possible to meet their needs partially or completely. Finding a way through the labyrinth of new theories and technologies, the often conflicting demands and expectations of administrators, colleagues and students, and the teacher’s own needs, interests and teaching style, can seem overwhelming. Although, speaking as a teacher, a certain amount of change in our environment is good in that it keeps us from being too reliant on routine and getting stale (a feeling which it is all too easy to communicate to our students), too much change leaves us bewildered and frustrated as we try to keep up. It sometimes feels as if we spend most of our time doing just that: keeping up with the latest technologies, with recent research in our field, with new textbook or software offers, with changes in administrative procedures that always seem to involve more reports and committee meetings, and on it goes. The challenge for teachers is to learn to respond rather than simply reacting to the endless demands on our time: to do this, we need to not lose sight of what is the most important element in the learning environment, and keep our focus on the student at the centre.

The role of the student can be just as confusing and complicated as that of the teacher: we hear of the student as learner, as monitor, as peer tutor, as client, as group member, as constructor of knowledge, as researcher. A student can take on any or all of these roles depending on the situation and the perspective of the “other”. Researchers often describe students in rather one-dimensional and homogenous terms, like a school of fish whose responses fall neatly on a bell curve. But anyone who has spent five minutes in a classroom knows that a group of students is a collection of very different individuals, and that rather than passively receiving whatever comes their way, they are very much active agents in the learning process and often surprise us by their varied and unexpected responses. In tune with the constructivist ideas of students as active constructors of their own knowledge, their role, like that of the teacher, is not passive but active.
Research supports the development of meta-learning among students, arguing that if students can be made more aware of how and why they learn, developing their own reflective practices, the process of metacognition can stimulate the learning process (Al Asmari 2013; Le Cornu & Peters 2005). This promotes learner autonomy (Reinders 2010) and can help to create links between teacher and student so that the learning experience becomes more of a partnership. There are many paths to learning and an enormous variety in terms of student performance. It should be kept in mind that the teacher is only one of the factors, although undeniably a very important one, which affect the success of any one student: not every student who gets a D in a course does so because the teacher has in some way failed him or her, and the opposite applies for A students. Learner autonomy works both ways, and the student as well as the teacher must accept responsibility for what happens in the classroom. It might be helpful to spend time at the beginning of the academic year with each group of students talking about what they as individuals want/expect from the course and why they are taking it, and about the teacher’s expectations of them and any limitations on what is possible that might be enforced by a common curriculum among sections, time factors and other variables. One should take nothing for granted and always keep the lines of communication open. In my experience, students can be very forgiving if they understand why a teacher behaves in a certain way; for example, they will forgive a lackluster lesson if they know you were up all night with a sick child.

As we saw in the story about the judgement of students whose chatting to classmates was interpreted as rudeness by their teacher, it is important to keep in mind that a new perspective may change our feelings completely. Is a teacher being “inconsistent” in his or her approach to error correction, or is s/he responding differently based on the requirements of a particular student in a particular situation? Ellis (1997) suggests that teachers need to have more faith in the validity of their own personal experience in the classroom. Although reflective teaching, in essence examining what we do in the classroom and how and why we do it, has been criticized for being too subjective, individualistic, and even that it is likely ‘to encourage conformity and compliance’ (Lawes 2003: 25), this approach does seem to be a good fit for a constructivist learning environment (Le Cornu & Peters 2005). Nevertheless, rather than trying to mould ourselves as teachers to any particular approach or philosophy of teaching, it seems to me that the quintessence of teaching is trust. We need to learn to trust the students to learn or not learn on their own terms and to communicate to us what they need in order to get where they want to be. In like manner, we need to learn to trust ourselves to respond appropriately to each student in a way that best fits his or her needs at that moment. This requires flexibility and openness, and an awareness of each student as an individual, for the essence of teaching is the student at the heart of the labyrinth.

References:


