

Knowledge-Base in ELT Education: A Narrative-Driven Discussion

Conocimiento Base en la Formación en Lengua Extranjera: Una Discusión Basada en Narrativas

Angela Castro-Garces¹

Universidad del Cauca, Popayán, Colombia

Abstract

Knowledge and experience, mediated by reflection, are essential components in teacher education and development programs. This paper discusses core elements that have guided ELT education in the last years and analyzes the case of five English language teacher educators who –in the Colombian context—reflect on their own pedagogical practices through narrative. I guide the discussion by four probing questions that generate a reflective overview of English language teachers’ knowledge-base, identity construction, and decision-making when it comes to localizing knowledge. This reflection uncovers teacher educators’ gains and challenges as it becomes input for those others who are at different stages of their teaching career.

Keywords: knowledge-base, narrative, reflection, teacher education

Resumen

El conocimiento y la experiencia, mediados por la reflexión, son componentes esenciales en los programas de formación y desarrollo docente. Este artículo discute elementos centrales que han guiado la educación en lengua extranjera en los últimos años y analiza los casos de cuatro formadores de docentes de inglés que -en el contexto colombiano- reflexionan sobre su propia práctica pedagógica por medio de narrativas. La discusión se guió por cuatro preguntas generadoras que dan una visión general reflexiva de los conocimientos base de los profesores de inglés, la construcción de identidad y la toma

¹ She has a B.A. in Modern Languages, a Specialization in Pedagogy of Reading and Writing, and an M.A. in TESOL. She is a Ph.D. student at Universidad del Valle, and a Professor at Universidad del Cauca. Her research interests include teachers’ professional development, literacy studies and intercultural communication. aycastro@unicauca.edu.co

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6675-0937>

Received: September 4th, 2020. Accepted: October 13th, 2021.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-No-Derivatives 4.0 International License. License Deed can be consulted at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>.

de decisiones cuando se trata de localizar el conocimiento. Esta reflexión pone al descubierto logros y desafíos de formadores de docentes y se convierte en un insumo para aquellos que se encuentran en diferentes etapas de su carrera docente.

Palabras clave: conocimiento base, narrativas, reflexión, formación docente

Introduction

Teachers' inquiry and reflection are at the root of teacher education and professional development. No matter how novice or expert teachers seem to be, there is always a need for reflecting on our teaching practices. Having a strong theoretical basis, although essential, is never enough for teaching that is inclusive and "context-bound" (Kumaravadivelu, 2001); teaching that comes from the needs of learners and that is informed by teachers' understanding of local realities. Language teaching, mediated by reflection, provides pedagogical resources for teachers' empowerment and enactment that will help improve their practices.

In this sense, I strongly believe in the "transformative power of narrative" (Johnson & Golombek, 2011) as a means to refine and be more engaged with the teaching profession. The need for inquiry and the richness of telling teachers' stories are a possibility that could be granted to them through study groups and teacher development programs, which take place over long periods with the purpose of acknowledging their roles and recognizing their contexts. Johnson and Golombek (2011) identify the role of narrative in reflective teaching, teacher inquiry, and the enhancement of teacher professional development, "not by the products of narrative activity, but by the cognitive processes that are ignited as a result of engagement in narrative" (p. 488). They introduce narrative as a possibility for externalizing, verbalizing, and examining teacher cognition. As further support for this premise, the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie (2009) argues that stories matter; they depend on how they are told and who tells them. That is to say, that if stories are told by their authors, based on their own experiences, their reality is more likely to be perceived the way they want it to be, and those stories may, subsequently, have a healing, reflective, or empowering effect. In the same line, Durán, Lastra, and Morales (2013) value the role of retelling personal stories as a possibility for pre-service English teachers to share knowledge and gain experience.

The goal of this paper is to discuss core elements that have guided ELT education in the last years, including terms such as English as a Lingua Franca, English as an International Language, World Englishes (Canagarajah, 2005; Kubanyiova, 2018; Kumaravadivelu, 2012; McKay, 2018; Sifakis, 2007) and the implications for teacher decision-making on global and local issues that influence their practices. I also analyze the case of five Colombian English language teacher educators who reflect on their own pedagogical practices through narratives. They are: Marcela, Carmen, Paul, Ariadna, and Elijah. This reflection is guided by the following four probing questions:

- When and how did you become an English teacher?
- How did you develop your teaching identity?
- What knowledge has made you become the kind of teacher you are?
- What are some sociocultural and global issues behind teaching English?

Discussion

When and How Do We Become English Teachers?

As a teacher educator, I analyze the possibility of helping prospective teachers become reflective practitioners. In doing so, I recall Freeman (2016), who invites us teacher educators to reflect upon the processes we live ever since we plan to be teachers. He introduces the terms *social practice theory* and *situated learning theory* to refer to the ways we approach learning. The first one is closer to the Vygotskian sociocultural theory, which I mostly adhere to, given I find learning to be situated in a specific context. Freeman (2016) introduces the born/made dichotomy, which may place educators on one edge, either born to be teachers or made through education and experience. As teacher educators, we could wonder if it is possible to have building components of each, supported on Dewey's (1916) thoughts that the born/made dichotomy blurs how people learn.

Another point of discussion is the background knowledge that we, teacher educators, bring to teaching, gained from our experience as students or from common everyday practices. Background knowledge is an ongoing debate in language teaching when referring to the language skills of teachers, and raises the concern of the value of the native speakers (NS), the definition of who is a legitimate one, and how much they are appreciated in this profession. This is aligned with the born/made dichotomy, which supports the demands that teachers have to fulfill because of their nonnative speaker (NNS) condition, while some others are exonerated because of their NS nature.

As such, many of us NNS teachers of English claim that we should not be measured based on natively like abilities, but on how prepared we are to teach the language (Arboleda & Castro, 2012; De Mejía, 2006; Espinosa-Vargas, 2019; Viáfara, 2016). For instance, Espinosa-Vargas (2019) addresses the NS/NNS dichotomy and questions the favoring of the first in the Colombian context. Conversely, Viáfara (2016) explores pre-service teachers' own perceived strengths and limitations based on their NS/NNS conditions for teaching the English language. Not surprisingly, while learning the language, we commonly try to mirror NSs' pronunciation in the attempt to reach a level of proficiency with a target in mind. When that is the case, whom are we imitating? Prospective teachers will rely on teacher educators, while the latter will make decisions based on their own education process and on

the current waves that they have affiliated with after years of experience. Therefore, we need to get academically prepared to face the challenges of education, which imply localizing and contextualizing our teaching practices to make informed decisions that will help level up the NS/NNS conditions, so that other quintessential elements in teacher education programs are similarly valued.

I continue the discussion from the voices of five teacher educators who enrich this reflection through their narratives nurtured by their over 20 years of teaching experience. The five teachers whose cases I present here work for language teacher education programs in Colombia and acknowledge this one as an opportunity to reflect upon and rethink their practices. Following are some excerpts from their stories.

When and how did you become an English teacher?	
Marcela	I became an English teacher after my international sojourn in 1998. Once I arrived to my city, I applied for teaching positions at two Universities and I got both jobs.
Carmen	As a matter of fact, I started teaching English when I was in sixth semester, in 1988. I remember that I taught a group of professionals enrolled to extension courses at my university, which was a challenging and enriching experience. Later, in 1991, I graduated from the Modern Languages Program and had the opportunity to work as an English teacher in the same program, which contributed a lot to my professional growth. I think that I didn't become an English teacher once I graduated, but before that, since, for me, this profession derives from the learning experiences and the chances you have to share them with other learners.
Paul	I think I became an English teacher when I started working at a school after graduating from college. There, I had the entire responsibility of teaching classes and dealing with the matters of a full-time teacher. It was back in 1988.
Ariadna	I become a teacher 21 years ago when I was a university student because in that moment [,] I had the opportunity to get into a classroom. It was in a primary school and this experience was very important because I realized that teaching was my life decision.
Elijah	I think I became an English teacher some time before finishing college. At that time, undergraduate students were able to do their teaching practice in some English courses at the university where I studied. So, I decided to take the opportunity and that is how I became an English teacher. Right after I graduated from college, I applied for a job at the same University and fortunately I got it. Since then, I have been teaching at the University for more than 20 years.

Marcela and Paul assert that becoming English language teachers came to be once they got teaching jobs. Marcela, for instance, felt that her international sojourn helped her better her language skills, an aspect that recruiters appreciate. Carmen, instead, acknowledges that all

the learning experiences she lived during her undergraduate program were part of becoming an English teacher, which means teaching is an ontological constituent of her persona.

Ariadna, like Carmen, had the chance to teach while being an undergraduate student, which was essential for both of them to reassure their career choice. Ariadna affirms that she became a teacher once she entered a classroom, while Carmen also includes her undergraduate education as part of her teaching experience. Elijah is sure that she became an English language teacher during her undergraduate studies and includes her teaching practicum as a relevant part of her education.

In effect, teachers' learning and development, and the context of teachers' learning, are key components in teachers' careers, which is why teachers cannot be detached from our sociocultural realities because no theory is enough to fill that gap (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005). The path they have walked to become English language teachers has been mediated by their academic and professional experiences and started before graduation; this is a piece of evidence of the important role that teacher educators have and of the relevance of content knowledge and pedagogical practice to shape their teaching careers.

How Do We Develop Our Teaching Identity?

My education as a teacher, the opportunities for professional development, and my teaching practice along the years have helped me develop a teaching identity that illustrates all the experiences lived, and which differs from those of colleagues I have come across. Developing a teacher identity is thus the result of what happens before, during, and after a teacher education program. Nieto (2003) supports this idea as she affirms, "teachers do not leave their values at the door when they enter the classrooms... They bring their entire autobiographies with them: their experiences, identities, values, beliefs, attitudes, hang-ups, biases, wishes, dreams, hopes" (p. 24).

Notwithstanding, Farrell (2015) introduces the terms *a reality check* and *a reality shock* to exemplify how little prepared novice teachers are when they enter the profession and start to build their identity (see also Bonilla & Cruz, 2014; Cruz, 2018). In my view, such identity is related to the nurtured development of teaching that is built at college, which could be positive or negative depending on their experience, the accompaniment they have from colleagues and supervisors, and the rapport they get to build with students. Now, this experience, if positive, can reaffirm their identity and make them more reflective and committed teachers; however, if negative, it might result in teacher attrition, which is a common event along the first five years of teaching.

Accordingly, Faez and Valeo (2012) establish that the decisions that teacher education programs make about what to teach are pivotal in the preparedness that English language teachers gain, and, thus, in the perception they have about their skills to teach, which will influence their identity construction. Faez and Valeo (2012) state that “teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about their teaching skills have a strong impact on their teaching effectiveness” (p. 452). Hence, teaching practices that result in successful experiences help teachers gain confidence and develop their identity.

Farrell (2015) highlights the importance of the novice years of teaching that can be smoothed through “novice-service language teacher education” (p. 12). He proposes programs in which novice teachers have this accompaniment and more preparation in terms of “knowledge, skills, awareness” (p. 6) that better prepare them to successfully face the school setting. Although helpful, it is little likely for universities to develop programs like these, unless they are part of an ongoing research project that allows them to be in contact with alumni. If this was possible, teacher educators could provide opportunities for reflection based on novice teachers’ specific experiences, but not necessarily prepare them for pre-established situations, given the contextual discrepancies that exist. There are no magic recipes, therefore, teachers need to be creative and work with what they have at hand, always aware of their teaching context; that is, “particularity, practicality, and possibility” (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 538).

Accordingly, Kubanyiova (2018) calls for teacher education that makes meaning and thus makes sense. This is a call for reflection in education that prioritizes social work and adaptation to context-specific education, which will indeed be an alternative to help develop teacher identity as it advocates for teachers’ voice and action, for the validation of local and contextual knowledge, and for social transformation through teaching. Kubanyiova declares that teachers have traditionally focused on “language structures and culturally responsive language pedagogies”, and proposes “a view of language as a meaning making practice situated in specific social encounters, place and times (a sociocultural approach)” (2018, p. 2).

Terms such as reflective practice, critical inquiry, and creativity are part of Kubanyiova’s (2018) discourse, as she poses the need of educating language teachers in the age of ambiguity; teachers who experience, first hand, what it is like to live in other languages, “in contexts in which multilingualism might be perceived as a stigma, a sign of privilege, or a genuine opportunity to enter into an open and creative relationship with the Other” (p. 8). That otherness is approached by Kumaravadivelu (2012) while he illustrates the most salient characteristics of modernism and postmodernism in the construction of identity, in which the first one presents identity as bounded and imposed by family and societal rules, while in the latter identity is constructed, fluid, amorphous, and fragmented. Kumaravadivelu (2012) also affirms that globalism is a crucial factor in identity formation because of the shrinking of the world, thanks to communication flow. Colombian scholars have also studied this

topic (for instance, Cruz, 2018; Durán, Lastra, & Morales, 2017). Cruz (2018) explores how teachers’ knowledge coming from local experiences in rural Colombian contexts has helped built their identity and value the resources they have at hand.

All of that said, what teacher educators can do as concerns pre-service teachers’ identity development is to awaken the need for reflection on their teaching knowledge and action, through the construction of narratives that unveil those experiences. In the following, teachers’ voices about teaching identity development are presented.

How did you develop your teaching identity?	
Marcela	When I enrolled in modern languages, the curriculum was new and my classmates and I were the first to register in that undergraduate program. Unfortunately, the new program did not have a strong pedagogical component, which made me have a hard time once I started teaching. I always felt that I needed to learn a lot more to do my job well. The little knowledge I have so far has been learned from practice, from studying different English methodology books, from other colleagues’ experience, from training courses and from teaching.
Carmen	I believe I was predestined to be a teacher. I’ve had many experiences during my life and for sure, I’ve forgotten many of them. However, I must say there is something I haven’t been able to forget doing: teaching my first lesson, not an English one, though, when I was five years old. I can still remember teaching some small girls of my age, how to read in Spanish. I had learned to do it from my mom who wasn’t a teacher but had a “how to help someone learn vocation.” Also [.] when I happened to explain a topic to my classmates at school or university, I really liked doing it. Being a teacher is something I enjoy a lot no matter how many times I can’t achieve my expectations.
Paul	It all started when I was in my first teaching practicum in a high school that was full of conflicts and violence and although young, I had to assume my identity as a teacher and convince my students that literature was something important for their lives. Then, little by little, I started adding some elements and developing my professional identity. The places I have taught and the students I have had, had made me the kind of teacher I am.
Ariadna	I consider that it happens every single time when interacting with my students, in groups or individually. The way I like to share my learning experiences and to respect their voices, cultural backgrounds and likes, allow me to integrate them into my teaching plan.
Elijah	I believe I have developed my teaching identity throughout my life working experience. As time has passed, I have changed my teaching style, I mean every time I have had the opportunity to teach, I have learned a lot of things that have molded my identity. Right now, I can say I have really felt the passion for teaching English. Every time I enter a classroom, I learn something new from students and the class itself. These things have made think about what teaching really means.

Marcela started to develop her teaching identity once she began teaching, while Paul feels that it started while he was in his teaching practicum because of the roles he had to assume as a teacher to help students change their attitudes. Carmen, predestined to be a teacher, has a born (Freeman, 2016) identity that has been nurtured during her whole life through education and experience. Ariadna's interaction with her students has contributed to her cultural understanding of difference; while Elijah reassures her identity through the passion, she feels that she enters the classroom every day.

In fact, these teachers' identity construction has been an ongoing journey that has included moments of teacher education, development, and practice. For instance, they express the need for inquiry and reflection to adapt their teaching practices. This 'adaptive expertise' in terms of Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Bransford (2005) "provides an appropriate gold standard for becoming a professional" (p. 360). Accordingly, Faez and Valeo (2012) advise on the need to build a critical frame that prepares us to face reality.

Hence, remembering that the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes surpasses pre-service education programs, teachers come to value the benefits of experience in teaching by proposing innovation even in situations in which frameworks and policies suggest the opposite. As such, Hammerness, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) state, "over time, teachers progress from learning the basic elements of the task to be performed and accumulating knowledge about learning, teaching, and students to making conscious decisions about what they are going to do" (p. 380). That is, teachers construct their identity "actively on an on-going basis" (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 10).

What Knowledge Makes Us Become the Kind of Teachers We Are?

The changing times and the advance of technology, which have resulted in the shrinking of the world in terms of communication and access to information, have surely affected how teachers gain knowledge and how they put it into practice. English language teachers have opportunities to learn the language outside the classroom, even if they do not go to an English-speaking country. Although there are no pre-established curricula, there are certain minimums that English language teachers are to know in order to succeed. Several authors have suggested those minimum requirements in the last three decades, as Álvarez Valencia (2009), Fandiño (2013), Freeman (2018), and Shulman (1987). To mention some, Shulman (1987), who pioneered in the area, argues that content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge are essential elements that teachers need to know. More recently, Freeman (2018) proposes the need to go from work-driven to field-driven knowledge, and to analyze content, teachers, learners, pedagogy, and teacher education. Furthermore, Johnson and Golombek (2018) emphasize what teacher educators do and say, and the reasoning behind that, as key elements in teacher