

Reconstructing a Personal Story about Being a Teacher Educator and a Researcher

Reconstruyendo una Historia Personal sobre Ser un Educador de Profesores e Investigador

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Abstract

This article presents an autoethnographic exercise focused on exploring my history as a teacher educator and researcher in ELT. With this article, I try to show, starting from my life experiences as a teacher and the different concerns that arose during them, my transformation as a researcher. Likewise, I analyze how these transformations are also derived from working with the pre-service English language teachers belonging to a research seedbed focused on doing autoethnographic research. Similarly, I show how my research work has helped others to establish a context for their research. Finally, the reflections derived from my experiences and what I learned while co-investigating in the research seedbed led me to see that continuing to work on the transformation of ELT education in Colombia is necessary.

Keywords: autoethnography, being a researcher, being a teacher educator, English language teacher education, pre-service English language teachers

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un ejercicio autoetnográfico centrado en explorar mi historia como educador de profesores de inglés e investigador en este mismo contexto. Con este artículo intento mostrar mi transformación como investigador a partir de mis experiencias de vida como docente y las diferentes inquietudes que surgieron durante estas experiencias. Asimismo, analizo cómo estas transformaciones

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se derivan del trabajo con los profesores de inglés en formación pertenecientes a un semillero de investigación enfocado a hacer investigación autoetnográfica. De manera similar, muestro cómo mi trabajo de investigación ha ayudado a otros a establecer un contexto para su investigación. Finalmente, las reflexiones derivadas de mis experiencias y lo aprendido mientras co-investigaba en el semillero de investigación me llevan a ver que es necesario seguir trabajando en la transformación de la educación de los profesores de inglés en Colombia.

Palabras clave: autoetnografía, ser investigador, ser educador de profesores, formación de profesores de inglés, profesores de inglés en formación

Introduction

The initial education of English language teachers in Colombia has undergone key transformations and advances in recent years. As a result, more and more scholars are interested in exploring this field and promoting meaningful changes to the teaching of English and the professional development of pre-service English language teachers (Castañeda-Trujillo, 2021). As a teacher educator, I have focused my work on pre-service English language teachers' experiences and how those experiences enact the construction of their teacher *self*. My growing interest in this topic arose from my own experiences as a pre-service English language teacher and a teacher educator. In these two roles, I have had encounters and disagreements in an academic sense that have led me to ensure that research in this field is not only necessary but imperative in the Colombian context.

I decided to write this article in the form of an autoethnography because I understood that this way of writing allows me to connect my personal *self* with the immersive culture in the context of which I am a part (Chang, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011). This autoethnography is a part of the reflective and critical process that I started a few years ago. This process intersects my being as a teacher educator within the context of initial teacher education programs in which those who work in it promote injustices and inequalities, most of the time without noticing it. For example, in Colombia, there is a strong tendency for initial teacher education programs to focus “on transferring a set of predetermined, preselected and presequenced body of knowledge from the teacher educator to the pre-service teacher” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 216). The above results in the fragmentation of knowledge and the imposition of attitudes derived from the native-speaker myth, which generates rejection of those who do not achieve the native-like level of English (Castañeda-Trujillo, 2018). Furthermore, there is a strong tendency to promote the use of decontextualized materials aimed at the colonization of knowledge, power, knowledge, and being (Nuñez-Pardo, 2020). Exploring my own story, interwoven with other people's stories, lets me see the context of initial teacher education from different angles and acknowledge the voices of pre-service English language teachers from their own inquires about their identity and their “*selves*” (Castañeda-Trujillo, 2020).

Since the primary intention of this article is to establish those points of discussion and topics of interest that I have been developing, I will begin by recounting my journey from being a pre-service English language teacher to becoming a teacher educator. The previous to establish the origin of my interest and how those experiences lived in the different contexts have led me to be interested in initial teacher education. Below, I will describe how researching these topics has helped my students, in the undergraduate program, to understand themselves and their contexts. In the same way, I will make a couple of observations about the work of other Colombian researchers in harmony with my topics of interest. Finally, I will present my current ideas and suggestions for the field of English language teacher education and conclusions of this autoethnographic exercise.

Stories that Trigger my Interest in Pre-Service English Language Teachers' Experiences in Initial Teacher Education

The idea of being a teacher had been going around in my head since I was in high school, and I had not considered having a technical or office job. However, a number of personal circumstances led me to study a technical undergraduate program in computer programming. As soon as I finished it, I realized that I did not want to follow that career. In 2000, I enrolled in the initial program for teachers of Spanish and English at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Bogotá, Colombia, which due to my weak economic conditions became a challenge. At first, my expectations were high regarding what I wanted to learn. I hoped to improve my English proficiency level a lot as I was convinced that only then I would get a good job when I graduated.

In the same way, I had been instructed on how to be efficient as a teacher, preparing my classes, adapting or creating materials, and making assessments that tracked my students' progress. Many of these skills were connected to the provisions of the theories related to language, learning, and teaching conceived by academics from the global North². I did not know it at the time, but I had been the object of colonization of being (in my identity as a teacher and English language speaker), of knowledge (assuming that what was in the books was the only option about teaching), and of power (having been subjected to follow what is established as the correct procedure in English language teaching) (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Quijano, 2007).

² In this document, the global North is not understood as a geographical region of the world, but as an on-to-epistemological positioning founded on the white male Eurocentric traditions and knowledge base. This global North has been the dominant tradition for many centuries and has been the author of epistemological oppressions in the global South (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Grosfoguel, 2008; Quijano, 2007).

In 2012, I started my career as a teacher educator. This event was a turning point since I had become involved with educating future teachers. In these first experiences, I had to self-adjust to what the program expected of me. At a private university, the pre-service English teachers are expected to be given a quality education³. Still, some of them just hoped to pass the subjects and get a professional degree. Some did not even think about the possibility of being teachers. They only focused on learning languages and carrying out activities other than teaching. This worrying fact made me wonder about the teaching profession and how it was being viewed from the outside, how its students saw it, and if they felt like pre-service teachers. As I have related in a previous paper (Castañeda-Trujillo, 2020), being a tutor in the teaching practicum contributed to my growing concerns. My practices became structured and attached to colonial ways of doing (decontextualized English teaching methods) and being (imaginary of what it means to be a good teacher), which I was in charge of spreading with others in the teaching practicum. It was then that I started looking for other ways to explore this field and, in 2016, I decided that I should start my Ph.D. studies as an alternative to understanding everything that was worrying me.

Initially, my interest was to develop a critical research project; however, I still had a long way to go before I came to consider myself a critical researcher. My initial idea was to find out how pre-service English language teachers put public policies on bilingualism into practice and reflected on their teaching practicum. As time passed, I immersed myself in the Ph.D. seminars, and new reading assignments, and the discussions around teacher education and the language teacher; these were from perspectives unknown to me until that moment. Theories such as poststructuralism and decoloniality made me understand that I had been limiting myself to reporting on the actions of pre-service English language teachers in their teaching practicum. I needed to restructure my way of conceiving research and how I have approached it to contribute to the visibilization of pre-service English language teachers in their teacher identity construction.

The research carried out together with a colleague led us to understand a little more the feeling of the pre-service English language teachers during their teaching practicum (Castañeda-Trujillo & Aguirre-Hernandez, 2018). One of the important points extracted from this work has to do with the difficulties that pre-service teachers may encounter when trying to connect theory with practice. As a result, we realized that they demanded more support and spaces to reflect on and share this reflection. In the same way, we found that ELT education programs should reconsider how they are structuring academic spaces for language teaching and teaching practicum, avoiding the spread of ideologies that promote

³ In Colombia, the Ministry of National Education (MEN in Spanish) has established the criteria for granting high-quality accreditation to universities or specialties. These criteria respond to a neoliberal policy established in university education with which entering the world university rankings is intended and thus being part of the world market for higher education (Mintz, 2021; Olsen & Peters, 2005).

English as a strategy for entering the globalized world. The results of this study were a trigger for what would be my research interest, understanding the processes of construction of the identity of the pre-service English language teachers, even before they began their university studies.

Intending to go deeper into their perceptions of the process of becoming English language teachers, I conducted another small-scale study (Castañeda-Trujillo, 2019). In that article, I tried to make the voices of the participants stand out more. Among the main findings, I would like to highlight the pre-service English language teachers' position vis-à-vis their profession. Despite not agreeing with many issues happening throughout the course of their major, they expressed hope for the future of the English teaching profession by alluding many times to the principles of critical pedagogy. Furthermore, the pre-service English language teachers felt a great responsibility on their shoulders and a commitment to education with their current and future students. This study meant to review my practices again since another of its findings indicated that teacher educators are also responsible for the transformations that the teaching profession has undergone and the perceptions that society, in general, has had and still has of pre-service English language teachers and English teachers. For this, I had to resort to research methodologies that were not frequently used, which allowed me to establish a horizontal relationship with the pre-service English language teachers. A research methodology with which they felt safe to tell their stories and analyze their context.

Learning and Unlearning from my Story and those of Others

After an exploration and conversations with national and international scholars, I found in autoethnography an alternative to what I had been looking for. I fully understand that autoethnography is an introspective research methodology by which an attempt is made to deeply explain the surrounding culture from lived experiences (Holman Jones et al., 2013; Castañeda-Trujillo, 2020). Additionally, I found in autoethnography a research-oriented pedagogy, which implies the use of autoethnography as an embodied teaching practice through a series of planned activities that lead pre-service English language teachers to investigate their experiences through writings using the tenets of autoethnography (Alexander, 2013; Yazan, 2019). Therefore, I decided to create a research seedbed with pre-service English language teachers interested in understanding themselves as teachers and the contexts in which they work. Working with these pre-service English language teachers and researchers from the research seedbed contributed to my reflection on being a teacher-educator and being a researcher while discovering what made them English teachers.

The constant work and conversations between the different groups that made up the research seedbed were consolidated in collaborative autoethnographic writing. The various

groups took my published work as a basis to make their analysis. Peynado Muleth and Morales Triviño (2021), for example, focused their collaborative autoethnographic writing(s) on finding those experiences that led them to decide to be English teachers. They found that, despite the image they have of the teaching profession, which is not the best for many people, they felt satisfied to be on the path of becoming teachers due to the income and social status granted. In the same sense, Méndez Garzón and Díaz González (2021) oriented their inquiry to explore their *self*, trying to reconstruct who they are from their life stories and connect those through collaborative autoethnography. They found that, although they had different backgrounds, their identities were being formed mainly by the experiences lived within the program, especially in the teaching practicum. Another pre-service English language teacher carried out a solo autoethnographic research in which she explored her being and becoming an English teacher based on her experience in the ELT program (Ramírez Suarez & Castañeda-Trujillo, 2021). In this study, the researcher expressed how her desire to be a teacher was stronger despite the vision that many may have about the teaching profession and the difficulties that she overcame to be a teacher. These difficulties are related to the teaching styles that teacher educators have and may not allow future teachers' full professional development.

In the same fashion, Ariza Quiñones et al., (2021) inquired about their own experiences as pre-service English language teachers in the teaching practicum. Using field diaries and constant reflective encounters, the four members of this group analyzed the contributions of the teaching practicum to the construction of their identity as English teachers in real time. Although the confinement derived from Covid-19 crisis affected their experience during the process, the researchers could finish their analysis. They found that the roles of the supervisor of the teaching practicum and the mentor teacher were fundamental to give meaning to the teaching practicum, especially when they perceived the significant gap between theory and practice. Likewise, the researchers recognized themselves as producers of pedagogical knowledge and emphasized that it was through the process of their autoethnographic writing that they realized this fact (Lesmes & Molina, 2020).

Other researchers took their experiences as au pairs in the United States as the basis for their collaborative autoethnography (for instance, Campos Campos et al., 2021). These researchers found that their experiences were significant for both the positive and the negative. These experiences contributed to their process of becoming teachers of English. For example, as the three researchers from the research seedbed faced discrimination due to their Latin origin and their accent, they reflected on the language policies that demand compliance with specific requirements regarding the use of English. Realizing that the experiences of the three pre-service English teachers (who were also the researchers) were connected to raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015), they reflected on their practices and analyzed the ideologies they had spread as absolute truths within the English classroom until that

moment. Some of these ideologies create gaps between native and non-native speakers, promoting more discrimination and injustices in ELT. This collaborative autoethnographic study led the researchers to think that changing the way of looking at English teaching in Colombia was necessary as well as recognizing themselves as valid speakers of English and avoiding comparisons with other speakers in terms of English variety, whether they are native or not, or come from an English-speaking or non-English speaking country.

I find it necessary to explain my role in the abovementioned studies by the members of the research seedbed. Although the research design of these studies was autoethnography or collaborative autoethnography, a space in which students understood the implications of these methodologies was required. To achieve this, I opened discussion groups based on academic texts related to the critical perspective of education, the narrative turn, and autoethnography as a research method. While the collaborative groups, formed by the members of the seedbed, wrote their stories, we, the members of the seedbed and I, held meetings in which my main role was to guide the conversation about the ethnographic analysis of their experiences. Towards the final part of each study, the collaborative groups decided on the orientation they would give to their study and the structure they would use to write it. Finally, as the research seedbed, we decided to participate in academic events to share what we found and experience the reactions of other pre-service English language teachers, teacher educators, and English teachers. Being part of these studies by the research group members allowed me to understand issues about teacher training (their feelings and thoughts about the training processes carried out in the program) and the research itself (other ways of doing research and seeing the research participants). Before referring to these understandings, I would like to take a look at the research published in Colombia that has considered the work done on pre-service English language teachers in the teaching practicum.

Impact on Other Studies in Colombia

My main research interest is to know and understand what happens within ELT programs directly from the voices of pre-service English teachers. To achieve this purpose, I have resorted to horizontal research methods, such as narrative research and autoethnography. The results of these investigations have also served as a reference for some other researchers interested both in the education of pre-service English teachers and in teaching practicum experiences.

First, Monroy (2020), Bonilla and Samacá (2020) and Buendía-Árias et al., (2020) used the worked developed by Castañeda-Trujillo and Aguirre-Hernández (2018) as part of the contextualization of the problem. Monroy (2020) aimed at explaining the importance of listening to the voice of a pre-service English teacher through his reflections on ELT. Monroy contextualized his research using the findings related to pre-service English

teachers' experiences during the teaching practicum. Similarly, Bonilla and Samacá (2020) centered their study on the mentoring process of the teaching practicum and the positions pre-service English teachers assume towards the teaching practicum, stating that the work developed by Castañeda-Trujillo and Aguirre-Hernández (2018) contributes toward seeing the importance of the mentors in solving issues related to the teaching practicum. In the same vein, Buendía-Árias et al., (2020) also used that study to frame their research about the configuration of the identity of pre-service English language teachers in a Colombian university; the results obtained in this study show a profile of how these identities have been built from the teaching practicum.

Second, some other authors such as Ubaque-Casallas and Aguirre-Garzón (2020), Montoya-López et al., (2020), and Munar Villamil (2018) have used the research findings of Castañeda-Trujillo and Aguirre-Hernandez (2018) as part of the theoretical framework of their studies. Ubaque-Casallas and Aguirre-Garzón (2020) conducted a narrative study to analyze the epistemologies of pre-service English teachers through lesson planning. In this study, the researchers explained, as part of their theoretical foundation, the relationship between the experiences that arise from the contexts of teaching practice characterized by knowing and doing and of pre-service English teachers. For their part, Montoya-López et al., (2020) sought to reveal the presence of the political agency in the construction of the identity of pre-service English teachers, for which they developed a theoretical framework integrating the findings of some Colombian researchers. One of the theoretical aspects developed has to do with the intersection of the narratives of the pre-service English teachers and their construction of identity within the ELT program. Lastly, Munar Villamil (2018) also focused on understanding the experiences of a pre-service English teacher in the context of a teaching practice, in such a way that the author developed a theoretical framework that would account for the use of narratives created with pre-service English teachers whereby their experiences are analyzed during the teaching practicum.

Third, some researchers have continued in the initial line of research aimed at inquiring about pre-service English teachers during their teaching practicum. In the case of Lucero and Roncancio-Castellanos (2019), they concentrated on presenting the reflections and insights of the pre-service English teachers from a narrative written by the authors. Some of the findings indicate the importance of the mentor in the development of her autonomy and professional identity. Likewise, the importance of becoming aware of the emotional aspect of pre-service English teachers is highlighted to reduce their anxiety levels and improve their ability to develop the activities of a teacher in an educational context. Pita-Castro and Castiblanco-Rincón (2021) also carried out an investigation aimed at analyzing the levels of reflection of pre-service English teachers and their influence on the construction of their identity during the teaching practicum. The researchers used some of the works developed in this field (Castañeda-Trujillo & Aguirre-Hernandez; Lucero & Roncancio-Castellanos, 2019)

and thus developed a narrative investigation. The researchers found that the reflection levels are primarily technical and very uncritical due to the different dynamics that are handled within the teaching practicum and the degree of commitment to their own professional development. Also, Lucero and Cortés-Ibañez (2021) continued their exploration of pre-service English teachers in the teaching practicum, but this time they focused on the discursive level. They analyzed conversations in meetings and institutional documents that showed how the teaching practicum is a space in which identity as an English teacher is consolidated. Conversely, the authors point out the importance of thinking about the practicum as a dialogical, reflective, and transforming space where it is possible to recognize oneself, the other, the context, and the knowledges related to teaching English. In this way, pre-service English teachers are conceived as individuals from whom certain things stipulated by the documents and established in the speeches of the initial education program are expected. The research referred to in this paragraph tends to build and elaborate more on the initial education of pre-service English teachers and their construction as teachers during the teaching practicum.

Finally, I want to highlight two articles where pre-service English teachers took on the role of researchers alongside me. The first research paper emphasized the importance of highlighting the context of students within English classes. These students suffer difficult situations from their social realities, and the pedagogical proposal of these two English teachers in training was cathartic (Cortés Rozo et al., 2019). Similarly, Cuervo-Rodríguez and Castañeda-Trujillo (2021) developed an investigation that shows the challenges that two pre-service English teachers with dyslexia had to face while building their identity as English teachers. The two research works are significant since the researchers-pre-service teachers made the proposals, collected the data, and analyze most of the data, oriented by me as their co-researcher.

Be that as it may, what is currently happening in Colombia has shown us as researchers of the seedbed that communities of practice, oriented to inquire from the perspective of pre-service English language teachers, are growing. We need to continue supporting locally-generated knowledge as it shows us the contextualized reality of our ELT programs.

Conclusions and Final Reflections

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This autoethnography approach has addressed the exploration of my history as a researcher within the context of ELT programs to understand aspects related to pre-service English language teachers. There is still much to be done in this field, especially if the research with horizontal methodologies is increasingly considered by the academics in Colombia. There is an urgent need to dismantle the imaginary about how to conduct research, not only from teacher educators' perspective but also from pre-service English

language teachers' perspective. However, this is only possible when, from the ELT programs, we, teacher educators and pre-service English teachers, work as a community of practice leaning towards the decolonization⁴ of the teaching of English in Colombia, which implies realizing who we really are as researchers, English teachers, and English users. From the work that I have done with the pre-service English language teachers of the research seedbed, I have gained the following insights into ELT programs' research.

First, I have realized the importance of research participants, if I can keep calling them that, in horizontal research methodologies. Research participants are the ones who carry out the research; then, they position themselves as knowing subjects (Vasilachis, 2009). That is, it does not strip them of their knowledge or reduce it to simple data that are interpreted by a third party (the researcher). This practice contributes enormously toward acknowledging the authentic voices of the people involved in the research, which has not been common in traditional research practices. I insist on this gesture/practice because I firmly believe that this fosters the decolonization of being, doing, and knowing in research, which is essential if we intend to promote fundamental changes in ELT in this country.

Regarding my role in this research process, I was an associate researcher, external observer, and a listener of their stories. For this, I established spaces for reflection and discussion focused on the suggestions of Johnson and Golombeck (2018). They emphasize the importance of opening spaces to make sense of experience through theory. At the same time, as a researcher, I was relating the stories I heard with my own story and those of other pre-service English language teachers that I have met throughout my career. In this way, I was making sense of the identity construction processes of the researchers and understanding the ELT context in general. This type of exercise where the other is listened to for their experiences and their feelings helped to transform my own teaching practice. Ultimately, dismantling power relations established by tradition is necessary within teacher education programs.

Another benefit of an autoethnographic work as pedagogy and as a research method is related to the teacher's image. Initially, the pre-service English language teacher-researchers were assumed to be English teachers from an instrumentalized perspective. As a result, they were unaware of the teaching profession's personal, professional, and emotional implications. Additionally, reviewing their processes of being and becoming teachers helped them see how the discourses of ought-to-be were present for a long time within their imaginaries. These discourses formulate a single way of being and doing through decontextualized strategies

⁴ Although I recognize that there are other epistemological perspectives that can contribute to the strengthening of the teaching of English in Colombia, my main intention has been to guide my efforts as a researcher and teacher educator towards the reestablishment of what we have been denied by being non-native speakers of English and promote social justice within ELT education (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Grosfoguel, 2008; Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

and methodologies that make a little contribution to the education of students at schools and other educational institutions. The benefit of this understanding process resides in the transformation of practices, evident in their own autoethnographic writings.

Finally, I would like to emphasize the significance of evaluating the research done in Colombia and accepting that we are producers of valuable knowledge for the ELT, manifested in even different ways than the traditional ones (Castañeda-Londoño, 2021). Furthermore, by acknowledging that, and despite all the theories that we have learned, we can unlearn and relearn to achieve a contextualized and beneficial practice for our students, not only regarding what has to do with learning and teaching the language but also as regards life itself.

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