ISSUES OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN AN EFL TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM IN COLOMBIA

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Abstract

This paper reports an ongoing research project on the teachers’ identities of 70 undergraduates of a TEFL program. A qualitative inquiry looks into three factors involved in teacher identity construction: a like for languages and cultures, an emotional attachment to the teacher role and an imagined future career trajectory. Teacher identity is complex process; to determine the undergraduates’ current identities, a survey to 70 participants was given asking: a) motives to join a college of education, and specifically a TEFL program, b) social, political and cultural aspects related to their teacher roles, and c) expectations as future teachers. The survey indicated that all participants liked modern languages, but only 14 expressed a wish to teach. Last year students, who had already done the teacher practicum, complained that they saw little connection between theory and practice and manifested doubts and fears about their competence to meet the challenges posed by teaching at school, such as classroom management and policies and standards of the Ministry of education of Colombia. At present, the data mentioned above was gathered for this purpose.

Keywords: empowerment, foreign language, socio-cultural, teacher identity, vocation.

1 INTRODUCTION

This study aims at empowering pre-service teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to construct a reflective and critical professional identity and looking into their identity elements. The first part of the research report, subject of this paper, explored and identified the constitutive elements of currents identities of student-teachers who are in the first, second and third year of their studies in teacher education. For [1] Hall and Gay (1996) “identity is a construction shaped by the recognition of “some common origin shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation” (p.2). We wonder how a sample of pre-service educators recognize themselves as humanists, educators, language teachers and foreign language teachers.

In a broad perspective, we adhere to [2] Johnson (2012) who affirms that Identity is: (1) personality and physical characteristics; family experiences, religious encounters; gender; educational background; ethnicity and culture, (2) a social, cultural and relational construction and it is maintained with language and dialogue, (3) is created and recreated by experiences and it is in constant change and transformation, and (4) is holistic; it represents the combination of many aspects (life experiences, physical characteristics, personality, roles and background, genetic makeup, ethnicity and culture, understandings, knowledge, beliefs, feelings and values) of our lives.

In contrast to the above conception of identity, the approaches to teacher development in the last two decades in Colombia, have had a technical perspective. [3] (cf. Ministerio de Educación Nacional - M.E.N. (2017)). We deemed important to inquire about the pertinent humanistic element that looks for the discovery, negotiation, and construction of a professional identity that bears in mind not only individual aspects but also social, political and cultural factors involved in the development of EFL teacher professional identities. In this sense, we occur with [4] Wenger (2000) that says that identity is crucial to social learning systems and therefore to communities of practice because first, our identities combine competences and experiences into a way of knowing, second, our identities depend on circumstances and limitations and we can also close or open up our identities to other ways of being in the world, and third, even though we identify with one particular community, we are able to create bridges among other communities we might also belong to. Thus, our identities are not static or immutable but rather dynamic, multifaceted and changing.

Teacher Education programmes in Colombia have provided student-teachers with the possibility to experience ways of being, belonging and imagining themselves as teachers. However, the literature seems to agree that there are areas of development and improvement in terms of constructing a strong teacher professional identity in our future teachers. For [5] Cárdenas (2009) trends in foreign
language teacher education in Colombia draw on a reflective model. While [6] Fandiño, Bermudez, and Varela (2016) speak of the need for revision in native and foreign language teacher education. They call for a professional development of teachers under the framework of teaching empowerment.

[7] Villamil (2009) highlights the offer of training in language and methodologies for EFL teachers of state schools. He feels that there is little emphasis on the role of teacher as an agent of change or as researcher. This may result in applying methodologies without full understanding. Similarly, [8] Sierra (2016) considers the government initiative on teacher professional development, positive. However, reports few opportunities of participation, little continuity and lack of follow-up and accompaniment. On the other hand, [9] Raba Castro (2014) found little evidence of articulation between school and universities in terms of collaborative projects of for training pre-service teachers.

For [10] Castillo (2012), training received in classrooms lags behind the instruction received in the environment. Then there is a challenge to meet, and it implies funding, large-scale program development, syllabus design, and methodology, among others. We highlight that he proposes that educational institutions should offer:

- language programs that meet the demand for high standards,
- the use and development of appropriate technology for language learning,
- research and development in the field of language teaching and learning.

This paper shall suggest changes in an undergraduate teacher education EFL program based on the data collected and on representative literature produced in Colombia and in other countries. This paper hopes to contribute to the understanding of a teacher education curricula for empowering future practitioners [11] (Sarani and Najar, 2015). The next section discusses the design of the study.

2 METHODOLOGY

Seventy undergraduates of a teacher education program from a private university participated. 22 of 70 are in their fourth year of studies. 20 of the 70 are in their third year. The other 28 are in the first year. There are 19 men and 51 women. This research in progress, which is exploratory in nature, used a diagnostic survey that dealt with the preservice teachers’ developing identity, vocation, or recognition of taking a role as classroom teachers [12] (Trejo-Guzman, 2009).

This paper will show the analysis of the first phase or diagnose confronting the research questions as follows: (1) How to empower the future English language teachers to construct his/her identity in a critical and reflective way? (2) Which elements promote and contribute to the construction of this EFL identity?

Besides descriptive statistics [13] (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011), which was used to analysed and present the quantitative data, thematic analysis [14] (Braun & Clarke, 2006). was utilized to analyzed and present the findings of this first exploratory stage. Due to the constrains of the length of this paper, three themes will be presented in this article as follows: a. A like for languages and cultures, b. Emotional attachment, and c. Future career trajectory in the following section.

3 RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

After analysing a survey that was given to students in their native language (see appendix), an account of the exploration and identification of the initial constitutive elements of 70 undergraduates’ students is given here with the results of this first stage of the research. It was found that these student-teachers do not have a clear role as future English teachers, they have doubts and fears about facing school and classroom realities. Three main topics were relevant and showed how complex the initial construction of teacher identity because very many factors are to be taken into consideration in any given English language teacher programme.

3.1 A like for languages and cultures

A general appeal to foreign languages and cultures was found to be the most pervasive reason for students to have chosen to enrol in the programme. 35 participants out of 70 seem to be attracted to this field of study because of a very general reason which does not show a real interest in Education. However, the aim of the programme is to contribute to the formation of EFL teachers and it does not match with the candidates’ expectation, as reported by the participants who said.

Por el gusto a los idiomas. “I have a like for languages”
Para poder aprender otros idiomas. “To learn other Languages”

Siempre me he considerado bueno para los idiomas. “I have always considered myself good at languages

Por las oportunidades laborales: “It offers me a great deal of job opportunities”

Porque me gusta el Inglés y Francés: “Because I like English and French”

“Porque hago lo que me gusta y por eso todo me va a salir bien”. “Because I like what I do, everything will turn out well.

“Al estar estudiando una licenciatura se tiene un fuerte enfoque en la parte pedagógica lo cual genera una buena preparación para ser docentes” Studying to become a teacher means learning about Pedagogy, which allows us to be teachers

“Creo que tengo las bases suficientes para formar y educar” “I believe I have enough bases to educate and teach”

“Porque cumple las expectativas en la orientación que nos dan como futuros docentes. Antes de graduarme estaba segura de que quería ser docente ya que me gustaba y quiero tener experiencia en una escuela, además he sido inspirada por algunos familiares que también son docentes. Because it fulfills the expectations in the orientation that educators give us as future teachers. Before graduating, I was sure that I wanted to be a teacher besides I want to have experience in a school. I have also been inspired by some relatives who also are teachers.

However, a significant number of students seems to be satisfied with the formation they have been given and they said they felt content with the quality of the programmes and suggested some areas of improvement such as didactics and methodology; and the lack of instruction to teach English to young children.

Regarding curricular issues, they said there should have a better articulation of subjects so that they can appropriate pertaining knowledge for their development as language teachers.

Contrary to expectation, students seem to be aware of the how important aspects such as learning to teach, vocation, and good competence in the foreign language are in their future role as English language teachers. Also, social responsibility is regarded as important in their formation as teachers. This might be due to the strong emphasis the University makes in social responsibility as foundational element of the institution.

Other aspects of their formation that are given much less importance are the role of teaching practice professor and little relevance they see in this particular subject matter for the future role as language teachers. However, it is contradictory because a recommendation of improvement in these areas was stated by the participants previous items of the survey. This might indicate that in spite of the fact that they consider didactics and methodology crucial, they do not identify themselves with the leaders in charge of these subjects.

3.2 Emotional attachment – Frustrations and Drawbacks

Some student teachers feel satisfy with their profession 30/70; Not satisfy 12/70; undecided 12/70; and sure of his profession 16/7.
Enjoyment and frustration are part of our job, we have to mediate in the relationship between emotional labour strategies and classroom management self-efficacy. For [15] (Lee & Van, 2018), “the results suggest that deep acting is linked to experiencing positive emotions, which in turn is positively related to classroom management self-efficacy, whereas surface acting is linked to experiencing negative emotions, which in turn relates negatively to classroom management self-efficacy.” (p.1) Teachers struggle these types of emotions when we face the positive of our desire for teaching but reality make us aware of the negative when things do not turn out well.

Satisfied
Las bases que me han dado han sido buenas para desenvolverme en el ámbito docente
“The given bases have been good to challenge me as a teacher”
Porque cumple las expectativas en la orientación que nos dan como futuros docentes
“Because, it fulfills the expectancies in the orientation given to be future teachers”
Creo que, aunque no es lo único que quiero ser, creo que me estoy formando como la futura persona que ayudará a formar a niños como personas de bien por ende me siento satisfecha.”I believe this is not the only thing I want to be, I believe I am getting experience as the future teacher that will help to educate children to make them an example for society, that’s I feel satisfied”.

Not satisfied
Siento que existen algunas falencias, desde el ejemplo del educador, hasta algunos elementos faltantes en la enseñanza.
“i feel that there are some gaps, from the educators’ perspective as well as from the teaching discipline”
Ser docente es la mejor profesión, pero yo no me veo en un futuro ejerciendo la docencia, creo que es un trabajo muy pesado, exprimidor, que requiere de mucha paciencia, mucho tiempo y experiencia. No todo el mundo sirve para ser docente. Being a teacher is the best profession; but I don’t see myself in the future working as a teacher, I believe it is a hard work, it requires a lot patience and a great deal of experience.

“Although I want to become a university teacher, my dream is devoting my time for writing”

Undecided
Indecisa, ya que no sé realmente qué es ser docente, lastimosamente en el anterior pensum la práctica docente es hasta octavo y además de eso, sí uno se llega a atrasar en una materia disciplinar la práctica se atrasa aún más lo que nos pone en desventaja con los otros dos programas quien no importa si sus asignaturas disciplinares están al día o no, es un poco frustrante eso dado que no hay gusto hacia la docencia.

Undecided, since I really don’t know what to be a teacher means, unfortunately in the prior curriculum the teaching practicum was taught until eighth semester; apart from that if somebody fails a subject, the student gets behind. It is frustrating and we start not feeling appealed towards teaching.
Porque no sé si sea una buena profesora o si sea la carrera que quiero. “Because I don’t if am going to be a good teacher or if it is the degree I want to obtain”

Tengo algunas bases, siento que es una gran responsabilidad la enseñanza y aunque tengo algunas bases no estoy segura si son las suficientes para cumplir con la tarea. “I have some bases but I feel that teaching is of great responsibility so, sometimes I don’t feel sure enough to achieve this task”.

Escogi esta carrera por los idiomas. Sin embargo, no me visualizo en un futuro como docente de colegio. “I choose this degree for the languages I study”.

“Una cosa es aprender el idioma y otra muy diferente es como se enseña a niños de diferentes edades una segunda lengua”.

Sure of profession
Porque hago lo que me gusta y por eso todo me va a salir bien. “Because I like what I do, and I think that I do what I like”.
Es una opción que tengo en mi proyecto de vida, la cual me brindara grandes enseñanzas. “It is an option I have on my life Project”.

Aunque es difícil aprender un idioma que desconozco, he disfrutado el proceso que hasta ahora llevo. “Although it is difficult to learn a language because you are not familiar with it, I have enjoyed the process I have carried out.”

Porque es algo que en verdad me gusta y desearía que fuera mi carrera a futuro, incluso un docente no es solo eso, es un investigador, escritor, traductor en algunos casos... la docencia abre demasiadas puertas que me gustaría conocer. “Because it is something that I really like and I consider this is the career for my future. A teacher is not only that, he is an investigator, a writer, a translator in some cases teaching opens doors that I would like to know”. 

Porque siempre he trabajado con niños y considero que tengo la pedagogía para desempeñarme como tal. Because I have always worked with children, I considered I have the pedagogy to become a teacher. 

Sí me gusta la docencia, pero investigar brinda más status. “Yes, I like teaching but research offers more status”

3.3 Future career trajectory.

Last but not least, the results related to the last question of the survey on the recognition of English language teacher in this context is worth mentioning. Despite the importance that English as an international language has gained in the last decades because of multitude of reason, the majority of the participants (80%) considers there is no social recognition for the English teachers in Colombia and therefore they might not choose this path as future career. They based their assumptions in the following factors: first of all, the remuneration of English teachers is quite low compared to other professionals and this does not show a real appreciation of teachers’ job in society. This might be due to institutional, social and cultural aspects which participants think are difficult to change in the short term. Second, English teacher’s job does not seem to be pertinent for certain remote areas of the national geography. Besides, concomitant factors such the violence in different regions of Colombia make the teaching of English much less pertaining to the sociocultural reality of these places. One of the participants allude the amount of resources that are spent in the war and the military forces whereas the resources allocated to Education are very scarce.

Siento que tengo vocación, pero económicamente no es una profesión bien remunerada. I feel like I have a vocation, but from the economical part, it is not a well-paid profession.

“Siento que es una profesión poco valorada, pero de gran importancia. Lo podemos ver en el sueldo de los maestros, por parte del gobierno, los padres de familia y en general.” I feel that is a no worth profession, but very important. We can see it for the paid salary from government....”

“No existe un gran reconocimiento social de los docentes de lenguas en Colombia dado que los profesionales no salen preparados completamente para ejercer su profesión, factor que ha desprestigiado dicha profesión en las escuelas. There is no a social recognition from Language teachers in Colombia because those teachers do not reach the professional expected profile, these aspects have caused serious critics in schools.

“Siento que hace falta apropiarse de la profesión y sentirla como vocación, definitivamente no cualquiera puede enseñar. Hay que pensar en las necesidades de los estudiantes e incentivar a los docentes a seguir aprendiendo y no quedarse en un pre grado”. I feel that there is a lack of appropriateness towards the profession and feel it like a vocation. Not everybody has the challenge to teach. It is necessary to think in the students’ needs and motivate educators to continue updating.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Fifth semester participants of this survey show a wish to be an English teacher although they claim a major joint between the theory and the practice, as well as a major depth in pedagogic and didactic aspects that allow them to face safely the needs of the job they are going to face.

The student teachers from eight semester stated that they see some gaps among teaching and learning strategies, there is a lack in aspects of methodology and the didactics in EFL when teaching
children and illiterate adults. These population challenge this as well as having an age mixability when doing the practicum (a range from 14 to 60 years old people)

Fears and doubts are represented in second semester participants, they expect to fulfill their goals as teachers. These future teachers perceive observations with elementary students in their context and regard it as an important part of the teaching practice.

Finally, the lack of social recognition is a perception of all the participants had in this exploratory phase of the study and together with all the other factors might contribute to erodes their professional identities of future English teachers and prevent them from envisioning themselves as successful EFL professionals in Colombia. The subsequent stages of this study intend a transformative agenda by which future teachers’ professional identities will be shaped and thus the community will embrace new empowered EFL professional.

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APPENDIX

Survey: Professional Identity in the Initial Formation of English Language teachers

Dear student:
We are developing a research project related to teacher identities, we kindly request answering the following questions, expecting your sincere and objective answers.

Personal Information:
Semester you are in: ___________________________
Do you work as teacher at this moment? Yes ____ No ____
How long have you been a teacher (specify if months or years)? _____

a. Personal History
1. Why did you decide to study a Teacher English Foreign Language Program?
   _____________________________________________________________________________

2. Do you consider that the training received in the practicum offered you the necessary elements to be an English language teacher?
   Yes_____ No______ Explain.___________________________________________________________________________

3. Taking into consideration teacher training, expectations; identify which of the following jobs will be part of your career trajectory?
   a. Elementary school teacher  ______
   b. Translator    ______
   c. High school teacher    ______
   d. University teacher    ______
   e. Language instructor    ______
   f. Flight attendant    ______
   g. Researcher    ______
   h. Editorial Consultant    ______
   i. Language Manager    ______
   j. Owner of a school    ______
   h. Other                              ______

b. Emotional Attachment— Frustrations and Drawbacks
4. If you chose "Teaching" from the prior section, mention how do you feel in your formation as teacher
   Explain
   a. Satisfied   _____
   b. Unsatisfied                                 _____
   c. undecided    _____
   d. Sure of your profession  _____
   ____________________________________________________________________________

5. If you chose an answer different from teaching, explain why teaching is not a part of your "life project"
   ____________________________________________________________________________

   c. Socioemotional and Cognitive Elements
   Rank from 1, the most to 7, the least important aspects you consider relevant in your formation as an English language teacher.
   ... To teach “how to teach”
   ... To learn very well the target language
   ... The practicum guide (from the teacher)
   ... Real language exposure classes
   ... Opportunities to reflect about your teachers’ identity
   ... The vocation
   ... The social responsibility

   d. Social Component
   Do you consider there is a positive recognition of English Language teachers in Colombia?
   Yes_____ No__________
   Why?

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