Tensions and Turning Points: A Narrative Study about Professional Identities of Two Colombian English Teachers

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Abstract

This research article explores the tensions and turning points experienced by two English teachers from the onset of their careers to their enrollment in a Master's Degree program in Applied Linguistics For Teaching English. As researchers, we assume that the process of becoming an English teacher is social and co-constructed over time. Within this co-construction, the English teachers underwent moments of tension through which they had to make goal-oriented decisions related to their profession. Theoretical constructs suggest that identity construction is a dynamic and fluctuating process, with teachers continuously using their agency and investing in constituting their identities. The methodology employed written autobiographical narratives and narrative interviews for data collection. The analysis of these narratives revealed a sequence of critical moments that significantly influenced the formation of the participants' identities, highlighting the role of agency in navigating emerging tensions. Findings indicate that teacher identity construction is influenced by the destabilizing nature of teacher education programs and the inherent tensions within these programs and teachers' broader professional journeys. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for teacher education programs in Colombia to support teachers' identity construction, enabling them to integrate and reflect their evolving self-conceptions in their pedagogical discourses and practices. The pedagogical implications rely on how teacher education programs in Colombia understand and support the construction of teacher identity and how teachers embody and reflect their new understanding of themselves in their pedagogical discourses and praxis.

Keywords: language teacher identity; narratives; tensions; language teacher education

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Tensões e pontos de inflexão: um estudo narrativo sobre identidades profissionais de duas professoras colombianas de inglês

Resumo

Este artigo de pesquisa explora as tensões e os pontos de inflexão experimentados por duas professoras de inglês desde o início de suas carreiras até a matrícula em um programa de mestrado em Linguística Aplicada ao ensino de inglês Como pesquisadores, assumimos que o processo de se tornar professor de inglês é social e co-construído ao longo do tempo. Dentro dessa co-construção, os professores de inglês passaram por momentos de tensão nos quais tiveram que tomar decisões orientadas para objetivos relacionados à sua profissão. Os constructos teóricos sugerem que a construção da identidade é um processo dinâmico e flutuante, no qual os professores continuamente usam sua agência e investem na constituição de suas identidades. A metodologia empregada incluiu narrativas autobiográficas escritas e entrevistas narrativas para a coleta de dados. A análise dessas narrativas revelou uma sequência de momentos críticos que influenciaram significativamente a formação das identidades dos participantes, destacando o papel da agência na navegação pelas tensões emergentes. Os achados indicam que a construção da identidade docente é influenciada pela natureza desestabilizadora dos programas de formação de professores e pelas tensões inerentes a esses programas e às trajetórias profissionais mais amplas dos professores. O estudo conclui enfatizando a necessidade de que os programas de formação de professores na Colômbia apoiem a construção da identidade dos professores, permitindo que integrem e reflitam suas concepções de si mesmos em evolução em seus discursos e práticas pedagógicas. As implicações pedagógicas dependem de como os programas de formação de professores na Colômbia entendem e apoiam a construção da identidade docente, e de como os professores incorporam e refletem seu novo entendimento de si mesmos em seus discursos e práticas pedagógicas.

Palavras-chave: identidade do professor de línguas; narrativas; tensões; formação de professores de línguas

Tensiones y puntos de inflexión: un estudio narrativo sobre las identidades profesionales de dos profesoras colombianas de inglés

Resumen

Este artículo de investigación explora las tensiones y los puntos de inflexión experimentados por dos profesoras de inglés desde el inicio de sus carreras hasta su matriculación en un Máster en Lingüística Aplicada a la enseñanza del inglés. Como investigadores, asumimos que el proceso de convertirse en profesor de inglés es social y se co-construye con el tiempo. Dentro de esta co-construcción, las profesoras de inglés pasaron por momentos de tensión en los cuales tuvieron que tomar decisiones orientadas a objetivos relacionados con su profesión. Los constructos teóricos sugieren que la construcción de la identidad es un proceso dinámico y fluctuante, en el que los profesores utilizan continuamente su agencia e invierten en la constitución de sus identidades. La metodología empleada incluyó narraciones autobiográficas escritas y entrevistas narrativas para la recolección de datos. El análisis de estas narraciones reveló una secuencia de momentos críticos que influyeron significativamente en la formación de las identidades de los participantes, destacando el papel de la agencia en la navegación de las tensiones emergentes. Los resultados indican que la construcción de la identidad docente está influenciada por la naturaleza desestabilizadora de los programas de formación del profesorado y las tensiones inherentes a estos programas y a las trayectorias profesionales más amplias de los docentes. El estudio concluye enfatizando la necesidad de que los programas de formación docente en Colombia apoyen la construcción de la identidad de los maestros, permitiéndoles integrar y reflejar sus autoconcepciones evolutivas en sus discursos y prácticas pedagógicas. Las implicaciones pedagógicas dependen de cómo los programas de formación docente en Colombia entienden y apoyan la construcción de la identidad de los maestros, así como la forma en que ellos encarnan y reflejan su nueva comprensión de sí mismos en sus discursos y su praxis pedagógica.

Palabras clave: identidad del profesor de idiomas; narrativas; tensiones; formación de docentes de idiomas

Introduction

> Exploring our language teacher identities means understanding
> our lived and living history. It is to understand and unravel the
> complexities that are at the core of who we are on all levels.
>
> (Varghese, *et al.*, 2016, p. 566)

This study emerged from our shared interest in exploring complex journey teachers undertake as they develop their professional identities in their personal, career, and academic contexts. We aimed to reveal teachers' self-constructions by using their narratives as a platform to express their lived experiences. The study seeks to contribute to the expanding field of English Language Teaching (ELT) by highlighting the importance of understanding Language Teacher Identities (LTIS) at central to teacher education and professional development. lti scholarship advocates for a language teacher education approach that integrates identity as a core principle within teacher education programs (Varghese *et al.*, 2016; Uştuk & Yazan, 2023). This article discusses the tensions experienced by two English teachers from the beginning of their careers to the start of their master's degree in applied linguistics for teaching English.

As authors, we assume that being and becoming an English teacher is a social process that unfolds over time. Similarly, we perceive identity construction as dynamic and multifaceted rather than static and singular. Teachers exercise their agency and continually invest in shaping their identities. As they navigate their social environments, they inevitably encounter internal conflicts with societal expectations and with themselves. Their professional expectations, aspirations, beliefs, discourses, and practices regarding the kind of teachers they are and wish to become often conflict with dominant discourses prevalent in their personal, professional, and academic environments (Alsup, 2019; Uştuk & Yazan, 2023). Teachers interpret these moments by narrating their lives, and these narratives provide a space for teachers to derive meaning from internal conflicts and to (re)construct and (re)negotiate their identities. Within this co-construction, the participants in this study illustrated how teachers often undergo many moments of tension that require them to make goal-oriented decisions.

This document departs from the theoretical considerations that support a poststructuralist perspective on LTIs. We argue that teachers negotiate a sense of self in relation to social structures, drawing on personal discursive constructions formed through their lived experiences as language learners and teachers. We understand language as a means for teachers to represent themselves and engage with authoritative discourses through dialogic (dialectic) interactions. Subsequently, we explore the potential of narrative inquiry to give voice to teachers' lived experiences and provide insights into the tensions they face in their personal, professional, and academic lives. The following section outlines the four tensions identified in the teachers' narratives and the resulting turning points in their practices, discourses, and, ultimately, their identities.

Theoretical Considerations

Language Teacher Identities

The concept of identity in Language Teacher Education (LTE) has gained significant attention over recent decades (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Varghese *et al.*, 2005). As classrooms have increasingly been recognized as complex and multidimensional environments, teachers are no longer viewed as passive technicians. Instead, they are encouraged to adopt more critical perspectives, positioning themselves as transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1988). The post-method perspective has introduced new roles for teachers, challenging existing views on

language teaching and advocating for a shift in how we understand language classrooms (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Consequently, the teachers' role has evolved to focus on empowering students by developing critical pedagogies to provide them with the knowledge and social skills needed to participate effectively in society and become transformative agents (Giroux, 1988). Despite these advancements, there are concerns about Teacher Education Programs (TEPs) that may not prioritize LTIs as their foundational element (Varghese *et al.*, 2016).

Conceptualizing identity poses a significant challenge in the literature due to the vast array of perspectives and fields intersecting with this concept (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Olsen, 2008). Nevertheless, within LTE, scholarship has emphasized the importance of addressing teachers' identity construction to gain a deeper understanding of their professional development (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Scholars have acknowledged the inherent relationship between learning-to-teach, teaching practice, and identity (Uştuk & Yazan, 2023). This has led to examining LTI from both poststructuralist and narrative perspectives. The former allows us to conceptualize LTI as grounded in the multilayered and kaleidoscopic nature of language, built upon the dynamics of discourse (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Rudolph *et al.*, 2018), while the latter reflects on the way teachers construct identities by narrating their life experiences (Barkhuizen, 2015a).

To begin, we acknowledge the constitutive dimension of the self within the language (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). From a poststructuralist perspective, we recognize language as a means of self-representation. Individuals construct their sense of self within the dynamics of discourse as they engage in interactions mediated by dialogue in the social world. This perspective acknowledges the mutually constitutive relationship between identity and discursive practices, and how individuals negotiate their sense of self through interaction (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Therefore, teachers' interactions in their daily lives, educational programs, and teaching scenarios shape their identities as they engage in dialogue. Thus, identities are viewed as ongoing and continuously shaped by teachers' personal and professional contexts (Olsen, 2011).

By understanding language in interaction as a social practice and as a means of self-representation, we recognize that teachers "have the power and autonomy to express their voice and exhibit their identities" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 182). Consequently, LTIs are shaped and enacted through the decisions, practices, and activities that teachers engage in. This process is bidirectional; as teachers exercise agency, make decisions, and immerse themselves in their practices, they enact their identities through language. However, every time this happens, they negotiate and renegotiate their sense of self. Therefore, identity becomes both an individual and a social construction. This discursive mode of understanding identity is supported by Norton (2010), who claims that "every time we speak, we are negotiating and renegotiating our sense of self concerning the larger social world, and reorganizing that relationship across time and space." (p. 350). Hence, it can be asserted that LTIs are dialogically constituted through discourse within the cultural, social, and power mechanisms of interaction, which are pivotal in the process of being and becoming.

A poststructuralist perspective on language teachers' identities acknowledges that identity is not singular or fixed but is constructed within the dynamics of discourse. This dialogic and discursive dimension of identity allows us to see the fluidity of identity in the roles that teachers assume and their agency in responding to imposed positionalities ascribed to them by others' discourses. Moreover, discourse dynamics are understood not merely through the dialogic process of conversation and interaction but also in the various ways teachers *story*[3]

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[3] We use the term story as a verb as individuals do self through language. It is to say that as language is a means of self-representation stories also become procedural dynamics for the creation of self. This is aligned with Bruner's (2002) understanding on how reality is lived through stories, therefore, individuals story their lives as they recount their lived experiences.

themselves and the meaning-making they construct over their lived stories (Barkhuizen, 2015a). In this train of thought, teachers shape, negotiate, and/or alter their identities while making meaning of the stories they tell.

Drawing on a poststructuralist approach to LTIs, we also understand that identities are inherently connected to the narrative constructions of lived experiences and the meanings individuals assign to those stories (Bruner, 2002). Narratives not only have the potential to exhibit teachers' identities but also to reflect the meaning teachers derive from their lived experiences. Thus, narratives have the potential to explore teachers' storied lives and experiences, as well as the meanings they create *inward, outward* (individual-social)*, backward,* and *forward* (past-present-future) on their own professional landscapes (Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This potential allows us to traverse the new significance and meanings that teachers create based on their dialogic interactions and experiences within their sociocultural-political contexts.

The latter perspective aligns with a view of LTIs that acknowledges the power of dialogue and interaction, as well as the role of language in self-representation. This dialogue involves not only social interactions but also an internal dialogue with one's own beliefs, shaped by lived experiences. Narratives serve as a mechanism for validating teachers' voices and their localized knowledge. In a field dominated by hegemonic discourses (Pennycook, 1989), narrative construction of the self-offers an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their practice, making their knowledge both public and validated (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). Therefore, we understand that individuals *do* self while storying their personal, professional, and academic selves. Hence, identities are constructed within a temporal dimension (Elliot, 2005; Kramp, 2004), spanning teachers' past experiences, their current self-constructions, and their envisioned future identities.

A narrative approach to identity allows us to explore how teachers experience tensions throughout their life stories and educational journeys. On the one hand, Kumaravadivelu (2012) suggests that teachers can undergo an 'epistemic break,' which involves shifting paradigms towards a more critical perspective of the self and the discourses and practices surrounding their teaching. On the other hand, Uştuk & Yazan (2023) conceptualize tensions as potential conflicts between teachers' internal persuasive discourses and external authoritative discourses. In other words, teachers' beliefs, practices, and discourses are often challenged by external interactions, discourses, and social dynamics involving other sociocultural and political actors (e.g., individuals, institutions, policies, regulations, theories). These challenges are understood as opportunities for (re)conceptualizing practices, discourses, and, ultimately, the self.

As teachers grapple with accepting or rejecting external discourses, their identities are (re)shaped, negotiated, and positioned in specific ways. At this point, teachers exert agency to embrace or reject these external positionalities. Consequently, identities become a dilemma (Barkhuizen, 2021) and a site of struggle, as individuals strive to balance their own belief systems with those encountered in their daily interactions. LTIs become a dilemma because teachers find themselves challenging their own perspectives against those from external sources. Similarly, Barkhuizen (2016) acknowledges that identities are constantly reshaped as individuals often adjust and readjust their configurations in response to their lived experiences and interactions. Therefore, LTIs understanding from a poststructuralist and narrative perspective highlights the potential of tensions to lead to changes or turning points, enabling teachers to (re)construct their identities.

Language Teacher Education from a Sociocultural Perspective

Over the past half-century, the understanding of Language Teacher Education (LTE) has changed dramatically (Freeman, 2002; Johnson, 2006; Johnson & Golombek, 2011). In recent decades, this shift has responded to a growing body of literature on teachers' cognition. Freeman (2009) introduced the concept of a widening gyre to capture the mainstream paradigms intersecting the field of LTE. The author contends that the field has evolved

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75

from training-focused perspectives to an interpretative approach that examines teachers' cognition and how they engage in professional learning processes.

Before the 1970s, the interest in LTE was mainly on teachers' behaviors and their learning outcomes, emphasizing a training perspective where teachers mastered content related to language, theories of Second Language Acquisition, and effective teaching methods (Freeman, 2002; Johnson, 2006). The 1980s marked a shift toward exploring the cognitive dimensions of learning and the decision-making processes in the classroom. The 1990s brought about a deeper understanding and consolidation of teachers' learning. The growing interest in teachers' knowledge base and the nature of their learning led to a more thorough examination of teaching itself. Unsurprisingly, LTE during this period involved understanding what teachers needed to learn and *how* they would learn it Freeman (2009). This broader scope for understanding teachers' learning acknowledged that teachers' cognition is shaped in the sociocultural context (Johnson, 2006). In other words, teachers' learning is grounded in their prior experiences, their interactions, and the sociocultural contexts in which they learn and work. Consequently, we can argue that LTE has evolved alongside epistemological shifts in how research conceptualizes human learning (Johnson, 2006). Similarly, the field of ELT has benefited from scholars whose primary focus over the past two decades has been to contribute to teachers' professional development within teacher education programs, advocating for a more critical and decolonial perspective (Guerrero-Nieto, 2023).

Rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) theoretical tenets, a sociocultural approach recognizes human cognition as a dynamic process that is socially constructed and culturally shaped. This theory acknowledges the inherent relationship between the cognitive and the social. Learning is not an accumulative set of information; it is situated in the physical and social realms and is mediated by people, contexts, language, and interactions (Johnson & Golombek, 2018; Johnson, 2009). Essentially, a sociocultural perspective also recognizes language as a social practice. Meaning is not solely embedded in language but also in the meanings that a social group ascribes to the language. Consequently, the act of learning by an individual is not an isolated cognitive process, as earlier cognitive approaches suggested. Instead, learning is grounded in the individual's prior experiences, the context in which learning occurs, and the use of that knowledge expected from the individual (Johnson, 2009).

Since LTE, at its core, is centered on understanding teachers as learners of teaching, the epistemological principles of sociocultural theory have the potential to unveil the nature and emergence of teachers' identities and their experienced tensions, highlighting the interplay between cognitive dimensions and the sociocultural contexts in which they operate (Johnson, 2009). Social practices and interactions encountered in learning and working environments, such as specific schools and institutions, shape teachers' understanding of *how to teach*. This is not a simple process of acculturation from the outside in; rather, as Vygotsky (1978) suggests, learning occurs through a dynamic transformation from the external (*Interpsychological*) to the internal (*Intrapsychological*), and this process is not direct but mediated (Johnson & Golombek, 2011). This mediation underscores the transformative internalization process (from external-social to internal-psychological). During this process, individuals use various tools, such as cognitive strategies or self-regulatory practices, to mediate between external influences and their own intra-psychological understanding.

In this vein, teachers learn how to teach not only the *scientific concepts* that are present in the content base of their (TEPs) but also by creating meaning and knowledge from the *everyday concepts* drawn from their experiential knowledge in their working environment. This dynamic opens the scope for TEPs to provide spaces where teachers can make sense of scientific concepts and apply them in practical ways, relating these concepts to their experiential knowledge gained through teaching activities Johnson & Golombek, 2011). The responsibility of TEPs, therefore, is to bridge the gap between theory and practice and integrate them into *praxis* (Freire, 1970), establishing a dialogic relationship where each informs the other. However, this remains a challenging task for LTE, as the theoretical

Folios n.º 61
Primer semestre de 2025 · pp. 71-88
Segunda época · Artículo de revisión

knowledge presented in TEPs often remains disconnected from practical application in current teaching practices. Furthermore, there has been limited emphasis on developing a sustained model of LTE that positions LTIs as the core organizational principle. This study, instead, advocates for understanding LTIs as a fundamental axis in the construction of a transformative practice for LTE in the country.

Consequently, a sociocultural perspective contributes to understanding the various shades of teachers' learning and their interrelatedness with their identities. Firstly, it allows us to comprehend the cognitive development of teachers in light of the social practices that mediate it. Secondly, it highlights the transformative impact of social practices on teachers' teaching methods, enabling them to be responsive to local needs. Thirdly, it recognizes that teachers' knowledge of *how to teach* is largely drawn from teachers' own experiences as learners (Johnson, 2009). This perspective supports a self-inquiry approach to LTE, where narrative accounts enable teachers to reflect on their development and identity as educators, allowing them to (re)construct and (re)interpret their learning-to-teach experiences (Johnson & Golombek, 2018).

Methodology

In this study, we adopted a qualitative approach due to its unique characteristics that contribute to understanding complex phenomena and provide a comprehensive depth to our understanding of them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, we believe that through a qualitative approach, we can capture the richness of subjective human experiences, enhancing the thoroughness of our study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As teacher-researchers, we also find that the flexibility of the qualitative approach makes it ideal for exploring dynamic and evolving phenomena, as it allows us to focus on the richness and relevance of the data that emerge from the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Our study aimed to explore the tensions and turning points that two English teachers experienced from the beginning of their careers until the start of their master's degree in applied linguistics for teaching English. To investigate this, we turned to narrative research. From the poststructuralist and narrative perspectives, we understand that identities are constructed discursively (Bruner, 2002). Narrative research, with its focus on the stories individuals tell about their lives, is particularly well-suited to exploring these aspects of identity, including the tensions and dilemmas that teachers face as they negotiate their identities (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Uştuk & Yazan, 2023). These narratives are both reflections of reality and active constructions that teachers use to make sense of their past, present, and future selves. Narratives allow for an in-depth understanding of the participants' stories and perspectives, highlighting the subjective and contextual aspects of their journeys as language teachers (Barkhuizen, 2016; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Narrative inquiry involves collecting and analyzing the stories individuals tell about their experiences to discover how they construct, negotiate, and enact their identities over time (Barkhuizen, 2015a). Accordingly, we use autobiographical narratives to collect firsthand accounts that provide insights into each teacher's internal dialogues, their responses to external pressures, and the stresses they experience in their professional lives (Chase, 2011). Autobiographical narratives are personal accounts of "one's memory of oneself, one's history, and one's critical moments" (Hernánde *et al.*, 2011, p. 29). The data extracted from these narratives are presented as vignettes connected to epiphanies or critical moments that describe a place, time, and characters (Barkhuizen *et al.*, 2014). The researchers asked the participants of this study to write an autoethnographic narrative that would first show their story as English learners and their journey as in-service teachers, and secondly, their story as master's students in applied linguistics. However, although ten students from the master's program agreed to write the autobiography, only two agreed to continue with the narrative interview.

We conducted a narrative interview with each participant to complement the information collected in the autobiographies. A narrative interview is a specific type of in-depth interview suitable for reconstructing subjective processes that unfold over time. Unlike traditional in-depth interviews, narrative interviews do not have a pre-established script of questions (Agoff & Herrera, 2019). Therefore, when conducting these interviews, we did not focus on selecting topics, ordering questions, or specifying the language used. During the interviews, each teacher was free to express themselves about the events narrated in the autobiographies, while the moderators asked questions as the conversation progressed. This method allowed us to gather additional vignettes that enriched the understanding of the critical events recounted in the autobiographies and related them to the context of teacher education (Riessman, 2008). It is essential to clarify that although the participants are native Spanish speakers, the data was collected in English.

The information provided by the two participants through the two instruments allowed us to characterize them accurately. Carolina is from Cartagena and works virtually for a language school. She was an M.A. candidate whose narrative departed from her initial disinterest in being a teacher or a researcher while studying for her B.A. in Spanish linguistics. Although she had more than two years of experience as an English teacher when she joined the master's program, she felt lost because her peers seemed more knowledgeable about language teaching due to their teaching degrees. Nevertheless, this fact did not discourage her from fulfilling her duties in the master's program.

Johana is from Bogotá and works in a public school in the southern part of the city. During her B.A., Johana focused on developing strategies for teaching grammar. She worked for different institutions, developing various projects with governmental agencies, and she considered herself a teacher-researcher. However, when she started the M.A. program, she broadened her understanding, realizing that her previous research initiatives were just initial steps compared to what it truly means to become a teacher-researcher. As a result of her master's studies, Johana reconstructed her teaching practices with a renewed purpose, advocating for a reconciliation of the English class curriculum with the knowledges of the communities. These participants were selected because they represent different contexts and experiences within language teaching in Colombia, offering diverse perspectives on their journeys as language teachers.

To ensure ethical considerations in this research, we asked both participants to provide informed consent before their involvement in the study. The participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose of the study, the data collection methods, and their rights as participants. They were also assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Informed consent serves as the primary resource to guarantee ethics in research, ensuring that participants are aware of their involvement and rights (Creswell, 2013).

The data analysis followed a thematic approach (Barkhuizen *et al.*, 2014). First, we read the vignettes repeatedly to identify the main themes that emerged from the narratives. Second, we determined the themes from the data and organized the vignettes in a matrix to facilitate a comprehensive reading of the data. The analysis process included familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and finally, defining and naming the themes (Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Regarding our positionality as researchers, we acknowledge our roles as active interpreters and meaning-makers within the narrative inquiry process. Our experiences, beliefs, and perspectives inevitably shape our engagement with the participants' narratives and the subsequent interpretation of the data (Chase, 2011). As language educators, our backgrounds and personal narratives significantly influence the research process and findings. By reflexively examining our positionality and being acutely aware of our biases, we strive to enhance the transparency and trustworthiness of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This reflexivity is essential in narrative research, where the interplay between the stories of the researchers and the participants contributes to a deeper, more nuanced

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78

understanding of the phenomena. Ensuring transparency involves openly acknowledging our influence on the research process, while trustworthiness is boosted by our commitment to reflexivity and ethical rigor in interpreting and presenting narratives. These principles are foundational in narrative research, reinforcing the credibility and authenticity of the co-constructed meanings derived from the inquiry (Riessman, 2008).

Findings: Tensions and Turning Points

The data analysis revealed two key elements in the teachers' narratives: tensions and turning points. Tensions refer to internal conflicts that arise from reconciling professional expectations with personal beliefs and aspirations, leading to struggles with self-conception (Alsup, 2019; Menard-Warwick, 2013; Pillen *et al.*, 2013). Turning points, on the other hand, are pivotal moments that significantly alter beliefs or practices, often triggered by challenges or new experiences. These moments prompt deep reflection and transformation, changing career trajectories and fostering professional growth (Schön, 1992; Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

Below, we describe four instances when teachers experienced tensions and turning points. We have labeled these moments as Becoming Language Teachers, Journeys of Growth and Transformation in Teaching Careers, Reemerging Identities and Renewed Perspectives in the M.A., and From Imposed Roles to Critical Agents of Change.

Becoming Language Teachers

After analyzing the narratives of Johana and Carolina, it becomes evident that they both experienced similar tensions before and during their time as pre-service teachers. One common tension they both encountered was their initial underestimation of the teaching profession. For many individuals, teaching is not seen as a prestigious or financially rewarding career, which complicates the decision to pursue it (Peynado *et al.*, 2022). For instance, Johana initially did not consider teaching as a viable option.

"I had always envisioned myself pursuing a career in a different field. Teaching never really crossed my mind as something I would be passionate about. It was only later on that I started considering it as a possibility" (Johana's narrative). Similarly, Carolina admitted, "I did not think about it as a possible career path... I never considered English as a field of work" (Carolina's narrative).

These initial thoughts led them into a field of uncertainty and conflict with their future selves, due to prevailing discourses about teaching as a profession (Pennycook, 2009). Furthermore, during their B.A. studies, both individuals encountered limited exposure to pedagogy, creating another shared tension as they felt unprepared to surmount the challenges of teaching in a classroom. Carolina mentioned that her pedagogy class was merely an introductory course that did not delve into the practical aspects of education. *"My only contact with anything related to pedagogy was during a semester-long pedagogy class... it focused on describing the most renowned pedagogues in history"* (Carolina's narrative).

Likewise, Johana expressed a lack of guidance and mentorship in pedagogy, which affected her ability to develop effective teaching methods. She recounted, *"I struggled to capture their attention, so I began searching for information on how to engage students with different practices in a classroom"* (Johana's narrative).

This tension highlights the importance of learning to teach and the teaching practice in the formation of one's identity (Uştuk & Yazan, 2023). While pre-service teachers are expected to learn and understand pedagogy and didactics, many teacher education programs only address these issues superficially, resulting in gaps that create conflicts and impact teachers' identities (Mosquera-Pérez & Losada-Rivas, 2022).

However, both Johana and Carolina overcame these tensions through various turning points in their journeys. We understand turning points aligned with Kumaravadivelu's (2006) concept of epistemic break—moments when

individuals re-configure their former understandings with renewed perspectives nurtured by external sources. These turning points within their stories represent a renewed construction in light of their lived experiences. One common turning point for both individuals was developing an interest through informal teaching experiences. Johana's involvement in a volunteer teaching program and Carolina's experience teaching Spanish to international students sparked their passion for teaching. Johana acknowledges the impact of her experiences. *"I had terrible English teachers, but they allowed me to contemplate my future as an educator"* (Johana's narrative). Similarly, Carolina reflects on her transformative experience. *"The experience truly changed my perspective on teaching... I enjoyed preparing my classes and discovering new and alternative ways to explain the language"* (Carolina's narrative).

The actions taken by the two participants demonstrate their transformation regarding their initial idea of becoming teachers. Consequently, both decided to invest in their future selves by taking steps to become more knowledgeable educators (Norton, 2010; Peynado *et al.*, 2022).

Johana and Carolina experienced another pivotal moment in their journey, connected to their interactions with others. During these discursive exchanges, both participants negotiated their future selves and positioned themselves differently from their initial ideas about becoming teachers (Barkhuizen, 2015a). Johana emphasizes the influence of a teacher who invited her to collaborate. *"She was a wonderful teacher who always helped and supported me... she encouraged students to strive for their best"* (Johana's narrative).

Similarly, Carolina's turning points were influenced by the recommendation and guidance of a classmate and her thesis advisor. The suggestion made by her classmate prompted Carolina to consider the teaching program, while her thesis advisor provided support throughout her studies. Carolina expresses her gratitude and states, *"I always say I am a Linguist thanks to her"* (Carolina's narrative). Additionally, Carolina attributes a significant role in her decision to pursue a teaching career to her former English teacher, who later became her thesis director. She acknowledges this support: *"She selflessly helped me... I suppose"* (Carolina's narrative).

Johana and Carolina both encountered tensions as pre-service teachers, including underestimating the career path and limited exposure to pedagogy. However, they overcame these tensions through various turning points. These findings underscore the significance of supportive relationships, informal teaching experiences, and exposure to pedagogy in shaping the trajectories of pre-service teachers. At this moment of resolution, the second tension appears.

Journeys of Growth and Transformation in Teaching Careers

After completing their majors, Johana and Carolina took different teaching positions at various educational institutions, facing new challenges that significantly impacted their professional identities. Initially, Johana faced difficulties securing a teaching position after graduation, emphasizing the significance of employment and professional growth in identity formation. Reflecting on her experience, she stated, *"I graduated in 2012 and attempted to find a position in a school, but it proved to be challenging"* (Johana's narrative). Similarly, Carolina encountered the challenge of starting her teaching career without prior experience, leading her to join a language school that provided training. She explained, *"I applied for a job at this language school... they didn't require previous experience, which was perfect for me at the time"* (Carolina's narrative).

These experiences highlight the everyday struggles faced by novice teachers, such as the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Gray & Block, 2012; Sayer, 2012). Although they receive considerable information and education during their initial training, it often proves insufficient for many schools or language institutions. Consequently, the knowledge, expertise, and identity of novice teachers are frequently overlooked, hindering their professional development (Gray & Block, 2012; Sayer, 2012).

Johana's experience exemplifies this situation as she faced the challenge of teaching in a specialized school that catered to students from diverse social backgrounds and varied sociocultural milieus. This experience likely fostered her personal growth and resilience as an educator. She shared, *"I started working part-time at a Private school... where I taught classes to students with distinct social circumstances"* (Johana's narrative). Johana also faced tension due to a hostile work environment, where the principal's behavior negatively impacting her self-esteem and professional confidence. She expressed, *"The principal was extremely rude... she scolded me in front of the students"* (Johana's narrative). Despite this hostility, Johana demonstrated resilience by adapting to the complex dynamics of her teaching context (Gu & Day, 2013).

Johana found a turning point when she decided to switch to a public school with a special bilingual project. This opportunity allowed her to collaborate with her colleagues and develop a program that aligned with the interests of her students. She stated, *"In July 2014, I applied for a job in a public school with a special bilingual project"* (Johana's narrative). However, Johana faced resistance from her colleagues, who were initially reluctant to embrace the bilingual project, underscoring the importance of managing professional relationships and addressing resistance to change. She explained, *"Initially, most of the teachers at the school rejected the project"* (Johana's narrative). Johana experienced a breakthrough by successfully engaging students through various activities, projects, and games. Witnessing their creativity and growth fueled her sense of purpose and passion for teaching. She remarked, *"I had to find ways to engage students who didn't like English... they surprised me with their creativity"* (Johana's narrative).

Carolina discovered the limitations of the school's teaching methods and recognized the need to challenge bureaucratic practices to ensure a better learning experience for her students. She observed, *"I noticed how the methods failed to serve the students' interests... bureaucracy took precedence over the actual quality of the course... we instructors had to rebel and take charge"* (Carolina's narrative). Carolina faced tension as she struggled to find her identity as a teacher within the confines of the strict teaching methods (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). She felt the urge to make her classes more dynamic and engaging, which clashed with the expectations of the school. She explained, *"Classes used to be rigid and inauthentic... I felt the need to adapt... as a result, my performance suffered, and I felt like an incompetent teacher"* (Carolina's narrative). These feelings toward her own practice motivated Carolina to exercise her agency and improve her teaching experiences (Johnson & Golombek, 2018).

For Carolina, her turning point came when she shifted her focus from adhering to the school's demands to prioritizing her students' comfort, motivation, and well-being in the learning process. As Carolina stated, *"It is a hundred times more valuable to me that my students feel comfortable, motivated, and cared for... than completing a set of steps just to satisfy the institute's demands"* (Carolina's narrative). This shift highlights Carolina's focus on prioritizing the needs and well-being of her students, demonstrating her proactive approach to enhancing her teaching.

Another turning point in Carolina's teaching career occurred when she recognized the importance of active listening and learning from her students. This connection and interaction with her students ignited her passion for teaching and fueled her desire to provide them with a high-quality education. She expressed, *"Two of the most valuable skills and joys I've gained from my occupation are... learning how to listen... and learning to **learn** from others' stories"* (Carolina's narrative).

Her realization underscores the transformative potential of critical pedagogy in fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment (Freire, 1970). Interestingly, both participants sought opportunities for professional growth by enrolling in a master's degree program in applied linguistics for teaching English, which brought new tensions and turning points.

Reemerging Identities and Renewed Perspectives in the M.A.

In the master's program, Johana and Carolina underwent a series of tensions between their former practices, discourses, and selves. This experience impacted their current identities as teachers and led them to reclaim and negotiate identities that had been overshadowed by the constraints of their previous teaching settings. The master's program provided an opportunity to experience epistemic breaks (Kumaravadivelu, 2012) and reshape their practices and identities as teachers. Consequently, these reconstructions allowed them to foresee future opportunities that aligned more closely with their newly acquired perspectives on teaching, research, and their roles as teachers in the field of ELT in Colombia.

The process of undertaking the master's degree allowed Carolina and Johana to experience tensions both at an intellectual and practical level. Intellectually, they were challenged to question past colonizing notions about teaching and learning a foreign language. Practically, they began to adopt renewed teaching practices with a more socially responsive perspective.

Carolina, for example, questioned her role as a language teacher and whether she had contributed to a system that treated individuals differently based on the language they use. She reflected, *"I really realized, OK, I question myself, maybe am I perpetuating these beliefs about English, that English is superior, that other languages are inferior to English, or that people need English in order to have a better life?"* (Carolina's interview).

This intellectual tension, or epistemic break in Kumaravadivelu's (2012) terms, was echoed by Johana, who stated, *"During the classes of the master, many aspects of my life have changed, first of all, the idea to perpetuate the instructional and repetitive method of colonization."* (Johana's narrative). Therefore, their studies at the master's program contributed to self-reflection about their past beliefs and teaching practices, ultimately helping them debunk preconceived perspectives that enforced a colonial view of language and teaching.

With their renewed perspectives on language teaching and learning, Carolina and Johana reshaped their classroom practices to align with a more critical and socially responsive agenda. Johana noted, *"the idea to go beyond the traditional lines of the curricula and think about including the community to rebuild the structures and content at school to take into account funds of knowledge of the families at school"* (Johana's narrative). Both participants realized that their role as language teachers gave them the opportunity to effect meaningful changes to their students' lives and the broader educational community. This realization was a result of the different practices carried out in the master's program. Carolina mentioned, *"what we took with Professor Andrea about how we don't really teach anything. We just teach like (…) something very superficial (…) But behind that we could do so much more or with that, along with the process during that we could do so much more. So maybe those two ideas made me change my perspectives about teaching English very much."* (Carolina's interview). Therefore, both teachers adopted a more critical perspective towards their role in the classroom, focusing on activities that could empower their students and challenge colonizing views of language and teaching.

The master's program also provided participants with the opportunity to negotiate and shape their identities. Both participants balanced their roles as teachers and researchers, and in the case of Carolina, as a linguist as well. While their teaching environments offered limited opportunities to carry out research, the master's program expanded the possibilities for integrating their identities as both teachers and researchers.

At this point, their identities (re)emerged as paths towards embracing more sustained identities as teacher-researchers. Carolina noted, *"I was just thinking, OK, I'll be a teacher. It may be, if I get a master's, I'll be a university teacher. But that's it, like teaching English at the university. Now, I really want to incorporate research into my career, my profession as well."* (Carolina's narrative).

Folios n.º 61 · Primer semestre 2025 · Facultad de Humanidades · Universidad Pedagógica Nacional | ISSN: 0123-4870 · e-ISSN: 2462-8417

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82

Thus, Carolina started balancing her multiple selves, which reemerged as a result of the opportunity to engage in research on linguistics. She mentioned, *"I mean, when I was a linguist, I was a linguist researcher. Then, I was a teacher. And now I am hoping to recover that identity of a teacher, researcher, and a linguist."* (Carolina's narrative). The master's program became the space where these identities could converge and negotiate new ways of being in her educational settings.

For Johana, the master's program was only an opportunity to (re)shape her teaching practices but also the space to carry out research with a critical perspective. She asserted, *"I understood that the focus on this master's is totally different (...) the purpose of this one [master's] is social change. And I think I tried to address my project in this way"* (Johana's narrative). Thus, her teacher-researcher identity sought to embrace a more socially responsive agenda that benefitted not only her students but also their neighborhoods and communities. As a result of this process, she experienced tensions with her former teacher-researcher self, who was mainly focused on developing successful strategies for teaching grammar. This shift was reflected in her master's research project, which aimed to reconcile the language curriculum with students' communities. She mentioned, *"I changed my mind about how to teach grammar to work with community-based pedagogies to motivate students to think critically based on a critical pedagogy"* (Johana's narrative).

Consequently, the master's program itself constituted both tensions and turning points for both participants. Their former perspectives were subject to reflection and transformation as a result of the texts, discussions, and activities carried out in the different seminars. Johana mentioned, *"For instance, presentations, dialogues, debates, guest speakers, interesting readings, reflective inquiry to permit us to develop agency and motivate us to have a different attitude as Language Teachers"* (Johana's narrative). For Carolina, the turning points involved debunking deficit discourses, such as the notion of a native-like accent being the standard for language proficiency. She asserted, *"maybe those are stereotypes and that idea that you need to be like the gringos, you have to, you need to speak English, but like the gringos. So maybe I don't do that anymore because I realized that's, I mean, problematic"* (Carolina's narrative).

These reconstructions in the master's program prompted participants to envision imagined identities as future language teachers and educators. Imagined identities and communities reflect individuals' capacity to imagine and desire their belonging to specific communities. This imagined prospection allows individuals to position themselves as partaking in the standard shared practices and spaces of a particular group (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Carolina's imagined self-related *"to be a university professor, and I would like to work with all three things, research, linguistics, and English"* (Carolina's narrative). For Johana, her imagined self is one that implements socially-responsive projects rather than solely focusing on the improvement of language skills. These imagined identities mirror participants' renewed constructions as teacher-researchers emerging from their participation in the master's program.

From Imposed Roles to Critical Agents of Change

This last section provides an account of the fourth tension and turning point encountered throughout the participants' journey of narratively reconstructing their professional identities. Our analysis revealed that the tensions experienced in the three previous sections served the purpose of allowing participants to reflect on their own experiences and foresee opportunities for change. As the master's program became a significant milestone in their professional path, Johana's and Carolina's narratives evidenced a process of transformation towards more critical agendas. The fact that they had challenged their former notions about teaching and learning a foreign language as a result of their master's studies evidenced how they exerted agency towards reconstructing their past selves and transforming, initially their discourses and later, their practices as language teachers.

Tensions and Turning Points: A Narrative Study about Professional Identities of Two Colombian English Teachers
Jairo Enrique Castañeda-Trujillo / José David Largo-Rodríguez

As discussed earlier, Carolina and Johana challenged the imperialist and often colonizing views on English, the native-like accent, and the curriculum (Philipson, 1992). This helped them not only to understand the pervasiveness of underlying discourses in their roles as teachers but also to envision ways of resisting these ideas through their own practice as language teachers. Carolina even questioned the often-structured way in which research is written, aligning with the criticism made by Canagarajah (1996) about the rigid features of research writing. She mentioned *"There must be some standards. But sometimes, I think they are too structured or too inflexible. And I mean, there must be another way, right? to do research."* (Carolina's narrative). This excerpt shows how Carolina even questions imposed models of writing about research and how research, as a way of representing her teacher-researcher identity, is often structured, oppressive, and rigid. The fact that she questions the inflexible nature of research writing illustrates how she exerts agency to dismantle imposed models of doing and being.

For Johana, resisting imposed models meant taking tangible actions in the classroom that promoted social change in the communities. Johana experienced tensions during the master's program when she realized that her role as a language teacher was not solely to find ways to improve language skills or include projects so that students could learn in a differently. Her tensions involved finding ways for her teaching contributed to the social transformation of deprived communities in the neighborhood where she taught. She noted, *"I think one of my biggest dreams is to continue working for a better situation for each one of my students in different places, in different contexts."* (Johana's narrative). Thus, we analyzed how this paradigm shift towards language and teaching reflected her options for resisting imposed models that circulated around her teaching scenarios.

Furthermore, we analyzed how, by engaging in the master's program, they reached a turning point towards reflexivity on social issues from a critical perspective. This process reflected their agency and transformation into agents of change. In this context, we understood that the participants not only exerted agency when changing their discourses and practices in school but that their agency bestowed a deeper dimension. This involved Carolina's and Johana's capacity to critically problematize the discourses that had positioned them within a specific way of being, and therefore acting, while assuming a renewed positionality as teachers, researchers, linguists, and future educators who challenged these long-imposed models of being (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Rudolph *et al.,* 2018). For Carolina, her turning point involved seeing her professional self as detached from the imposed agenda of an instructor at a language institute, but instead embracing renewed positionalities that are more aligned with her envisioned selves. She commented,

I used to see myself only as an instructor; I am now building my identity as a teacher-researcher. I used to conform to following given steps; I hope from now on, my story that will not lack inquiry, reflection, innovation, and hopefully, meaningful learning through interaction, connections and relationships; between myself and learners, among learners themselves and learners and their realities. (Carolina's narrative).

This turning point resulted from participants' own reflections on their personal, professional, and academic selves within their past, present, and future constructions. It illustrates how, despite the conditions in their teaching scenarios, the circulating discourses on language teaching and learning, and the often-imposed roles in their educational settings, their education in the master's program allowed them to resist these dynamics and discourses, positioning themselves as agents of change and transformation. The concept of "agents of change" refers to individuals who actively seek to alter or improve social, educational, or organizational systems. This role requires critical awareness and a commitment to social justice, as articulated by Freire (1970), who emphasizes the importance of conscientization—raising critical awareness—and praxis, the action and reflection upon the world to transform it.

For Johana, her turning point involved embracing a more humanizing pedagogy, which meant seeking actions to transform the realities of her students.

Tensions and Turning Points: A Narrative Study about Professional Identities of Two Colombian English Teachers
Jairo Enrique Castañeda-Trujillo / José David Largo-Rodríguez

"We also need to be social human beings to lead the process of emancipation, where education takes the real place. We have the power to transform society with our behavior as teachers. And if we act together our voice as a community will be heard." (Johana's narrative).

This statement reflects her understanding of education as a vehicle for emancipation and social change, aligning with hooks' (1994) concept of engaged pedagogy, which advocates for teaching that goes beyond knowledge transfer to empower and uplift marginalized communities.

Therefore, we analyzed how Johana's turning point implies becoming an agent of change by raising awareness of the social issues within her community and striving for social transformation. We understood that the master's program provided her with the opportunity to integrate a critical dimension into her practices, discourses, and classroom dynamics, thereby challenging oppressive structures and fostering a more equitable educational environment. Through these critical engagements, Johana exemplifies the role of teachers as agents of change, capable of influencing not only their immediate educational settings but also the broader social fabric.

Conclusions

This study shed light on the tensions and turning points experienced by in-service teachers before entering a master's teacher education program and during the initial semesters in the program. Johana and Carolina, the two participants, faced both unique and shared tensions from their undergraduate studies to their current teaching experiences. They overcame these tensions through various turning points, which significantly contributed to their professional identity construction. The tensions and turning points they experienced highlighted the importance of supportive relationships, informal teaching experiences, exposure to pedagogy, and professional growth opportunities in shaping the trajectories of in-service teachers. Supportive teachers and mentors played a crucial role in reshaping their perceptions and supporting their decision to pursue teaching careers.

As they entered the profession, Johana and Carolina encountered challenges related to their identities and workplace demands, including adapting to students' diverse backgrounds, navigating a rigid curriculum, and dealing with bureaucratic practices. A significant turning point was enrolling in a master's program in applied linguistics for teaching English, which allowed them to reflect on and challenge colonizing language teaching notions and adopt a socially conscious approach. They embraced research and became teacher-researchers, with the master's program providing a transformative space for self-reflection, intellectual growth, and the re-emergence of their identities as teacher-researchers. These findings underscore the critical role of teacher education in fostering teacher autonomy and reflective practice, particularly in challenging dominant pedagogical discourses. To enhance the development of such a role in teacher identities, it is recommended that educational institutions and policymakers prioritize continuous professional development and create supportive environments that encourage reflective practice and research integration.

The implications for the ELT field in Colombia highlight the importance of supporting in-service teachers through continuous professional development that is contextually relevant and responsive to local needs. Teacher education programs in Colombia must address the tensions and turning points experienced by teachers, such as underestimating the career path, limited pedagogy exposure, challenges in securing teaching positions, and conflicts with institutional demands. Comprehensive education should be provided, including practical and experiential learning, mentorship programs, and exposure to diverse and contextualized teaching approaches. Additionally, teacher education programs should encourage critical reflection and the development of a socially responsive perspective, empowering teachers to challenge dominant discourses and promote inclusive and transformative education practices. Ultimately, these efforts will be vital in cultivating a critically engaged and socially responsive teaching workforce capable of addressing the complex educational challenges in Colombia.

Tensions and Turning Points: A Narrative Study about Professional Identities of Two Colombian English Teachers
Jairo Enrique Castañeda-Trujillo / José David Largo-Rodríguez

85

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86

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87

Tensions and Turning Points: A Narrative Study about Professional Identities of Two Colombian English Teachers
Jairo Enrique Castañeda-Trujillo / José David Largo-Rodríguez

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88