Colombian English Teachers' Professional Development: The Case of Master Programs[1]

El desarrollo profesional de profesores colombianos de inglés: programas de maestría

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Master degree programs have rapidly increased in Colombia to the point where they are one of the most favored options for English teachers seeking to bolster their professional development. This survey study characterizes eighty participants, their five master programs, and their perceptions concerning the influence these graduate courses exerted on their teaching. While participants' pedagogical and research work seemed to have benefited the most from their studies, their practices involving language policy and administration were regarded as distant from what they learnt. Findings suggest that innovation, reflection, and collaboration permeated participants' overarching categories of development. Challenges to respondents' integration of their newly acquired education with their teaching included competing ideologies and agendas exhibited by stakeholders in school communities.

Key words: Colombian English teacher education, English as a foreign language master programs, English teachers' graduate education, English teachers' professional development.

Los programas de maestría en Colombia han aumentado rápidamente convirtiéndose en opciones preferidas para el desarrollo profesional de profesores de inglés. Empleando encuestas, se caracterizaron cinco programas de maestría, ochenta participantes y la influencia de sus estudios de maestría en su enseñanza. Mientras la pedagogía y la investigación fueron aparentemente los aspectos que más se beneficiaron de sus estudios, sus prácticas en política lingüística y administración fueron las menos favorecidas. Los hallazgos sugieren que la innovación, reflexión y colaboración permearon en general el desarrollo profesional de los participantes. Los retos que enfrentaron los participantes al integrar la educación posgraduada con su enseñanza incluyeron ideologías y agendas opuestas de los varios actores educativos en las escuelas.

Palabras clave: desarrollo profesional de profesores de inglés, educación de profesores de inglés colombianos, educación posgraduada de profesores de inglés, maestría en enseñanza de inglés.

Introduction

Teachers can develop professionally by resourcing a vast array of formal and informal options. Though there are many options available to teachers, most choose to deepen and expand their knowledge base by enrolling in courses, seminars, and workshops. Colombian English teachers are not the exception to this trend as González, Montoya, and Sierra (2002) and González (2003) reveal. In their studies, educators in public and private schools expressed that teache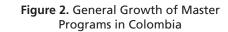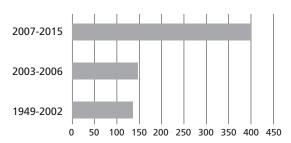r development programs and postgraduate courses offered by universities were their number one choice for continuing their education. From the time the aforementioned studies were published to date, university postgraduate programs, namely, master programs, have grown dramatically. As Figure 1 shows, from two programs in English language teaching (ELT) before the year 2000, the number of programs increased to almost twenty in 2016. These programs are offered mostly in regional capital cities, among them Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali.

Figure 1. Growth of ELT Master Programs in Colombia[2]

This tendency in ELT masters programs aligns with the general trend in all the disciplines in the country as Figure 2 illustrates. By the year 2000, approximately one hundred masters' programs had been opened and in 2015 that number soared to 400.

Figure 2. General Growth of Master Programs in Colombia

The rapid increase in the number of master programs in ELT calls for research to update and deepen the field's knowledge of teachers' perceptions regarding their participation in these programs. Albeit González's (2003) and González et al.'s (2002) studies, conducted more than ten years ago, established key issues regarding Colombian teachers' views on their options for professional development, the questions they posed did not specifically tackle postgraduate studies. Consequently, they do not provide substantial discussion concerning master programs.

In this vein, this article seeks to characterize not only a group of master's programs in Colombia, but also the participants in these courses. In addition, by examining teachers' perceptions concerning their master's level studies, the manuscript delves into the impact that they understand the programs might have had on their performance within their teaching contexts.

Literature Review

After their initial education in undergraduate programs, teachers nearly always need to continue their learning. As Richards and Farrell (2005) posit, the issue is not that their prior education experience might have not been a productive one, but that there are limits to what teachers can learn in each cycle of their education. Moreover, educators live in a changing world which requires them to constantly develop new knowledge and

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2   The information used to design Figures 1 and 2 was taken from Sistema Nacional de Información de la Educación Superior (SNIES) and from the document "Situacion de la Formación de Programas de Postgrado en Colombia" published online by the Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación Nacional [MEN], 2006b).

skills necessary to cope with new challenges faced when attempting to contribute to their students' learning. In this vein, Freeman (2001) explains that after five years of teaching, in-service teachers make their learning goals the core of their instruction. At this point in their career trajectories, teacher education, especially education rooted in inquiry-oriented and reflective paradigms, provides an essential guide for their efforts to meet their career objectives.

Though in-service teachers' education can involve educators' training or development, current tendencies in the field align with a developmental perspective. Richards and Farrell (2005) make a distinction between teacher development and teacher training. Teacher training is "focused on teacher's present responsibilities and typically aimed at short-term and immediate goals" (p. 3) whereas teacher development "serves long-term goals and seeks to facilitate growth of teachers' understanding of teaching and of themselves as teachers" (p. 4). Consequently, it behooves teachers to focus on development rather than training as they make educational progress, not only because of the technical conception associated with training but also due to the reflective, long-term, and teacher self-driven agenda behind seeking teachers' development. In this vein, Cárdenas, González, and Álvarez (2010) underscore the need to adopt a general framework founded on a developmental perspective for Colombian English teachers' education.

In-service teacher options for development encompass a vast array of modalities. The level of formality, length of engagement, type of certification, association with others, and objectives being pursued constitute some of the variables shaping teacher education alternatives. Higher education courses, for example, master courses are included in what Roberts (2016) and Johnstone (2004) characterized as formal situations for teachers' learning. These programs will grant university certification to teachers and in Colombia they required teachers to take courses for at least two years. The Colombian Ministry of Education has provided

guidelines for master programs in Decreto 1001 (MEN, 2006a). In this vein, master programs are expected to contribute to the production, apprehension, and use of knowledge guiding participants to innovate and to update their knowledge base, not only at the methodological level but also regarding the scientific developments in their discipline.

Nationally and internationally the consistency of master programs has also been aligned with overarching principles founded on adult education (Cárdenas et al., 2010; Díaz-Maggioli, 2003). Based on research areas on adult education, Brookfield (1995) posits that self-directed learning and learning how to learn, critical reflection, and experiential learning are major foundations considered in the education of this population. In addition to the previous principles, Díaz-Maggioli (2003) discusses how teachers, as adults, should be motivated and respected by taking into account their needs and decisions when they enroll in education programs. Likewise, encouraging them to collaborate with peers and providing suitable institutional conditions are of paramount importance in their learning.

The following lines summarize studies published in Colombian journals targeting ELT master programs. Pineda and Clavijo (2003) examined participants' beliefs about research and their development of research skills and determined that they were able to bridge reflective and research practices. Through their exploration of the innovation processes carried out in schools by teachers enrolled in a master's program, Clavijo, Guerrero, Torres, Ramírez, and Torres (2004) found that "teachers planned and carried out curricular innovations thinking critically about students' needs and interests" (p. 11). Álvarez's (2009) examination of teachers' reflections regarding their knowledge base concluded that these participants' various knowledge categories were built from the interaction of what they learnt in their formal education and what they accumulated through life experiences. McDougald (2015) established that by using new technologies in their practices, M.A. candidates

increased their instructional abilities to use these new technologies, their comfort when assessing them, and the encouragement of their pupils' learner autonomy development. Quintero Polo (2003) concludes that participants' involvement in a human approach to evaluation led them to comprehend the relevance of evaluation and of decision making as a staged process in their pedagogical practices. López Mendoza and Bernal Arandia (2009) posit that M.A. programs with assessment and evaluation components can support teachers to become agents of change in their institutions by contributing to the transformation of ideas and practices concerning assessment. Finally, Núñez and Téllez (2015) examined a material development seminar's role in M.A. candidates' personal and professional growth. Participants evidenced knowledge gains about the field, renewed pedagogical practices, and refined research projects.

Though the following two studies do not exclusively focus on master programs, they yield valuable information concerning Colombian teachers' perceptions about these formal professional development opportunities. Targeting public and private school English teachers, González et al. (2002) established that graduate studies were a major expectation of participants. Nonetheless, teachers viewed Colombian graduate programs as theory-based, without options to guide them in employing that theoretical knowledge in tackling their real needs at schools. These conclusions were corroborated by González's (2003) study which determined that graduate degrees offered by Colombian universities were regarded as valuable but enrollment was deemed as problematic because they were "theory-oriented, distant from real classrooms and unaffordable for many teachers" (p. 163).

The Study

This survey study attempted to explore ELT master programs in Colombia. According to Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, and Razavieh (2010), such types of studies

allow scholars "to summarize the characteristics of different groups or to measure their attitudes and opinions towards some issue" (p. 28). A mix-method approach guided researchers in the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. By using descriptive statistics, the first type of approach guided the analysis of information in order to highlight the salient events and perceptions' tendencies. Meanwhile, a qualitative paradigm expanded on participants' perspectives concerning their master studies and their impact on their teaching practices.

Participants and Data Collection Instruments

This study was conducted with a group of 80 master's graduates and candidates from five different programs at different public (4) and private (1) universities in Colombia. As Figure 3 describes, participants exhibited diverse degree accomplishments, years of experience and positions in their teaching institutions. Fifty-two participants were master candidates and among them 41% were in the first year, 3% in the second year, 53% were writing their thesis, and 3% had already defended their project. Twenty-eight participants already had their master's degree and 35% of them had graduated during the last year, 3% graduated two years ago, and 37.5% finished their studies more than three years ago. Participants held a position in different public (62%) and private (37%) institutions. Their working contexts varied from primary (10%), secondary (66%), university (16%), and other institutions (1%) in rural (18%) and urban (82%) areas. The functions that respondents carried out at their institutions ranged from teaching (92%), administration tasks (1%), management (6%), and others (1%).

Instrument and Procedures for Data Collection.

According to the study's aim, a survey was administered by means of an internet application. This survey was divided into several sections concerning participants'

Figure 3. Participants' Studies and Career Profile

profiles, general and specific perceptions about the connections between their master programs and their teaching practices, the challenges they faced when trying to employ what they learnt in their pedagogical exercise, and, finally, a consent form section as a response to ethical issues. The survey contained different closed and opened ended questions which provided both qualitative and quantitative data (see Appendix). This survey was piloted with 10 students from one of the universities and then some adjustments were made. The researchers invited participants by contacting the master programs directors. The information was collected for about two months and 80 participants were willing to complete the questionnaire.

Table 1. Objectives and Expected Graduate Students' Profiles

Objectives and Expected Graduate Students' Profiles	UA	UB	UC	UD	UE
Understanding and developing related theories	x	x	x	x	
Improving communicative abilities and increasing proficiency in English					x
Analyzing language education policies		x			
Being a reflective teacher	x	x	x	x	x
Designing and using context-based pedagogical strategies	x	x	x	x	x
Developing curricular components	x	x	x	x	x
Developing collaboration skills	x				
Developing abilities to conduct research and solve problems	x	x	x	x	x
Develop abilities to lead and manage programs	x	x	x		

Note. The targeted universities have been coded with a "u" followed by another letter.

Program Description

Five master programs were studied. These programs were located in four main Colombian cities: two in the capital city of the country and the remaining ones in capital cities of other departments. Four programs completely focused on ELT and one of them was a Master in Education with an emphasis on ELT. Two were "advancement" programs and two research masters.[3] Two programs started before the year 2000, the other two during the decade beginning with 2000, and one of them in the decade beginning with 2010. Table 1 shows that all the master programs sought to encourage participants to cultivate a reflective attitude, research skills, abilities to design and use curricular elements, and pedagogical strategies based on their students' and contexts' characteristics. Another common tendency

was to guide participants' learning towards the comprehension and construction of theories.

Table 2 reports that three curricular areas appear as commonalities among all the programs: *research*, *pedagogy*, and *curriculum design*. In these areas, in several cases, universities offer specific courses. Most universities also required candidates to take seminars on *second language acquisition* and disciplinary courses either to support their development of language ability or to increase their theoretical knowledge of language structure and functions. Finally, all the programs offered a diverse range of optional courses.
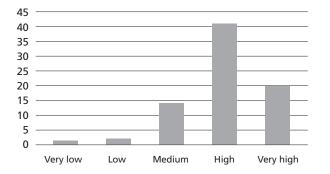
Data Analysis and Findings

Researchers analyzed the data taking into consideration four pre-established areas in regard to teachers' learning, namely, *pedagogical practices*, *research*, *language education policies*, and *administration*. Information collected for each area was categorized by following grounded theory principles (Glasser & Strausss, 1967). In addition, descriptive statistics were used to supplement qualitative data. Researcher triangulation (Patton, 2001)

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3   Based on the Colombian Ministry of Education, there are two "lines" for master's programs in Colombia. While the first one, *profundización* [advancement], is an in-depth study of a discipline in order to acquire abilities and knowledge to solve problems in the target field, the second one, research programs, seeks to encourage the development of abilities in order to enable participants to work in research processes and generate new knowledge (MEN, 2006a).
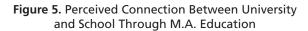
Table 2. Programs' Curricular Areas and Seminars

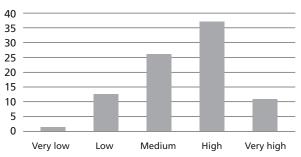| Areas of Study & Courses	UA	UB	UC	UD	UE
Research foundations (UE) (UB) (UD), qualitative research (UA), action research, classroom research, applied linguistics research (UB), project design (UA) (UE) (UB), statistics (UC)	x	x	x	x	x
Pedagogy: ELT, EFL, ESL, general models (UB)	x	x	x	x	x
Discipline (English use abilities and language structure): Academic reading & writing (UA), text production (UC), linguistics, sociolinguistics (UD)	x		x	x	
Curricular design: Testing and assessment (UA) (UE) (UD), material design (UE) (UB) (UC) (UD), program design (UB)	x	x	x	x	x
Language acquisition	x	x		x	x
Language teacher education				x	x
Others courses: Language policy (UA) (UC), ICT in language teaching (UA) (UE) (UD), teaching English to children (UE), English as an international language (UE), reflective teaching (UE), bilingual education (UE), applied linguistics (UB), communication and education (UC), education for peace (UC), learning strategies (UD), pedagogy and culture (UD), literature (UD)	x	x	x	x	x

Note. EFL = English as a foreign language, ESL = English as a second language, ICT = Information and communications technologies.

Figure 4. Overall Perceived Impact of Master Programs in Teaching Practices

Figure 5. Perceived Connection Between University and School Through M.A. Education

was useful to corroborate findings. This section starts by sharing findings concerning participants' overall understanding of how their postgraduate studies had shaped their performance in their teaching contexts.

As Figure 4 reveals, the highest number of participants (53%) and the second highest number (26%) acknowledged that their master's level studies had highly or very highly contributed to their teaching practices at schools.

Similarly, Figure 5 shows that 61% of participants regarded their master's program studies as facilitators of connections between schools and universities at a high or very high degree, and 32% at a medium degree. The previous findings contradict González' (2003) and González et al.'s (2002) studies in which their participants did not acknowledge master studies as substantial avenues to support them in connecting what they learnt in such programs with their classroom practices. An

explanation for the contrast between findings in the two studies might be that m.a. programs have evolved from the time González et al.'s and González' studies were conducted and currently, these courses' methodology, curriculum, focus, and approaches are more geared towards participants' needs which lead to a greater impact of their education on their contexts.

The nuances of participants' perceptions regarding these contributions highlight the following aspects: *encouragement for reflection processes* (all universities), *innovating views and knowledge* (universities A and E), *support to conduct research processes* (B, C, D, E), *teaching practice improvement* (B, C, D, E), the *use of theory in their practices* (A, D, E), *the encouragement of their students to pursue higher education degrees* (B, C, D). Other contributions encompass *material design* (E), *changes in their institutions* (D), and *changes on a personal level* (A). Conversely, three participants reported they did not perceive any impact from their studies on their teaching.

The aforementioned findings align with studies' results in Pineda and Clavijo (2003) who determined that by participating in master programs teachers increased their reflection and critical reflection. Other investigations concluded that participants' reflection as a result of their graduate studies was associated with their development of inquiring skills, namely, their abilities to bring changes into their school settings (Clavijo et al., 2004)
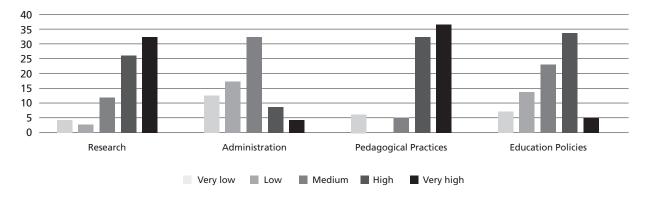
and their competence in intertwining theoretical frameworks with their teaching (Álvarez, 2009). Likewise, the study's findings support scholars' deliberations in regard to the relevance of promoting critical reflection in adult education (Brookfield, 1995; Cárdenas et al., 2010; Diaz-Maggioli, 2003).
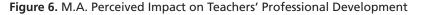
Master Programs and Participants' Pedagogical Practices

When participants were asked to grade the level of impact that their master studies might have had in their pedagogical work, most of their answers place this category at the top of their perceived gains (see Figure 6).

Various aspects of participants' pedagogical abilities and knowledge were perceived as being shaped by their m.a. education: *critical and reflective thinking* (all universities), *innovation in the classroom* (all universities), *material design* (UC, UD), *classroom research* (UC, UD), and *coaching colleagues* (UD). In particular, m.a. graduates and candidates asserted that increasing their understanding of conceptual frameworks supported different features of their practices as they gained clarity about the teaching and learning processes, and re-shaped their pedagogical actions.

> I think that when I enlighten my practice with theory, my job changes, to become not only a teaching practice but a space for analyzing, critiquing, and building awareness in regard to the

Figure 6. M.A. Perceived Impact on Teachers' Professional Development

relevance to learn another language understanding and valuing its context. (UD-P2)[4]

While the previous excerpt illustrates how a participant perceived the program as a valuable avenue for establishing connections between theory and practice, it also evidences the close relationship between that connection and reflective and critical thinking. Moreover, teachers seemed to be more aware of the decisions they made and the reasons for those decisions in the classroom: "Before enrolling in the program, I [prepared activities based on students' preferences], it's just that now I am more aware of what I do and the reason why I do it." (UD-P5)

Furthermore, the impact did not merely concern reflection "on action", but it apparently transcended the setting and contexts where they became involved in concrete processes of classroom innovation. Thus, it furthered/furthers change in traditional methods, provided students with activities they liked, created new events and opportunities to learn the language, and encouraged participants to lead projects aimed at improving pedagogical processes.

> I could confirm that the methodology applied in my current practices and learned during my masters' studies, is remarkable in contrast to other colleagues'. Likewise, I can refer to the positive opinion, love, and preference that my students show for my class. (UD-P3)

In addition, some participants from UC and UD believe that their master programs have had an influence on designing material which relates to their adjustments of curriculum and syllabi in their institutions:

> I have contributed on the elaboration of printed and multimedia material focused on the students' characteristics. Furthermore, I have proposed different strategies to tackle the teaching of English and to overcome the difficulties students may have. (UC-P25)

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4 Excerpts from participants' answers in the survey were translated into English by the authors of this article being faithful to the original statements. Excerpts have been codified using some abbreviations: UA, UB, UC, UD, UE, and refer to the programs targeted for this study. P followed by a number represents the participant.

For UC and UD master candidates and students who graduated with their master's, their studies encouraged them to conduct research and to carry out projects in their institutions. In fact, the following comment discusses participants' willingness to implement their master thesis and projects in their settings to obtain better results in the classroom:

> My proposal, and research was conducted with eighth graders and I used TBL [task based learning], that helped students significatively to obtain better academic results. (UD-P67)

However, as the comment above expresses, not only did participant students seem to benefit from their knowledge, but colleagues apparently also benefited from the coaching and support provided to them:

> Teachers from primary ask me for advice, masters' candidates from different universities look for counseling, all these shows that the master's program opens a different way to teach and to learn English. (UD-P74)

Master Programs and Participants' Research Work

Analysis of the data gathered shows that this area stands as the second highest in participants' development being impacted by their master studies (see Figure 6). The different topics branching out from this impact encompassed: *the influence in reflective processes* (UA, UB, UD, UE), *the development of research projects in the classroom to change realities* (UA, UC, UD, UE), *the diagnosis of contexts* (UC, UD), and *the increasing awareness on the relevance of research* (UE); nevertheless, as shown in Figure 6, a few participants considered this impact as low, very low, or nonexistent (UA, UD).

To begin with, participants acknowledged the master programs' emphasis on research which aligns with the emerging characterization of targeted programs in Tables 1 and 2. This focus was acknowledged as an avenue for their involvement in reflective processes. Participants stated that they became able to elucidate and analyze

problematic situations in their classrooms, students, and institutions which may turn into potential research projects: "The master's program has guided me to focus on diverse realities and it has triggered on me the need to observe closely these situations to carry out possible research studies" (UB-P38).

Master studies seemed to give respondents the opportunity to learn about the process of conducting a formal research study leading them to feel more confident and prepared to carry out such processes. Indeed, some of the surveyed master's graduates or candidates had developed or were developing their research thesis or monograph within their own classrooms and settings. Participants believed that developing research in the classroom as part of their M.A. education allowed them to explore new and better ways of teaching and learning, and to change realities in their contexts: "It's important to consider my role as a researcher in order to change my pedagogical perspective regarding methodology and teaching strategies" (UC-P7).

Other participants employed research in their teaching contexts as a means to conduct diagnostic processes of pedagogical issues. They claimed that they advanced in skills to explore, compare, identify, and recognize not only their and their students' strengths or weaknesses, but also their classrooms, institutions, and practices' possibilities and characteristics.

> There was a lot of work in the masters' program about research approaches, this has helped me as a teacher because I can use diagnosis instruments to get to know how my students are doing in relation to previous terms and how I can guide them in the new one. (UD-P21)

Finally, respondents (UE) believe that another type of impact has to do with theirs and their colleagues' thus increasing awareness of the relevance of research. Due to the fact that participants develop research inside their own contexts, they believed that their peers seemed to become more aware of the importance of inquiry in their practices:

> By conducting a research study in the school and sharing it with all the educational community, and raising awareness about how important research is among other colleagues in the institution. (UE-P5)

A few respondents from UA and UE did not perceive a major impact from their studies on their performance as researchers. Although other participants acknowledged their acquisition of research knowledge and skills, there were reports of various limitations constraining their exercising those competences. While some participants mentioned that within their master programs there was no consensus about how to conduct research, meaning that each one of their tutors had a different conception about it, other master's graduates and candidates affirmed that there was a lack of time to conduct research due to the substantial amount of work they were required to accomplish in other areas and the lack of resources to sustain their projects:

> In a private institution, the available time to conduct research is not always enough to put into practice what was learned. I also think that there was not only one research approach in the masters' program, on the contrary, each tutor follows a different path and this becomes a "limitation" or "disadvantage" for us as students. (UD-P2)

Master Programs and Participants' Administrative Roles

In contrast to participants' highly perceived impact regarding master studies on pedagogical and research practices, as Figure 6 informs us, when analyzing gains in administrative roles, how respondents ranked this category as the one with the least impact. For some master's graduates and candidates their programs did not focus on or embrace education in program administration or the like. In this regard, though developing abilities to lead and manage programs was part of the objectives and expected graduate students' profile in three of the targeted programs (see Table 1), there were no concrete courses or educational strategies available to potentiate these competences (see Table 2).

Based on data gathered, another explanation for this low perception concerning impact on administrative roles could be that the majority of participants exclusively held teaching positions in their contexts (92%); nonetheless, a few participants affirmed that different from teaching, they developed functions concerning the coordination of academic units (6%) and administrative tasks (1%) (see Figure 3). In this vein, chances to become involved in managerial tasks were scant:

> Regarding the administrative labor, it is scarce the work that I have done, not because masters' issues, but because of administrative matters in the institution, where I have worked, and where there are few opportunities for [developing administrative tasks]. (UE-P54)

Digging into the impact of master programs on their work at the administrative level, some of the respondents highlighted the sporadic nature of their endeavors. Due to the variety of contexts in which participants worked and to the different and particular situations in which they developed administrative tasks, a variety of impacts were found. To begin with, participants from UB and UE regarded themselves as more able to carry out different projects at their institutions. Indeed, P37 from UB affirms: "I have worked as head of department during four years, leading institutional projects in the area"; and P61 from UE states that: "I have strongly supported the elaboration and strengthening of educational projects for my institution in the English area and others." Furthermore, whereas teachers from UC remarked on the existence of an impact when they became involved in educational-policy, teacher-training tasks, teachers from both UC and UE emphasized management functions: "I have been asked to develop lectures for my colleagues within the institution" (UC-P10); "one can support managerial activities at the institution through the pedagogical knowledge we acquired" (UE-P55).

Participants from UB, UC, UD, and UE seemed to view leadership as related to administrative roles. Specifically, they made this connection when discussing their involvement with educational policy in relation to curricular

adjustments in their institutions. An educational policy, as the one embodied in the PEI,[5] is discussed below:

> The impact [regarding the M.A. program] has been that much that, for example, in the institution where I work, I have always been taken into account to tackle topics related to pedagogical strategies, and I have been a leader in updating the PEI. (UD-P5)

Apparently master studies contributed to participants' expertise leading to their construction and consolidation of positive images as leaders in their school communities where they felt empowered by the high regard others' exhibited of their input:

> Due to the knowledge about concepts and strategies, the value of a teacher's word acquires credibility, which, to a certain extent allows opinions to be taken into consideration. (UD-P2)

Master Programs and Participants' Work With Language Policies

Survey answers showed that the programs' impact on respondents' learning regarding language educational policy was ranked similarly in comparison with administrative work. Both of those categories received the lowest scores (see Figure 6). In this regard, it is worth mentioning that only one program, out of five, (UB), emphasized policy analysis as part of its objectives and graduated students' profile, and only two other programs (UA) (UC), offered courses in this area (see Tables 1 and 2). Another explanation for this low perceived impact might be that, as in the case of administration endeavors, participants manifested their lack of opportunities to become involved in tasks concerning the analysis, construction, and reconstruction of language education policies. Finally, some participants indicated that their voices were not heard in their institutions because the policies were pre-established by the government so the institutions could not allow any changes:

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5   PEI = Proyecto Educativo Institucional (an institution's educational project).

> As teachers we are informed about institutional policies but I am not allowed to influence on these policies. They listen to my opinions, but because sometimes I am too critical I am ignored. (ᴜᴇ-ᴘ6)

Among those participants who did regard an impact of master programs on their education as teachers, ᴜᴇ-ᴘ61 expressed:

> I have been able to comprehend more easily the changes in educational policies from a critical and constructive perspective. Although I cannot change the ones I consider harmful, I know that if I organize my pedagogical practice, I can reduce the impact of harmful policies on my students. Now, I know how to keep balance between my ideals, my institution's, and national educational policies. This is difficult because of frequent changes and lack of coherence, however, what I have learned has been useful and I have stopped feeling frustrated in my job.

As shown in the excerpt above, graduate studies allowed participants to be keener at reflecting critically upon the official policies from the government. Apparently, processes of thinking and reflecting allowed participants to study and analyze such policies from different angles, and to establish a connection between them and real contexts.

Consequently, participants seem to be more likely to make changes and contribute to the analysis of policies at their institutions. Some respondents from ᴜʙ, ᴜᴅ, and ᴜᴇ affirm that now they participate in trying to revise policies in their institutions, which evidences the influence of their masters' studies at this level. Others acknowledged the contribution of their master studies when they were able to promote the analysis of these policies as they implemented those policies in their classrooms.

Challenges to Integrate Their M.A. Education Into School Work Teaching

Before elaborating on respondents who claimed they had faced challenges when attempting to employ the knowledge and abilities acquired as a result of their master's level studies in their teaching practices (72%), it is worth noting that the remaining 28%, those who apparently did not encounter any barriers, pointed out the following factors as mitigators of those limitations: the pertinence and realistic nature of their proposals, the preparation they had achieved through their program, and their flexibility coupled with the support from their colleagues and administrators which buttressed participant's autonomy:

> I've got help from colleagues and administrators when I want to conduct a project, and schools in the public sector allow a bit more of curricular autonomy inside the classroom. (ᴜᴄ-ᴘ14)

An unfavorable side of most of the aforementioned factors affected those participants who acknowledge the existence of challenges. These limitations tended to undermine the impact that their education could have on their overall professional development because the existence of adverse conditions to exercise what is learnt might not sustain teachers' expertise. Challenges in connection with their students, their institutions, and their colleagues, among others, are discussed in subsequent lines. Participants in all the universities claimed that their institutions' policies did not contribute toward their efforts to incorporate their newly acquired knowledge into their pedagogical practices. Firstly, they hinted at the lack of support in their schools concerning enough time, space, and resources as a problem. Secondly, conforming to institutional policies mounted by school authorities became an exhausting process which often times discouraged them. The following testimonies illustrate these circumstances:

> Well, in the ᴍ.ᴀ. there is always talk about the use of strategies based on resources like ᴛᴠ sets, video beams, and in public schools there is not full access to them; being honest, that issue sometimes makes it hard to use what you learnt. (ᴜᴇ-ᴘ66)

Another level of limitations was associated with participants' colleagues. In all the universities, there

were master's graduates or candidates who listed reasons related either to their coworkers' attitudes, qualifications, or job conditions as obstacles to integrate what they had learnt into their context. The following respondent shared his experience trying to implement a writing project:

> Some teachers are not that committed and dedicated to teaching such a complex skill as writing, so they end up working in a general and not very meaningful way. On top of this, not all of them are willing to explore new technologies and methodologies. (UC-P25)

In addition to their peers' lack of commitment and resistance to adopt new ideas, other participants indicated that trying to develop projects was a challenge when their colleagues' knowledge and skills regarding the language and methodology were poor or at least conflicted with the expertise they had attained through their graduate studies. These types of issues coupled with the unfavorable job conditions some participants reported, especially in the public sector, did not seem to generate an encouraging environment in which they could establish collaborations among teachers:

> Evaluation is an issue which takes time to be understood. Being part of a team has been hard when trying to make all members follow the same direction. I have not found the right frame of mind in all team, so that they are ready to invest more time to check evaluation practices. (UD-P47)

Regarding learners in their schools, for respondents in universities B, C, D, and E; their students' language ideologies in connection with their learning habits made difficult, on occasions, their attempts to innovate using ideas from their master studies:

> Students are accustomed to traditional work, dictation, copying, transcribing and sometimes when I use new strategies, they don't take them seriously or they're lazy. They are reluctant to be involved in activities that would challenge their brains. (UD-P58)

In addition to the sort of learners' beliefs and practices described by the respondent in the previous comment, large classes, students' low English level,

and lack of experience at working with certain types of students complicated their use of innovative ideas originating from their graduate studies. Participant 52 from UE explained: "Once I had to teach English to a visually impaired student. That was a challenge because not even administrators answered to me about how to work with him."

Other challenges were grouped into a miscellaneous category. They include, among others, parents' expectations rooted in traditional beliefs, for instance, the use of Spanish as a means for instruction in the English class or of textbooks for learners to complete exercises. Parents' attitudes created challenges because of their lack of commitment and preparation to support their children's learning. What respondents' colleagues exhibited as ideologies about the high prestige or certain curricular areas (e.g., biology and math) vs. others (e.g., English), emerged as another constraint faced in their schools; in this vein, resources and opportunities were not frequently a priority in order to allow actions to be taken for the improvement of foreign language pedagogy. Finally, competing agendas between M.A. candidates or graduate students and teacher training agencies (e.g., Secretarías de Educación, British Council) regarding the introduction of teaching methodologies turned into struggles which participants were not usually able to overcome because they faced institutional powers. One of the participants exemplifies the latter point:

> There is conflict with other pedagogical views from peers, administrators, students, parents, and teacher trainers from the secretary of public education. Usually there is lack of coherence between what is sought and what is offered, what is said and what is done, what is potentiated and what is evaluated. (UD-P64)

Participants were also asked about their attitudes towards the challenges they had encountered when attempting to employ their M.A. knowledge in their teaching at schools. While in all universities a group of respondents persevered in their efforts by being more

creative, trying to persuade colleagues to join them in their projects, or working on obtaining funding from other sources, other participants abandoned their innovation plans believing barriers were unsurmountable. On the positive side of the reactions, there were participants who saw the challenges as opportunities for change (universities C, D, E):

> My attitude was one of perseverance, willingness to create, innovate, participate, to explore academic and research topics, to modify what is not done well or one does just to stand out without considering others' benefit. (UD-P3)

Finally, in university E, some participants referred to their reflection coupled with research as their way to confront challenges.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

For most participants their enrollment in master degree programs impacted positively their development as teachers. In all of the four pre-established categories discussed, three recurrent topics can help to summarize findings. To begin with, participants perceived that their graduate education made them more reflective, which allowed them to deepen their analysis of educational policies and to carry out curricular adjustments. Regarding research, reflection seemed to be of paramount importance in order for participants not only to configure and conduct informed and coherent inquiry and pedagogical activities, but also to understand the relevance of research itself. Innovation at various levels of their teaching-related endeavors emerged as a second topic intersecting the categories of perceived impact in association with respondents' master studies. For master degree graduates and candidates, inasmuch as their education favored their reflection and research abilities, they were more prompt in transforming their pedagogical practices. Likewise, some participants felt empowered to examine and possibly adjust or change institutional educational policies.

Findings also showed that collaboration within the school community was a topic permeating participants and their colleagues' views when the former reported on their growth as teachers who were pursuing or holding master's degrees. By conducting research projects that involved several members of the community, their peers' engagement resulted in a growing awareness about the relevance of research. Furthermore, their newly acquired knowledge and abilities put them in a more privileged position so that their peers, administrative staff, and other stakeholders accepted offers to engage in projects with them. For instance, in some cases, their colleagues seemed to welcome their coaching on how to implement better teaching plans.

Putting into practice what teachers had studied in their graduate programs was the cornerstone to fueling their professional development; however, these opportunities were sometimes jeopardized by the ideologies, stakeholders' profiles, agendas, and policies that existed in their school communities. Not only students' and colleagues' but even parents' traditional beliefs would occasionally oppose participants' innovation plans. Institutional guidelines also appeared to constrain where, when, and how they could implement their proposals; resources at various levels did not always seem to be available and in some cases, motivation appeared to be low due to job conditions coupled with perceived lack of opportunities to assume new roles in schools. Likewise, when their colleagues and students did not exhibit critical knowledge and abilities to team up in carrying out projects, they felt discouraged. Albeit a group of participants reacted to these challenges by abandoning their plans, apparently most of them understood challenges as fresh starts to reshape their plans and to probe for new options.

The aforementioned constraints have led us to suggest that M.A. programs need to create and strengthen alliances with participants' working institutions. These associations can become avenues to bridge gaps between traditional and innovative plans and practices in both

scenarios. In addition, those holding master's degrees, candidates, and faculty can function as conduits sharing their knowledge and illustrating positive attitudes when implementing common agendas between university M.A. programs and schools. Specifically, the promotion of professional growth networks involving people from master programs and stakeholders in schools could result in the development of communities which allow teachers' constant communication. This may represent an opportunity to tackle issues concerning the lack of cooperative work among colleagues in the institutions and the reluctance to incorporate new ideas.

The characterization of the targeted programs using their objectives, expected graduate students' profiles, and their curriculum contents seems to hint at a correlation between programs and participants' perceived enhancement of their development as EFL teachers. In the case of research and pedagogical strategies where the highest levels of impact were reported, it was observed that all five universities clearly sought to buttress these dimensions of participants' education. Despite this positive view, it is relevant to highlight that for some, the diversity in research approaches in master's graduates' and candidates' programs emerged as a limitation. Language education policy and administration did not seem to be emphasized through most programs' curricular goals and contents and these two areas were the least favored by participants.

In order to ameliorate the perceived gap between M.A. programs' curricula and participants' advancement in some aspects of their development, these types of graduate programs should, firstly, consider expanding their emphasis beyond teaching strategies and related research to include more issues regarding language education policy and program administration. Secondly, these courses can guide teachers towards an understanding of diverse perspectives on conducting research less focused on prescribed paradigms and more on employing inquiring methods according to contextual needs. Finally, due to participants' concerns

about master programs not tracking their work in their teaching setting, it is suggested they integrate practicum experiences in curricula favoring the tutoring and feedback that more expert faculty can provide in situ.

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Appendix: Survey Sample
Connection between Master Studies and Professional Development
Professional and Employment Profile (Choose the option that is true for you)

1. a) Master's graduate   b) Master's candidate
2. When did you graduate?
   a) Last year   b) 2 years ago   c) More than 3 years ago
3. In the case you have not graduated yet, how much have you advanced?
   a) 1 year   b) 2 years   c) Working on thesis   d) Already defended thesis
4. Current job institution
   a) Primary   b) Secondary   c) University   d) Other
5. Current job location
   a) Rural   b) Urban
6. Position
   a) Teacher   b) Administrative Staff   c) Coordination   d) Other. Which?

Perception of Master Studies

1. Master studies impact on your practices as a teacher. (Explain answer)
   a) Very highly   b) Highly   c) Medium   d) Low   e) Very low
2. Master studies impact in your teaching practices. Rank each one of the following items provide a number from 0 (lowest) to 5 (highest).
   a. Research
   b. Administration
   c. Pedagogical strategies
   d. Language education policies
3. Explain how your M.A. education might have influenced your pedagogical strategies.
4. Explain how your M.A. education might have influenced your performance in administration work.
5. Explain how your M.A. education may have influenced your work concerning research.
6. Explain how your M.A. education may have influenced your work about educational policies analysis and implementation.
7. Have you faced any challenges when trying to implement what you learnt in your M.A. programs at your school?
   a) Yes   b) No
8. If your answer for the previous question was "yes", explain.
9. What attitude have you taken regarding these challenges?
10. In case you have not faced any challenge, why do you think that occurred?
11. How do you think the master programs may strengthen the connection between what is learnt in the program and your work at schools?