

Becoming language teachers: Exploring student-teachers' identities construction through narratives¹

Volviéndose profesores de idiomas: exploración de la
construcción de identidades de docentes en formación a
través de narrativas

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative narrative study. Its aim was to analyze what student-teachers' narratives unveiled about the construction of their identity as language learners, and the connections made with being future in-service teachers. This study, which was carried out with undergraduate students from a public university in Tunja, was the product of permanent interaction and dialogue with student-teachers in their initial teaching experiences. Narratives, in-depth interviews, and journals were used as data collection instruments. Data were analyzed using the grounded theory approach. The results suggest that student-teachers construct and re-construct their identities as language learners and future teachers across classroom interactions and their empowerment through teaching and reflection.

Key words: Identity; language learners' identities; teacher identity; classroom interaction; second language acquisition.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un informe de un estudio cualitativo-narrativo que tuvo como objetivo analizar qué develaban las narrativas de docentes en formación en relación con la construcción de su identidad como estudiantes de idiomas y su conexión como futuros profesores de inglés. Este estudio, que se llevó a cabo con estudiantes de pregrado de una universidad pública en Tunja, fue el producto de un proceso de interacción y diálogo permanente con docentes en formación sobre sus experiencias

6

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iniciales de enseñanza. Se utilizaron narrativas, entrevistas en profundidad y diarios de campo como instrumentos de recolección de datos. Los datos se analizaron utilizando el enfoque de la teoría fundamentada. Los resultados sugieren que los maestros en formación construyen y reconstruyen sus identidades como estudiantes de idiomas y futuros docentes con base en las interacciones en el aula y su empoderamiento a través de la enseñanza y reflexión.

Palabras clave: Identidad; identidades de los estudiantes de idiomas; identidad del maestro; interacción en el aula; adquisición de un segundo idioma.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta um relatório de um estudo qualitativo-narrativo que teve como objetivo analisar o que revelavam as narrativas de docentes em formação, em relação com a construção da sua identidade como estudantes de idiomas e a sua conexão como futuros professores de inglês. Este estudo, que se realizou com estudantes de graduação de uma universidade pública em Tunja, foi o produto de um processo de interação e diálogo permanente com docentes em formação sobre suas experiências iniciais de ensino. Foram utilizadas narrativas, entrevistas em profundidade e diários de campo como instrumentos de coleta de dados. Os dados se analisaram utilizando o enfoque da teoria fundamentada. Os resultados sugerem que os mestres em formação constroem e reconstroem as suas identidades como estudantes de idiomas e futuros docentes com base nas interações na sala de aula e a sua apropriação através do ensino e reflexão.

Palavras chave: Identidade; identidades dos estudantes de idiomas; identidade do mestre; interação na sala de aula; aquisição de um segundo idioma

Introduction

In the field of education and research, there has been an increase in interest related to teacher identity. Being involved in educative practices requires that the academic community understands a myriad of factors underpinning teaching and learning practices. When stakeholders, administrative staff, teachers and students are aware of who they are, what they need, and the factors influencing their teaching and learning processes on a daily basis, they are capable of making more informed decisions and implementing changes in the curriculum. Teacher identity has been of great concern to teacher education (Bullough, 1997) because it discovers the principles needed to better understand the nature of teaching and learning.

Identity has taken on various definitions in literature, but there is a common perspective that is shared by some authors. Identity implies an ongoing, dynamic, complex, subjective, multifaceted, and contradictory process (Beijaard, Paulien, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Flores & Day, 2006; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004) in the construction and (re)construction of one's core selves based on experiences, values, beliefs, and imagined representations in society. According to the subject's position in distinct contexts, a sense of self or selves emerges to attribute meaning to a person's lived experiences and emotions.

Most research studies on teacher identity have been conducted with in-service teachers, while few others have been carried out with student-teachers in Second Language Acquisition (SLA henceforth) environments. In the latter context, language student-teachers are enrolled not only in a process of acquiring the language *per se*, but also learning how to teach it. Student-teachers also experience a large number of fluctuating issues as learners and as beginner-teachers. Some of these fluctuating aspects are related to the transitional change between being a student and becoming a teacher.

This transitional change is worth exploring and understanding in order to inform and encourage teacher education programs to foster contextualized teaching practices. This is because the transition from student to teacher is a dynamic, day-to-day process that implies changes, adaptations, and sometimes, dramatic experiences. These experiences make part of the construction and reconstruction of their selves as learners and future language teachers as well. Since "learning to become an effective teacher is a long and complex process" (Flores & Day, 2006, p.219), student-teachers' experiences can provide a descriptive understanding on these processes, which can help in making informed decisions in teacher education programs.

Therefore, teacher educators are emphatically required to open spaces for student-teachers to reflect and express about the essence of their education

and future. Several factors are involved in the construction of positions, perceptions, and understandings of what it means to become a language teacher in today's society.

This narrative study reports the insights of thirteen student-teachers in a process of identity construction as language learners and their connections with becoming future English as a Foreign Language (EFL henceforth) teachers. The student-teachers are English language learners from a public university in Colombia and who are on the path of becoming future English language teachers. In their daily academic endeavors, student-teachers face a myriad of challenges. They have difficulties with the linguistic and research components presented in their first semesters. Once they advance in the teacher education program, student-teachers might struggle with the pedagogical component as well.

When student-teachers are in their eighth semester, they start their English teaching experiences at schools. This means that student-teachers go through the transition of being students to being teachers. A change like this can invoke a combination of emotions in student-teachers, as it entails extra responsibilities and workload. Thus, they experience physical and psychological adaptations. During this transitional process, we were able to converse with the student-teachers. We identified that student-teachers do not make their own decisions while planning their English classes, but rather they request support from the teacher educator and homeroom teacher at school.

In this vein, teacher educators partake in the decision-making process of student-teachers. This implies a significant responsibility not only with the teacher education program, but also with the community. In such a way, teacher educators and student-teachers are invited to embark together on the path of learning to teach collaboratively as a common goal to be met. Thus, reflection and dialogue play a crucial role in hearing student-teachers' voices in order to analyze and make changes in the design of teacher preparation programs. By doing so, student-teachers' needs are met as language learners and future EFL teachers.

Having spaces for reflection, career guidance, and counselling are factors involved in the construction of identity learning (Geijel & Meijers, 2005). We believe that if student-teachers receive support in their vocational decision, they might assure their professional conviction and commitment as language learners and future teachers. Given that in SLA environments, discourse, interaction, and dialogue play a meaningful role, teacher educators might influence the ways student-teachers construct their identity as learners.

Such an influence in identity construction is mediated by discourses constructed amid the interactions carried out in the SLA educational environment. Discourses are written or oral texts that can be interpreted from

different perspectives. Participants make meaning from these interpretations which are constantly changing to contribute in identity construction. As discourses are sources to meaning-making and rich in subject knowledge, speakers might have the power to position the audience within different domains: learner, writer, participant, among others. This position influences the construction of identity of individuals. In the classroom, the speaker is the teacher who might position learners within discourse practices. Language, identity and power are interconnected terms that have influences in shaping one's identity. Thus, discourse is a powerful tool to help student-teachers construct their identity as language learners. A discourse can change ways of thinking, elicit new perspectives of perceiving oneself as an individual, learner, member of a society, among others.

In this vein, as language learners are immersed in an interactional environment mediated by discourses, these have influence not only over student-teachers' meaning-making process, but also over positions they assume as language learners and future teachers. Then, discourses permeate the day-to-day academic endeavor of teacher educators and language learners in the learning and teaching processes. As identity is constructed and re-constructed by daily lived experiences, we believe that in a language learning environment, discourses are sources of thinking and re-thinking one's identity. Thereby, identity is constructed within diverse discourses or interactions (Norton, 2011). From this, discourses need to emerge from suitable experiences from learners and teacher educators to better understand phenomena in the educational context. This understanding might lead student-teachers to reflect upon who they are as learners and future in-service teachers, what they expect from their teaching practices and their future professional goals to be met.

Suitable experiences are necessary in teacher education programs to approach a situated pedagogy, as sometimes the theoretical foundations offered to student-teachers are seldom related to real contexts, preventing student-teachers from tailoring these theories to practical teaching realizations (Korthagen, 2010). In such a way, student-teachers' experiences as language learners set spaces for reflection upon the necessity of contextualized teaching practices mediated by discourses. Reflective practices provide insights on possible ways how student-teachers eventually ascribe themselves as future in-service teachers: reflective professionals.

Given that identity is constructed amid the dynamics of interweaving different domains such as discourses, interactions, reflection, identification, sense of belonging, and beliefs about knowledge constructed in SLA contexts; identity construction relates to two main terms: personal epistemology and communities of practice. On the one hand, personal epistemology refers to the clustered beliefs and ways of thinking of student-teachers towards knowledge and knowing (Hofer, 2001). Personal epistemology encompasses

elements such as “beliefs about the definition of knowledge, how knowledge is constructed, how knowledge is evaluated, where knowledge resides, and how knowing occurs” (Hofer, 2001, p. 355). The previous elements constitute some dimensions in identity construction of student-teachers as they retake their past lived experiences as learners, they share their beliefs about knowledge and knowing in SLA contexts, they evaluate their learning process in order to set prospects about themselves as future in-service teachers

On the other hand, communities of practice emerge as a result of members’ interaction. A community of practice can be defined as the group of individuals who not only belong a community, but who share common interests, concerns and desires aiming to interact and learn from each other (Wenger, 1998). The members of a community of practice construct altogether a social identity, which is framed by the common dimensions developed in such a community. In this study, student-teachers construct their language identity as they engage in a learning environment. They share the conviction and interest of becoming future in-service teachers, so they learn from each other in every interaction carried out in the SLA environments. In such a community, student teachers have a sense of belonging, they feel identified with, and their voices are heard. Thereby, discourses mediate the mutual learning occurring in the community of practice, which could unveil insights on “how collective discourses shape personal worlds and how individual voices combine into the voice of a community” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p.15).

Literature Review

Identity in second language acquisition

Identity is defined as one’s core self (or senses of self). It is usually referred to as one’s identification with a particular social group, the emotional ties connected with that group, and the meaning one gives to that connection. A widely accepted view of identity is the one posited by Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) that defines identity as “a dynamic and shifting nexus of multiple subject positions, or identity options, such as mother, accountant, heterosexual, or Latina” (p. 35). On the other hand, Norton (2000), well-known for her theories on identity and language learning, conceives identity as:

...how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future. I argue that SLA theory needs to develop a conception of identity that is understood with reference to larger, and more frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction. (p. 5)

11

In her more recent work, Norton (2011) posits that identity, or subjectivity, as it is called under the poststructuralist framework, “is defined as multiple, contradictory, and dynamic, changing across historical time and social space” (p. 172). In other words, there is no “real me”. Thus, the subject position is “constructed within diverse discourses or sites of practice” (p. 172).

The methodology used to investigate identity and agency has been based on four methods: *case study methods*, *narrative inquiry*, *ethnographic research* and *conversation analysis* or *discourse analysis*; and, of course, any combination of these methods. Actually, it would be fair to say that a combination of narratives from the participants (conversation, discourse, narratives, etc.), mixed with direct observation, would constitute an encompassing enough method to ascertain results that reflect both self-image and understanding of the participants’ own learning processes.

In the first studies done on identity in the field of SLA, the items related to identity were considered static, clear-cut variables to which individuals ascribed or were ascribed to in a non-problematic manner. These variables were age, gender, social class, ethnicity, language variety and place of birth. There were a number of studies that analyzed both how different identity groups were constructed by others and how their linguistic varieties were actually different (Duff, 2012). “Identity was operationalized as the degree or strength of ethnic or linguistics identification with one’s own (L1) group in relation to other groups” (Duff, 2012, p.3). The main objectives of these studies (Gumperz, 1982) were to identify how identity, especially linguistic identity, affected the way people learned and performed in L2 and how to optimize their performance in very specific interactions, like job interviews.

When people are bilingual or immersed in contexts where more than two languages are spoken, they tend to affiliate themselves with one language. This affiliation was not static, rather it was dynamic. This also the true for identity, and in this case, linguistic identity. Zentella (1997) argued that linguistic identity “is not a given, an automatic membership granted by birthplace, parentage or an accumulation of linguistic features, cultural artifacts or group customs with meanings that can be definitely interpreted” (p.3). Therefore, individuals are constantly constructing their linguistic identity similar to the construction of social identities.

12

In more recent studies (Norton, 2010; Duff, 2012), a more dynamic perspective on identity and identity related variables is being used. A concept that has been proposed is that of “possible selves”, instead of one static notion of “self”. Genung’s (2002) account of her own experience as a Chinese language learner proves that students start a course with expectations and different levels of expertise in the language they are trying to learn. However, the specific

interactions that take place in the classroom restructure these expectations, redirect objectives, and provide informed results of the courses.

Defining someone by means of one identity feature, such as ethnic or social background, does not allow the possibility to see someone's abilities, roles and acts of agency that might be personal and that would construct a more dynamic image of a "self". Learners can actually choose to play a role that identifies them and gives them a place in the classroom. Those roles might be *class clown*, *nerd*, *party animal*, and many others. Additionally, their academic results will most likely reflect those expected for players of these roles.

Theory of identity and classroom activities' development

Literature suggests that a text does not have a single meaning as it is a product of a given time and context (Locke, 2004). Therefore, several meanings may arise from reading the text, which can change the interpretation of the identities of the participants. It is inevitable and necessary to state that one of the most important consequences of the current theory of identity for classroom development is that, provided the right context to discuss the meanings of a given text, a situation can be created in which the identities of the participants are changed. Thus, the interpreter of the text, usually the teacher, possess the power to position the writer as a learner, rather than a knower, and vice versa. This fact can have huge implications for students, since they might feel empowered when their diverse voices are heard as valid accounts of reality represented in their narratives. Needless to say, this process of empowerment will only enrich the discussion on the topic, as well as improve students' participation and motivation toward the class and learning in general.

Furthermore, the theory of identity or subjectivity follows the poststructuralist term "investment" in identity construction. Norton (2011) suggests that *investment* is different from motivation, since a student can be highly motivated to learn a language, but at the same time, not *invested* in the practices of the classroom. This can occur when she or he perceives the way in which the discourse is distributed or administered plays against her or his possibilities to develop further her or his linguistic skills. For example, if time for speaking is only allotted to people with above average linguistic skills, the student might think that this practice is highly discriminatory and will withdraw from participating in classroom activities, or even from the class altogether.

Since interactions are constructed every day in each class, it is important for teachers to be aware of the processes of identity constructed through interaction. For example, teachers can administer equal speaking time so as to not discriminate students because of their linguistic level, gender, age,

ethnicity, etc. By taking these processes of identity construction into account, motivation, as well as investment, will be enhanced once learners feel their discourses and identities are respected and can be developed equally among everyone else's (Norton, 2011). In fact, teachers may not only ask themselves if students are motivated, but if the classroom language practices address students' hopes and desires about the future.

The concept of identity is not only important for classroom linguistic practices, but it is relevant for administrators and policy makers. They too must consider the fact that the essentially changing nature of teachers' and students' identities impact the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. Likewise, if teachers are actively aware of the complex, multi-layered nature of identity, they may improve not only motivation but also investment in their classrooms.

Methodology

The research methodology is deliberately framed within a qualitative paradigm because emphasis was made on gaining deep and humanized understanding of the dynamic and complex process of student-teachers' identity construction in classroom activities (Norton & McKinney, 2010). This study followed some principles of Narrative Inquiry Research, in which storytelling becomes a powerful tool to make sense of the world, to attribute meaning to experiences participants have lived. In other words, "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). In such a way, trying to comprehend the other, the world, and one's reality is the core of this research study to make sense of student-teachers' stories. As Gadamer (2002) states "it is not the word what we can see: it is the universe what we try to comprehend"³ (p. 68).

Context and participants

This study was carried out with 13 student-teachers from a public university in Tunja (Colombia). They are enrolled in the eighth semester of the Modern Language Program. This program focuses on educating future English language teachers. These student-teachers have just finished developing their linguistic skills, and they recently embarked on their first teaching experiences as part of the requirements for the English Didactics I course.

In the Didactics I course, student-teachers are immersed in three areas: theoretical, pedagogical, and research. The pedagogical component was the

³ Translated by the authors

main component to be developed in this course. This aspect was displayed through the teaching experiences student-teachers had at the schools. During the process, they planned their classes adopting a given format, and they received feedback from the teacher educator who guided the course and the homeroom teacher at school. After that, they made decisions upon their lessons and continued teaching English at the schools.

Accounting for trustworthiness in this research study, a letter of permission to conduct the research study was submitted to the Curricular Committee of the Modern Language program. A consent letter was also given to student-teachers at the very beginning of the process. As confidentiality is a vital aspect in this research study, the researchers explained that the results of the research study had academic purposes only. Also, student-teachers could request or ask for information about the status of the project when required. Once they accepted to partake in the research study, we invited the student-teachers to assign themselves a pseudonym.

Data collection procedures

Narratives, in-depth interviews and journals were used as the data collection procedures in this research study. Student-teachers wrote narratives, in the English language, during an academic semester. These narratives give an account of past and present experiences they had lived as language learners and initial practitioners at the schools. The writing process of the narratives was mediated by a practice of reflection and positioning of student-teachers towards their experiences as learners and future teachers. Narratives can be defined as a set of consciously told stories which emerge from deeper stories people are not aware of. Hence, every single story, true or fictional, portrays pieces of real experiences and beliefs (Bell, 2002). These narratives also help the researchers understand and unveil hidden information that had not been brought up to the surface yet. In addition, narratives in language teaching and learning focus on unveiling lived and imagined experiences or stories (Barkhuizen, 2014). Although the literature does not specify the types of stories that encompass the idea of narratives, student-teachers were free to write life stories in relation to their past lived experiences as learners.

In-depth interviews helped us gain a deeper, descriptive understanding of the narratives student-teachers had written. In-depth or face-to-face interviews can be defined as a staple means that facilitates negotiating exchanges between two interlocutors, and which are mediated by various contextual elements (Oltmann, 2016). As in-depth interviews elicit an interactional reciprocity, data emerge as the result of individuals' co-constructions carried out in diverse contexts (Hayes, 2005). This data collection procedure allowed us comprehend

the continually construction and re-construction of stories by the participants in their identity construction process.

The in-depth interviews were approximately 30-40 min in length and were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Data gathered from the in-depth interviews showed the student-teachers ability to make sense of their realities, beliefs, and day-to-day experiences in relation to their identity construction process as language learners and its connection as future teachers. The protocol for the in-depth interviews was delivered in Spanish, the student-teachers L1. By doing so, a harmonic and natural environment was set which favored the student-teachers' storytelling.

In the same way, journals were means of promoting reflection and deepening understanding of reality (Bain, Ballantyne, Packer, & Mills, 1999). Journals are not only mechanisms or tools that keep records of past events but are also sources for in-depth reflection. Thus, journal writing "offers the opportunity for analytical thinking and self-analysis about what one's personal stories conveys" (DeVault, 1997 as cited in Barry & O'Callaghan, p. 56). Similarly, it is a way to empower student-teachers as language learners and future EFL teachers (Insuasty & Zambrano, 2010) as a way to unveil their future imagined professional identity. Student-teachers wrote journals on critical lived experiences that were found in their narratives with the aim to reflectively expand on the life stories presented.

After gathering the information, it was organized, analyzed, and theorized as a way to give account for trustworthiness in data management. Therefore, the following lines present the data analysis and findings of this research study, which emerged from the analysis across the three data collection procedures.

Data analysis and findings

We followed a narrative analysis as the research method to profoundly comprehend the human dimension depicted through stories. This research method helps to understand a narrative by means of splitting it into critical fractions which play a meaning-making role in the whole narrative. In language learning and teaching, analyzing narrative data comprises four essential levels: content, form, context and thematic analysis (Pavlenko, 2007).

While analyzing the narratives we delved into significant and critical words the narrators used to tell their stories. We pursued the content of the narratives through a three-step dynamic analysis: structural, thematic, and interactional. Firstly, in the frame of structural analysis, we paid close attention to the emphasis made on those words and the possible meanings emerging from them. This stage relates to the relevance of having spaces for human understanding through words and its connection to the world (Gadamer, 2002).

Secondly, we focused on the content of the story *per se*. A “narrative can illuminate purposes, plans, and goals which are the forms by which our lives have some direction, motivation, and significance for us” (Johnson, 1993, pp. 170-171). At this stage, this thematic analysis portrays what the story is about and its purposes and attributions behind it.

Thirdly, interactional analysis encompasses the dialogical perspective between the teller and listener. In this case, the narratives, the interviews and journals were significant means that gave place to interaction, interpretation, sense and meaning-making between researchers and narrators in order to unveil those invisible voices student-teachers had to tell. Thus, “a life is not how it was but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold (Bruner, 1994, p.36). This procedure provided us with the opportunity to go in-depth through each narrator’s stories; aiming to interpret, re-interpret, construct and reconstruct meaning from narratives.

Two main thematic elements/themes emerged in order to respond to the research question, which was the following: What do student-teachers’ narratives unveil about their identity construction as language learners?

Constructing student-teacher’ identities through classroom interactions

This first theme emphasizes the role student-teachers assumed as language learners and the connection they made with their future professional lives. Student-teachers position themselves in between being a learner and becoming a language teacher. As SLA classrooms are interactional and productive environments by nature, student-teachers highlighted the important role interaction played in their classroom as learners and in their contexts as beginner teachers. In other words, each situation the student-teachers had lived as learners was taken into consideration in order to establish connections with their teaching experiences at the schools. This assertion can be better described in the following excerpt:

“I do not think just as a learner because I am becoming a teacher and it means to convey knowledge to other people in any context. Becoming a teacher implies many factors such as treating people in the same way, helping others when they ask for help because I am not going to be just a teacher, I am going to be a friend, an advisor, a guide, but especially a model for my students”. (Narrative, Alisson) [Sic]

In this excerpt, Alisson makes an explicit statement regarding her role as a student-teacher. She assumes a position of being a different teacher, a person who is on the path of changing the commonplace perspective of what being a teacher might imply. However, when she mentions the fact of conveying knowledge to others, she accounts for a notion of power in knowledge teachers

have. At the same time, she expresses her desires for the future. She makes a special emphasis on becoming a role model for her students. When she highlights wanting to treat students in the same way, it highly relates to the dynamics of interaction in the SLA classroom as a way to avoid discrimination. This can also reshape the expectations, beliefs, and perspectives student-teachers may have (Genung, 2002).

In this vein, student-teachers went through a dynamic process that took place on a day-to-day basis. Little by little, they picked up elements from their teaching experiences as language learners and teachers. The student-teachers' previous experiences as learners served as a source of reflection towards their future as language teachers. This reflection lead student-teachers to think of possibilities on how to deal with troublesome situations. Therefore, having a first-hand contact with the educational environment provided the student-teachers with a meaningful panorama of the circumstances they will face as future in-service teachers. Thus, student-teachers reflected upon the near future, projecting themselves as language teachers.

“One of my hobbies is reading. I love going through the world books present us. In my free time, I sit down on my couch to read, I have a cup of coffee and get relaxed. I have realized that in books theories and activities about teaching appear to be very positive, everything is very beautiful and there are methodologies with super effective strategies. However, when these theories are addressed in real contexts, you have to take into account not only the methodologies, but also everything happening around every single student”. (Interview, Antonela)

Reading between the lines, Antonela acknowledges that there is a dissonance among theories, activities, methodologies and the real-world context. This becomes her greatest concern and worry as a future EFL teacher. She states that it is expected that teachers take into consideration a myriad of factors affecting each individual student and the way it can impact his/her classmates. In relation to this, Anspal, Eisenschmidt, and Löfström (2012) point out that, “Worries and fears are related to ability to cope with real classroom situations. The student-teachers have acquired some pedagogical knowledge and skills, and begin to wonder how these are to be applied in real teaching situations” (p. 206). This explains why Antonela questions the existing gap between the information (theories and activities) provided in books and the way it should be extrapolated in real teaching contexts. The gap between theory and practice appears to be a common component in studies conducted with pre-service teachers.

“When I was a child, I wanted to study many things, but I did not have any clear idea on what I wanted to study. Today, I have the marvelous opportunity to walk on the path of education to become an English

teacher. Life has taught me a lot on this long way. In my teaching lesson, I interact with students and they say: why do I want to learn English if in my house I do not have what to eat, I do not have basic supplies. Then, I get shocked with those situations and stop worrying and seeing language learning as the unique goal to meet". (Journal, Paquita)

In her teaching experiences and through her interactions with her students, Paquita finds that her students have a lack of interest in learning English. Her students do not identify with the subject, nor do they see any benefit from having to learn it. They are more concerned with their daily living situations as they relate to the basic human necessities of life (maintenance, housing, among others). This circumstance changes her prior conception of students' reality and motivation towards learning English. This interpretation matches a justification in Cattley's (2007) words, when she affirms that "Their own teaching experiences challenge students' existing thinking – an important element in developing professional identity" (p.254). It is through teaching experiences and interactions in the classroom that student-teachers can analyze and try to understand the context and circumstances their students live in. Thus, meeting students' needs, and personal priorities become more relevant for teachers rather than having their students learn English.

In accordance with the aspects described above, another participant narrates some important insights and situations lived as a student-teacher working at the schools.

"I have heard this profession is not well-paid, people say this profession is not quite important in having a social-status. Ok, they can have reason in what they think and say, but to me, it is one of the most privileged professions. I learn every day from my students and I live gratifying moments. It is cool to see when the students come by and tell you 'I really liked the class, I loved the material that you brought, it was a very nice class'. These things create an atmosphere of trustworthiness and that is very gratifying, it motivates me to continue on this path". (Narrative, Milu)

By the same token, Milu expresses her gratification and happiness when she receives approval for her lessons from her students. This increases her confidence and motivation to continue striving to do her best in her profession as a future EFL teacher. Thus, it can be suggested that real life teaching experiences contribute to student- teachers' awareness of the conditions of their future working environments, students' needs, challenges, and gratifications when teaching. In this sense, student-teachers experience ambivalence framed under two main dimensions: previous experiences as learners and real teaching experiences.

Given that “language teacher identities are constantly evolving and are developed through pedagogical practice” (Barkhuizen, 2017, p.9), student-teachers’ identities as learners and future teachers are constructed daily through the interaction and negotiations that take place in the classroom. At the same time, these identities become part of their self-images as teachers.

Student-teachers’ empowerment through teaching and reflection

The second theme encompasses some attributions and meanings to their initial teaching immersions. Student-teachers asserted that their identity as learners underwent a process of change when they started teaching and reflecting upon their own teaching experiences. Previously, they had some beliefs about education and perceptions regarding their teacher educators. While teaching at the schools, they started to re-shape their beliefs, perceptions, desires, and realities. In other words, their identities as learners were being re-constructed, and this created a closer connection to their role as future teachers, as illustrated in the lines below.

“I have been able to understand that teaching gives you power and with power we change society”. (Journal, Socrates)

“Returning to Nelson Mandela, education is the strongest weapon we can use to change the world. Thus, you end up seeing your students as granites to encourage all these things like critical thinking by taking advantage of all those controversial issues in our society to promote critical thinking in our classrooms. It is with these critical teachers that little by little we change our students’ way of thinking: that is the essence of education”. (Interview, Alisson)

Explicit emphasis was made on changing minds, ways of thinking, and the idea of what being a teacher entails. This is an appropriate momentum to start thinking about education as a tool to change society, which I applaud because a current change in education is urgent. This concept on education emerged along with a conscious, rigorous, and reflective process. Accordingly, Schön (1983) pointed out the importance of understanding and improving how we teach by reflecting on our own experiences.

20

Accordingly, Giroux (1988) noted that teachers are “transformative intellectuals when they combine reflections from their pedagogical labor with their role of teachers by fostering those reflections in their students and also when they show them how to be critical in what they do” (p.122). Alisson expresses her optimistic vision towards education and highlights the role teachers have to transform the way of their students’ think. She further asserts that the “real” essence in language teaching has to do with problematizing

issues in education by accounting for “controversial aspects in society”. In the same way, she metaphorically suggests that teachers need to be active agents in society in charge of generating multiple, meaningful initiatives of change, which could be developed along with their students.

Another emerging and vital aspect, in teaching and education in general, is connected with the contributions of research in these fields.

“The most important in teaching English as a Foreign Language is innovation and the only way for innovating is through doing research, researching theories and how English teaching methods have worked in other contexts. Also, I like to bear in mind meaningful learning, to set students in a real context, if they are not in a real context learning won’t be meaningful and they will forget what they have learned”. (Lusiana, Narrative) [Sic]

“In research, I have found a way to discover and reflect on new realities, to explore new contexts and gain a better understanding of them”. (Interview, Mary)

By doing a careful analysis of these excerpts, research appears to be a crucial component in teaching English as a foreign language. By means of doing research, these two student teachers find alternative ways to explore, understand, reflect, and act upon distinct phenomena occurring in their new, immediate teaching contexts. That is to say, they have an optimistic vision towards using research as part of their endeavors. Therefore, research is understood as a strategy to take action after reflecting about a current situation.

This concept of research is strongly opposed to the one described in an investigative study done by Xu (2014). This author reports that teachers have a misconception about research, and they assure that time constraints prevent them from reading and conducting research. In this regard, the author does not agree with the reasons proposed by the teachers. Rather, she affirms that these teachers were not sufficiently aware of the nature of teaching. In the end, the author suggests that teachers should not separate themselves from research, but rather, see it as part of their teaching practices (Xu, 2014). In this case, student-teachers highlighted the relevance research has as a means of promoting spaces for reflection, action, change, and innovation in teaching. With this notion, student-teachers start positioning and empowering themselves as language learners and future teachers.

Conclusions

There were several critical factors influencing the ever-changing dynamics in the construction of student-teachers' identity as language learners and future teachers. Accounting for students' inner insights in their first teaching experiences is a common constituent of great concern for teacher educators. Thus, student-teachers constructed or re-constructed their visions, perspectives, and beliefs on what it means to become a teacher. They suggested that becoming a language teacher goes beyond the subject matter. It entails recognizing the human being as a "persona" in all aspects of the SLA environment: activities, interactions, role play switching, and meaning-making processes. In this respect, student-teachers imagined themselves as language teachers who care about their pupils' learning process and human dimensions. In addition, taking actions based on reflection was an integral part of the student-teachers' path to defining, constructing, and accepting their attached meanings as learners and future EFL teachers.

Student-teachers' prior experiences as language learners with different teachers comprised a dynamic and shifting process in which harmonic and complex momentums were lived. Teachers were significant agents who contributed, in a complete sense of the word, to student-teachers' decision and meaning-making process with regards to the type of teacher they would like to become. In doing so, they went through a dynamic process that took place day-to-day in which they were picking up little by little some components from their teachers. The dimensions or aspects taken from teachers were confirmed, rejected, and/or extrapolated to their own teaching experiences, some others remain as imagined aspects to revive in the future.

Equally important, prior experiences as language learners helped student-teachers either increase or decrease their motivation to become teachers. However, student-teachers understood every teaching-learning session as an opportunity to grow personally and professionally. Besides that, they became more aware of the inequalities, disparities, and challenges in the various educational contexts as a way to envision themselves towards their future working environment. The fact of raising awareness changed future EFL teachers' vision of education and encouraged them to re-think their roles as future teachers. Ideologies and perspectives integrate the definition of "self" when answering the question "Who am I?", which articulate to the multiple "identities".

A post-method perspective of teaching was recognized and acknowledged as crucial in the teaching of English. This explicitly has to deal with the bases of critical pedagogy, through which student-teachers expressed their affiliation within a transformative and emancipatory practice through the teaching of English. Thereby, teaching was drawn beyond structural boundaries of

language where students “come to see the world not as a static reality, but as reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, 1970, p. 71).

Student- teachers construct their identities as future teachers taking into consideration their previous experiences as learners. They affiliate their future professional teacher profile with a previous teacher they admire or identify as a role model teacher. Student-teachers construct, de-construct, and re-construct their projected identities according to the experiences they live day-to day. They make emphasis on becoming teachers who are characterized by their commitment in education to grow personally as well as professionally.

Pedagogical implications and further research

Writing life stories is a time-consuming task for student-teachers, but it is worth doing because they come up with happenings that lead them towards a reflective process on what teaching really entails. This process should take place in earlier semesters to have a more consolidated perspective of teaching and learning at the moment of going to schools for first time. Also, it is important to avoid student-teachers experience a dramatic change from being a learner to being a teacher from one day to another, and without having a clear understanding of the factors involved in real teaching contexts.

Student-teachers, pre-service, and in-service teachers are invited to go through an introspection process, by means of storytelling, to gain a deeper understanding on their roles they have as transformative agents in society. It is necessary to embark on the path making a transformative progress in each individual’s life to stop perpetuating ways of colonizing people in education.

Looking into the future, there is a need to delve into research with regards to student-teachers’ identity construction since the very first moment they enroll in the initial teacher education program in order to unveil how they feel as language learners, and how the program *per se* permeates their identities as learners and future teachers.

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