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Empirical In-service Teachers' Identities in an ELT Education Program*

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Abstract: This article aims to show a narrative study on the (re)construction of the identity of empirical in-service teachers who are in the last semester of the Virtual Bachelor of English Language Teaching (ELT), at a private university in Bogotá, Colombia. After analyzing the two participants' experiences, collected through semi-structured interviews, three categories emerged: Sense of belonging; Giving my 100%, and Expectations. The main research findings were that empirical in-service teachers identified themselves as teachers based on their ideas, supported on experience, and that professional education has served primarily as a way to improve and find better job opportunities. We conclude that the participants shaped their identity based on their empirical teaching experience rather than their professional training.

Keywords: Agency, ELT education, empirical in-service teacher, investment, teacher identity.

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Identidades de docentes empíricos en servicio en un programa de educación ETL

Abstract: Este artículo tiene como objetivo mostrar un estudio narrativo sobre la (re)construcción de identidad de docentes en servicio empíricos, que se encuentran en el último semestre de la Licenciatura Virtual en Enseñanza del Idioma Inglés, en una universidad privada de Bogotá, Colombia. Tras analizar las experiencias de los dos participantes, recogidas a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas, surgieron tres categorías: sentido de pertenencia; dar mi 100 %, y expectativas. Los principales hallazgos de la investigación fueron que los profesores activos empíricos se identificaban a sí mismos como profesores, basándose en sus ideas sustentadas en la experiencia, y que la educación profesional les ha servido principalmente como una forma de mejorar y encontrar mejores oportunidades laborales. Concluimos que los participantes moldearon su identidad con base en su experiencia docente empírica más que en su formación profesional.

Keywords: Agenciamiento, preparación de profesores de inglés, profesores empíricos, inversión, identidad del profesor.

Introduction

Teacher identity (TI) has become one of the most recurrent themes in recent years for research, due to its contribution to undergraduate ELT programs and teacher professional development in general. In the Colombian context, research papers focus mostly on in-service English language teachers' identity (e.g., Arias-Cepeda, 2020; Cruz-Arcila, 2020; Lander, 2018; Torres-Rocha, 2017; Torres-Rocha, 2019) or pre-service English teachers' identity (e.g., Castañeda-Trujillo & Aguirre, 2018; Montoya-López et al., 2020; Quintero Polo, 2016; Torres-Cepeda & Ramos-Holguin, 2019). However, little has been explored about empirical in-service teachers' identities and even less if they have entered an undergraduate ELT program, where they are assumed as pre-service English teachers, despite having years of experience teaching English in schools or other places.

This article offers a vision of the construction and reconstruction of two empirical in-service teachers' identities¹. On the one hand, the construction of identity from the experiences as teachers they have had, and on the other, the reconstruction of those identities from being part of a virtual undergraduate ELT program. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand how empirical in-service teachers configure their identities based on the experiences, beliefs, and expectations of their different trajectories before and after enrolling in the undergraduate ELT program.

Understanding the (re)construction of empirical in-service teachers' identities is especially relevant for the country's undergraduate ELT programs. These programs have focused their curricula on those who do not have any experience as teachers and have minimized those who have been teaching English for years. Thus, the results of this study could serve as a reference frame to establish the relevance of the empirical experience in professional education. It is especially true in those remote areas of the

¹ The term *empirical in-service teachers* characterizes those English teachers who have been trained from their work experience and not because they have enrolled in an undergraduate ELT program. We clarify that this term is used for the specific purposes of this study.

country where higher education is barely accessible and where empirical in-service teachers educate a large part of the future Colombian society.

Theoretical Framework

Identity and Teacher Identity

The field of identity has been the subject of several studies, and definition attempts that authors consider are not all conclusive, due to their complexity. Norton (2013) refers to identity as how we build and understand our relationship with everything around us within unlimited time and space. Gee (2000) defines identity by referring to what people come to be in a particular context in a much simpler way. In general terms, identity refers to the image we build of ourselves, connected with our beliefs and experiences, and it is projected as such, both in the present and in the future. Similarly, its future materialization is determined by all the factors that define our way of being, thinking, and acting throughout life. All the different views regarding identity have also allowed the identification of substantive aspects that support TI, one of its variations. TI consists of multiple aspects that derive from individual identity and are projected in the educational context: proficiency, and all the elements configured within professional performance and knowledge therewithal.

Professional development of teachers encompasses the (re)construction of identity. Different authors have claimed that TI develops through the student-teacher course and has its origin in the future professional version of the self, created in one's mind (Savickas et al., 2009 cited in Araxi Sachpazian & Papachristou, 2018). It could be argued that this visualization of the career path constitutes the connection between the personal and the professional identity. In this sense, it could be assumed that student-teachers would have had some motivation to become academic agents and have already been able to perceive the profession. As students at school, they had witnessed their teachers' actions. It is argued that their idea of the professional role when they first start the education course, is somewhat utopian, due to their prior beliefs or motivations (Anspal, 2018). Along the course, they engage in reflective activities and settings, such as specialized knowledge, classroom-related actions, and teacher practice that would foster their professional identity.

A general view of research that has been carried out to learn about the development of TI in pre-service student-teachers (*e.g.*, Quintero Polo, 2016; Sarasa, M. 2016; Torres-Cepeda & Ramos-Holguín, 2019; Aktekin & Celebi, 2020; Araxi Sachpazian & Papachristou, 2018) leads to highlight the human dimension of the profession. Student-teachers may perceive teaching as “both a human and a genuine social practice that inspires the true selves” (p. 115). Consequently, one of their main concerns is the contributions to society within the educational setting (Quintero Polo, 2016). It has also been concluded that professional studies have provided a greater foundation for the development of TI. Quintero Polo states that the university “provides the theoretical and practical tools to make sense of the human dimension of education” (p. 118). On the same line, Sarasa (2016) stated that “linguistic and pedagogical knowledge” is developed at the university (p. 110).

These ideas and the *special condition* of some student-teachers who enrol in the ELT programs, sparked the interest in the inquiry that supports this paper. This special condition is given by the experience of having worked as language teachers without prior professional studies. These empirical in-service teachers (the term that the researchers assigned) told their stories, from which it was concluded that they developed their identity through their own perception of what it means to be a teacher, rather than their idealization of themselves in the future or the professional education.

Agency and Investment

Two distinctive features that are recurring in several papers may be of relevance to the purpose of this article, as key elements in the (re)construction of TI: agency and investment. These features foster the development of identity and are related to one another. The task of aligning the vision of teaching with the act of teaching corresponds to the agentic behavior, and it is framed by commitment, autonomy, and expertise. According to Benson and Huang (2008), agency refers to taking action and meeting a purpose. Therefore, pre-service and in-service teachers are expected to engage in a series of actions to nourish the pedagogical experience.

The search and production of resources to enhance teaching, constitutes a fundamental basis in a teacher's behavior and discourse, that reflect in all teaching settings and even in their own perception of themselves.

Classroom practices, shaping professional development, and subject expertise, require a set of conditions, behavior, and reflection. Consequently, spending time and resources is a long-term investment in the (re)construction of identity. Sarasa (2017) referred to marshaling “personal assets” (p. 30). The previous statement means that the extent and capacity a teacher has to negotiate and manage time, skills, constraints and experiences, would ultimately determine their identity.

Methodology

Narrative inquiry, as a methodology within the qualitative research paradigm, offered a viable way to approach our concern to understand, through the experiences shared by the participants, how they built and consolidated a concept of the identity behind the teaching profession, that constituted the basis of their training in an empirical context and its claim in an educational one. We conducted individual open-interviews as the main means to gather data in agreement to Barkhuizen et al. (2014), given that it “may be the most suitable to be used for accessing personal perspectives” (p.16).

The eleven questions used to conduct the interviews were aimed towards the participant’s experiences, beliefs and expectations, within the frame of the research question. The answers that were given by the participants were recorded and then transcribed into text, which later became narratives written by the researchers and approved by the participants. Once the empirical in-service teachers approved the narratives to account for their words’ veracity and intentionality, the narratives were analyzed, to search for distinctive patterns. These patterns would elicit answers to how their trajectories as empirical in-service teachers had changed in terms of the experiences, beliefs, and expectations that had shaped their identities. To do this, De Fina’s and Georgakopoulou’s (2015) methodology for narrative analysis was applied, and once the patterns were highlighted, they resulted in an organized table which you can see in Annex 1.

Now that the methodology has been presented and a broader understanding of this research and its narrative-oriented methodology, we believe that it is essential to highlight the context in which it was carried on. This research was carried out with two empirical in-service teachers, in their practicum from the virtual undergraduate program in English language teaching, at a Colombian university located in the country’s District Capital.

While it is noteworthy to say that many universities offer online education at the undergraduate level in Colombia, this one was one of the few that provided an entirely virtual undergraduate in ELT. Given the nature of the undergraduate program's modality, and taking into account that this research was conducted during the 2020 pandemic of the COVID-19 virus, the research was mostly done asynchronously.

The two empirical in-service teachers were Mariana and John. Their names were changed to protect the students' identity, in compliance with the university guidelines for research papers. These two participants were chosen because they had considerable teaching experience before enrolling in formal university studies. The experience was the only distinctive characteristic that the researchers were seeking for. Therefore, there is no particular range of age, gender, or any other characteristic taken into account when selecting the participants for the interviews. They were chosen because they had been empirical English teachers for over nine years. They are both Colombian, but their second language learning process occurred in a country where English is the native language. Now that there is a general understanding of how the research was conducted, it is more viable to proceed to discuss the findings obtained through the study.

Findings

The findings of this research have been organized into two different sections. First, each participant's narrative is presented, beginning with John and then Mariana. Second, the three resultant categories of analysis are displayed: the *A teacher is born, not made*, *Giving my 100%*, and *Expectations*.

John's Narrative

John is currently undergoing the last semester of the undergraduate program at the University in Bogotá, Colombia. He has been teaching for more than 20 years, and he is strongly committed to education. Before his career started, John lived in the United States, but then decided to go back to his hometown for vacation. He decided to stay and then was allowed to be trained at a very renowned institution at the time. This prestigious English academy was praised many years ago for its excellence and practical instruction. In this institute, John was given the opportunity to teach as part

of his training. It was there and then that John knew that he was a teacher: “The training lasts for a month. And I began working there as a teacher, and I said, well, I like it, it’s like something natural came out of me” (Personal communication, September 7th, 2020).

Time passed during his teacher training, where he would train and teach at the same time. It was not easy. He had struggles and challenges that he needed to overcome:

It was not an easy task. The training was very complicated. We were like 20 guys and only two finished. It was another guy and me. The training was hard, and I thought, ‘I’m not going to make it. I’m not a teacher.’ Then I said, ‘No, I have to do it.’ I put all my effort into it, and in the end, I made it. But that training made me think like, Oh, my God! Is it worth it? I don’t know. (Personal communication, September 7th, 2020)

In the end, it was his own desire to pursue his teaching career that helped him prevail and finish the training. He had a strong commitment to his community of practice and even a more robust agency. It was during those moments, those few months, that John knew for a fact that he was a teacher:

Well, that was a long time ago, when I had my first job at the [an English] Institute. I said, ‘I am a teacher. I’m not going to be a lawyer, administrator, or a pilot. I want to be a teacher. (Personal communication, September 7th, 2020)

When adversity came, and he had setbacks in the very first months of his career, he was already fully committed to his objective of being a teacher. It came to a point where he felt the need to be in the classroom and teach: “I need to be back in the classroom. I need to be there and teach. So, I gave my one hundred percent and then made it” (Personal communication, September 7th, 2020).

After a lot of sacrifice, resilience, intrinsic motivation, and agency, John finally finished the training. Out of 20 candidates, only he and another colleague got through and were granted the certificate for the course. This was very important for John. Although he did not have a degree, people started calling him: “teacher John, come in here. Can you help me out?’ And I was like: ‘Wow, they’re calling me a teacher now!’ and that made me very proud of myself. It made me feel more comfortable in the classroom”

(Personal communication, September 7th, 2020). It was important for him to be called a teacher. But this wasn't the only positive impact that he got from completing his training. John felt like he deserved the honor of being called a teacher. It made him feel more comfortable being there as a person. It meant a lot to him as an individual.

Years ago, the certificate given by the institute was all he needed to teach. He even got a raise in a little time and became the academic director there, where he “started training teachers around Bogotá. Then I traveled to Cali, Medellín, San Andrés. And it was interesting” (Personal communication, September 7th, 2020). Nevertheless, with the coming of years, education policies started to change, and it is now compulsory to have a teaching degree to be part of a school. John knew that change was coming and that he was going to be a part of it. He had to make some investments to further his career. That is why, after many years of teaching, John decided that it was time to join a university and get his undergraduate degree, which he got at the university in Bogotá.

John is entirely convinced that having some experience as a teacher before entering the university courses, made it easier for him. Not only could he approve some credits because of his fluent English, which saved him at least one year of his academic career, but he also felt that the content was easier to digest: “It was much easier, for example, here at the University. I didn't take the English classes” (Personal communication, September 7th, 2020).

He also feels that even though he was already a teacher when he started the program, the content of the courses and having contact with other teachers, gave him a solid background which helped him become a better teacher.

The experience I had was great. I met teachers during this university, a lot of great teachers. I learned a lot, even though I had the experience. I needed this background, this pedagogical background, for me to be a better teacher. And I, and I'm about to finish. I'm just missing the semester, and I'm done. But, I mean, I needed this as a teacher to be a better teacher... now I understand more things. (Personal communication, September 7th, 2020)

John has also been able to apply some of the content that he has learned in the past few years at the undergraduate program. Planning, task-based learning methods, and differentiation strategies are topics that he

has learned at university, that he now does within his daily teaching. His investment has paid off, as he admits: “I was a lot like a grammar-based teacher; my institute was one hundred percent grammar-based. But now I’m now learning all of these task-based learning, communicative approaches, all these things made me look wider, broader” (Personal communication, September 7th, 2020).

It is undeniable, then, that the undergraduate program has positively impacted John’s teaching career: “It has worked 100 percent for the tasks, the warm-up, presentation, practice, all these things. They have worked a lot” (Personal communication, September 7th, 2020).

There is a significant thing that John feels like an individual. He firmly believes that he is a person before being a teacher. He is an independent individual who belongs to a community of practice. Even when he believes that his university experience has provided him with tools and knowledge to be a better teacher, he feels that it has also empowered him as a person. As an individual. He believes that “it gave me more power as a person. Now, in the meetings, I feel more confident. I feel like I know a lot more” (Personal communication, September 7th, 2020).

So, it can be said with plenty of confidence that John has changed and grown, even more as a teacher and a person since he joined the university for the first time. He says the university has provided him with professional growth and other job opportunities. Still, he believes that the most important things that he has learned are evident with his teaching and with his individual development as a person.

It is clear to John that teachers have a particular responsibility with their students. He thinks that a teacher must be knowledgeable and caring. Also, he firmly believes that “there is something that has been with me always, and this is a quote that I made up. A teacher is born. He’s not made. You see what I’m saying? A teacher is born, not made through his experience” (Personal communication, September 7th, 2020). For him, some people are born with an inherent and intrinsic motivation to help, to guide, and teach. Characteristics like these are the skills or personalities that teachers are born with. They don’t get it from experience or learning; they are predestined with them. With these characteristics, teachers become something “more than teachers”, John says.

So we, as teachers, become mom and dad. It's more beautiful than being just there to teach the subject, the verb, this simple past, or the future tense. No! You have to be there and be more than a teacher. (Personal communication, September 7th, 2020)

He believes that teachers must adapt to situations where the role can be more related to being a parent and helping them solve problems that are not strictly related to the content of a lesson: "You solve the problem, and they're either happy and say 'thank you for telling me what to do, now my mom and dad are happier.' It's that part" (Personal communication, September 7th, 2020).

John is still teaching and looking forward to contributing to the education guild and his students. He will graduate very soon and is looking forward to a position as a coordinator of a school.

Mariana's Narrative

Mariana is a last-semester student of the undergraduate program who, in turn, has also been working as an English teacher for around nine years. Her career in education started long before she even thought of becoming a teacher. Her love for this profession started the moment that she began tutoring her classmates at university. Mariana initiated her biology studies abroad, around 20 years ago, because she wanted to be a marine biologist.

It was this activity of tutoring that made her realize she had teaching skills and that she liked doing so. In her own words: "So those moments of one-to-one tutoring allowed me to identify that I liked teaching and that I had the ability to transmit knowledge. So that was like the first experience I had" (Personal communication, September 10th, 2020). Even though it all started as a need, the experience of working as a tutor became an enriching and gratifying opportunity that ended in a life-changing event, not only because she faced a change in her profession, but also because it allowed her to find an ability she had not explored before.

On an unplanned return to her home country, even though she had not had any professional training, only the ability to speak English opened doors for her to work as an English teacher for the first time. Under her perception, she was a teacher of heart before being a professional teacher,



and the actual exercise of this profession confirmed her feelings about it. It also gave her what we have come to call empirical training.

I guess knowing that being a teacher is also part of having the gift of teaching, and not necessarily having an academic background in teaching. So, I guess it was just the opportunity that I had to teach, and I discovered that I had the skills and that I enjoyed what I was doing.

[...]

And then, throughout those almost eight years that I worked there, I grew as a teacher, and developed the teaching skills. And, of course, it was like the experience was at my school. Right? I mean, experience was my teacher. And, of course, at the same time, I would try to inquire about some teaching methodologies or teaching practices. And then, some years after that, [it] was when I decided to start the bachelor's degree. (Personal communication, September 10th, 2020)

12 ■ Even before her academic beginnings, her agentic behavior allowed her to start searching for ways to perform in the best way since she began teaching at a school without any professional background in this *métier*. In this sense, she decided to be part of her community of practice and invest in her own academic growth in an autonomous way.

Even though she conceives teaching as the archaic activity of transmitting knowledge, which certainly is a key skill according to her discourse, she concentrates on the human and dynamic side of a teacher regarding students' personal and academic dimensions. This shows a strong feeling of commitment.

So, that's what for me a teacher is; having the gift of teaching and like that passion for teaching and just transmitting the knowledge that the person has. And we know, of course, that teaching is not only that, just passing down knowledge, but it's also like a way of letting, allowing or making the students discover the skills that they already have, and also discovering their passions or their talents as well.

[...]

I was good at teaching and, and of course, I had already been a second language learner. I mean, I went through that process myself, so I knew what were the difficulties that a second language student would face, and like the common

mistakes that you would make in the process. (Personal communication, September 10th, 2020)

Mariana draws significant advantages of her first experience as a second language teacher besides her later formal education in this field. She discovered her natural talent for teaching by her own means and committed herself to this practice by investing in teaching techniques. Still, she also acknowledges the importance of professional training.

Having the experience to teach for whatever number of years, of course, gives you tools and gives you some knowledge and everything to apply in your classrooms. But once you pursue or you complete the program, you have more theory or more academic background that can help you understand things better, or learn like the roots of the teaching language, process and everything. So it gives you more confidence, I guess, and more academic background, so that you can understand things better and feel, as I mentioned, more secure and more confident in what you are doing. (Personal communication, September 10th, 2020)

She recognizes that professional studies have contributed to her growth on a pedagogical level and her confidence as a teacher. However, her teaching identity from before professional preparation was already framed in a pedagogical context. When asked about meeting her students' educational goals, even though she was not a professional in the field she was working in, she felt sure of her performance. She also reflects upon the expectations that draw this profession regarding society and is aware of the responsibility this entails within her community of practice.

Yes, yes, without a doubt. I think that, like, if we were to see the results of those students at that time, that would speak by itself. If you see that there is progress in the process and there is evidence that they advance in the use of the language, then that will be the result, saying that it worked.

[...]

I think that they would expect me to be able to fulfill the needs of their children, whatever they are. I mean, we know that teachers do not only teach a subject, but we provide life skills, and we support their development in many aspects. So,

I guess it will be that, to be able to supply those needs and contribute to their development. (Personal communication, September 10th, 2020)

Nevertheless, she focuses on her students' acquisition of the target language, even though she had only worked at one school as a self-contained teacher by the time this research was carried out. This shows a firmly fixed vision of herself as a language teacher, an idea that was confirmed when asked if she would teach higher English levels, to which she agreed. "I, for sure I would know that it would be a challenge for me, but I would also feel comfortable and confident of my language knowledge. So I would. I would teach it. Yes" (Personal communication, September 10th, 2020).

She knows that being a teacher encompasses the many practices related to the dynamics in the classroom. Even though her teaching abilities were challenged when she had difficulties with a particular group of students and found herself questioning her own pedagogical resources, she could overcome the situation. The exercise of agency contributed to her taking action in a scenario that demanded classroom management.

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There was one group that I and we know that the first weeks of the school year, it's a matter of getting to know each other and the kids, getting to know the teacher and we as teachers getting to know them and everything. But with this specific group, maybe it was like one month, two months, three months, and I wouldn't, and I hadn't been able to, I don't know, like to guide the class, as I would do it with any other group. I mean, it was difficult, and there were some cases in which it was like: is the first day of class or what? Because you wouldn't see any progress. (Personal communication, September 10th, 2020)

All along with her experience as a teacher without previous professional studies, her identity was shaped by her passion and talent for doing this job and, in turn, by the experiences lived within the academic context; later, by professional training. Actions of reflection, self-awareness, and autonomous acquisition of pedagogical skills to perform this activity have been acknowledged by her students. It was that acknowledgment and feeling what made her feel like a teacher for the first time, and it has been like that since.

At that moment, with those first students and I remember it was maybe chemistry or even math, and it was there that I noticed whenever they would come back to me saying 'thank you, I passed my exam' or 'I'm doing better in my classes,' or whatever their comment was, it was there.

[...]

And I guess what really mattered for me there was like an infinite number of calls and messages from families, from my students, even from my first two students back in 2013, that they would just express their gratitude and like recognize the job that I did for them and everything. So it was that; those words and those experiences that you are able to provide to those kids and that they still remember and value, and that they still acknowledge that it was enriching for their lives. So, yes, definitely. Yes. (Personal communication, September 10th, 2020)

Despite her inexperience and lack of professional training during the first years of her work as a language teacher, she has taken part in her community of practice, investing autonomously in her own training to gain experience and pedagogical skills; managing her own practical and personal resources, but above all, it could be said that she accidentally found her true vocation, which allowed her to conceive herself as a teacher from the beginning.

Interpretation of Narratives

With the narratives we created from the interviews with John and Mariana, we constructed a table with the different categories that we considered to fulfill our research objectives (Annex 1). We then continued to solidify our interpretations of those narratives in a more textual way. The final result was an interpretation of narratives with three categories: A teacher is born, not made; Giving my 100%; and Expectations.

A Teacher is Born, not Made

The first category consists of the pre-service teacher's conception of teaching as a gift. The analysis suggests that these empirical teachers strongly believe in an inherent characteristic or natural quality that determines their professional identity. Their first experience as teachers made them aware of their strong, positive feelings towards this profession, and of their natural

talent, which could be understood as a set of skills that they developed in their upbringing, and allowed them to teach proficiently before taking part in the bachelor of education (B. Ed) in ELT: “So those moments of one to one tutoring allowed me to identify that I liked teaching and that I had the ability to transmit knowledge. So that was like the first experience I had” (Mariana, personal communication, September 10th, 2020).

John suggests that he has always had the talent to teach, despite his lack of knowledge in teaching. What others describe as a “talent,” he casts it as an expression of his vocation. He said that there was something natural within him. The discourse in this quote shows that by choosing the word “natural,” the participant believes it is in his nature to belong in a classroom: “The training lasts for a month. And I began working there as a teacher, and I said, well, I like it, it’s like something natural came out of me” (John, personal communication, September 7th, 2020).

Mariana, like her colleagues, relates the teaching work with an ability prescribed by nature when she describes it as a gift:

16 ■ I guess knowing that being a teacher is also part of having, like, the gift of teaching, and not necessarily have an academic background in teaching. So I guess it was just the opportunity that I had to teach and discovered that I had the skills and that I enjoyed what I was doing. (Mariana, personal communication, September 10th, 2020)

Their vocation arose from their experience in the field, even without considering it from a professional perspective. This “first examination of conscious thoughts and feelings,” as Quintero Polo (2016) describes it, enables a more in-depth interpretation of their identity. In this sense, the conception that “a teacher is born, not made,” given by John during his interview, and corroborated by the other two participants, determines the human dimension of the profession, and brings a new significant element to be included in the study of teacher identity. Thereby, the stage of retrospection, as described by Quintero Polo (2016), can bifurcate towards a more personal construct than a vocation. It is relevant to mention that in this research, the retrospective stage focused on the participants’ school learning experiences that served as identity shapers. “There is something that has been with me always, and this is a quote that I made up. A teacher is born. He’s not made. You see what I’m saying? A teacher is born, not

made through his experience” (John, personal communication, September 7th, 2020).

That is, culturally, we have the belief of developing a professional career based on our interests. Contrary to being interested in teaching as a profession, our participants came across it by chance and discovered their passion for it. As Mariana said, it was life that made them teachers.

It could be argued that these empirical teachers' identities, retrospectively, were already determined by certain aspects. A hidden passion arose from this activity; they imagined themselves as teachers and used their own assets to continue doing it. Savickas et al. (as cited in Araxi Sachpazian & Papachristou, 2018) described how people make their career choices based on how they view themselves. “The imagination of possible selves,” as named by the authors, is connected to the self-concept. Therefore, it can be said that John and Mariana imagined and identified themselves as teachers because they realized their natural talent to teach. In Mariana's words: “life made me a teacher first before the academy. And that is totally what happened” (Mariana, personal communication, September 10th, 2020).

The latter, along with the descriptions of their first experiences as teachers, or what we have called in this research empirical teaching, we can assume that this is not just a career choice. Being a teacher is not just a matter of talent, regardless of the difficulties in terms of pedagogical knowledge; it is also a matter of doing what you love and deciding upon a newly found self-concept.

Thus, the decision to develop the new self-concept is a clear example of the *imagination of possible selves*, so that experience was the start point of how these empirical teachers began to shape their identity. The imagination of possible selves makes us believe that their self-concept was redirected when they found this new passion, discovered abilities for doing it, and above all, enjoyed it. “I had to teach and discovered that I had the skills and that I enjoyed what I was doing” (Mariana, personal communication, September 10th, 2020).

The idea of a teacher being born and not made has other specific implications. One could ask about those sets of skills being applied to a different field, for example. Why did these pre-service teachers decide to use their skills, natural characteristics, or gifts towards teaching? It is undeniable to highlight that John and Mariana had a sense of belonging in the teaching

profession. There is a noticeable feeling of pertinence towards education. The sense of belonging was there all along:

Well, that was a long time ago when I had my first job at the [English] Institute. I said 'I am a teacher. I'm not going to be a lawyer, administrator or a pilot. I want to be a teacher'. (John, personal communication, September 7th, 2020).

“So those moments of one to one tutoring gave me the opportunity to identify that I liked teaching and that I had the ability to transmit knowledge” (Mariana, personal communication, September 10th, 2020).

Similarly, Hernández and Gutiérrez (2020) observed in their research that pre-service teachers who interacted within their community of practice developed agency and what could be understood as a sense of belonging. By taking part in their communities, participants started feeling like they belonged there more and more and that it was through these interactions that others could feel the same way as well. It can be said that the different participants in our research also had a feeling of belonging, once they immersed themselves in their school, classroom, and other communities of practice as well. It is vital to highlight that the interactions were significant, even more so than the community itself.

This sense of belonging and interactions led them to use their pre-determined skills in the field of education. Their identities began to take shape right after their first teaching experience, where they put those innate skills to practice and noticed that they belonged to the educational field. It was, however, a challenging path. As the participants mentioned, the skills they were born with were not enough to become the teachers they really wanted to be. There was still a lack of knowledge and other skills (methodologies, practices, and approaches, amongst others) that they needed to acquire. They had to work hard and overcome their difficulties, which takes us to the second category.

Giving my 100%

Being born with a set of capabilities that allowed them to teach without any prior experience can definitely be considered a gift, as Mariana said. However, this does not mean that the pre-service teachers had an *easy way in* into the classrooms and other educational settings. The pursuit of better

qualifications and general knowledge to enhance their performance, due to the lack of pedagogical background, enabled Mariana and John to exhibit awareness of their professional constraints. This determined their autonomous actions towards investing resources and efforts to develop teaching skills to improve their practice. They demonstrated agency and investment when surpassing the obstacles that they found: “The training was hard, and I thought, ‘I’m not going to make it. I’m not a teacher.’ Then I said, ‘No, I have to do it.’ I put all my effort in it, and at the end I made it” (John, personal communication, September 7th, 2020).

To further develop the previous idea, investment and agency are considered to be personal, conscious, and attentive spending of their assets into their teacher education process. The participants’ investment is clear; they willingly spent personal assets to advance in their careers: “we conceive agency as teachers’ fully autonomous capacity to act, to feel, and to adapt, [...] refuse and resist” (Sarasa, 2017, p. 29), which in turn, reflects autonomy, flexibility and resilience in their performance, characteristics of the agency. Therefore, the pre-service decisions and actions regarding their careers are perfect examples of investment and agency. Mariana, for example, says that

I was able to grow as a teacher and develop the teaching skills [...] it was like the experience was at my school. Right? I mean, the experience was my teacher. And, of course, at the same time, I would try to inquire about some teaching methodologies or teaching practices. And then, some years later, that was when I decided to start the bachelor’s degree. (Mariana, personal communication, September 10th, 2020)

It is essential to involve Norton (2013) in this regard, who says that investment seeks to make a meaningful connection between desire and commitment to learning. The pre-service teachers seek to get qualified, as they acquire and learn the skills to improve their teaching:

Having the experience to teach for whatever number of years, of course, gives you tools and gives you some knowledge and everything to apply in your classrooms. But once you pursue or you complete the program, you have more theory or more academic background that can help you understand things better. (Mariana, personal communication, September 10th, 2020)

Therefore, it is clear that John and Mariana invested in different ways to expand their knowledge and develop teaching skills. In this sense, their actions are identified with Duff (2012), when he refers to agency as people's ability to make decisions, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals, potentially leading to personal or social transformation. Connecting this idea to the previously mentioned self-concept and imagined possible selves, agency enables people to imagine, take up, and perform new roles or identities. We believe that through their investment and agency, the two pre-service teachers (re)constructed their identity as language teachers.

It is important to highlight that the two participants worked hard to become the teachers they wanted to be and that they already had in mind an idea about what it was to be a teacher. This imaginary or idea became a role model, something that the participants wanted to become and expected to be, which brings us to the next category.

Expectations

20

Another fundamental category that shows us how Mariana and John have (re)constructed their identities is their expectations. What is meant by expectations? It can really be divided into two different pillars concerning the same concept. In the first place, for the purpose of this study, expectations are the *imaginary* about what a teacher should be. Going back to the idea of the self-concept, they invest to achieve a self-concept where they identify themselves with the imaginary. They do what they can through investment and agency to be the teachers they are expected to be, in simpler words. It can be either expected by themselves, by others, or by a combination of both.

Savickas et al. (2009) argue that teacher identity emerges from individual identity as the construction of the self-concept includes how we imagine ourselves in the future. Under this premise, it is related to the expectations of teachers, who reflect on what they expect from their teaching practices and their future professional goals to be met:

I mean, we know that teachers do not only teach a subject, but we provide life skills, and we support their development in many aspects. So, I guess it will be that, to be able to supply those needs and contribute to their development. (Mariana, personal communication, September 10th, 2020)

It can be argued that pre-service teachers have a common expectation from an English teacher. A good English teacher must be familiar and fluent with the language and know how to teach it. Therefore, they believe that they must also be very good at using English and teaching it to their students. This belief, however, is only one of the expectations that they have:

So we, as teachers, become mom and dad. It's more beautiful than being just there to teach the subject, the verb, this simple past or the future tense. No! You have to be there and be more than a teacher. (John, personal communication, September 7th, 2020)

There is clearly an expectation to “be something more than just a teacher”. Both Mariana and John feel the need to invest and put their innate skills into practice to become what they imagine to be a *good teacher*. They (re)construct their identities and become “more than just a teacher”. On the other hand, taking into account that the (re)construction of pre-service teachers' identity is a constant and does not stop at a particular given time (considering that people's identities keep changing as they live and experience different things). It is only natural that we also look at the prospective (re)construction of identity. The previous is the second pillar of the concept of expectations; the pre-service teachers' expectations for the future after completing the bachelor's degree.

The first idea that comes to mind when thinking about the future is their almost immediate graduation from the B. Ed in ELT. John expresses this feeling when he says: “Now I can look for a job as a coordinator, and I can do many things now that I have my degree” (John, personal communication, September 7th, 2020). There is a very concrete and clear expectation that completing the B.Ed in ELT will serve as a pathway to new opportunities, jobs, and higher income. This pathway can (re)construct their identities regarding the success that they have achieved as teachers: “I can look into the future now, you see what I'm saying? Now I can look for a job as a coordinator, and I can do many things now that I have my degree” (John, personal communication, September 7th, 2020). “Well, the fact that I knew that I was losing opportunities because I didn't have a bachelor's degree. It was mainly the fact that I couldn't have an international teacher exchange that I wanted to do” (Mariana, personal communication, September 10th, 2020).

From the categories mentioned beforehand, we could see how Mariana and John's trajectories (re)constructed their identities as Language Teachers. They were born to be teachers, and they invested through their agency to become precisely the teachers they expected to be. Their different experiences have played the most important role in their (re)construction of identity, as they have become more efficient, confident and proud English teachers.

Conclusions

This research aimed to understand how empirical service teachers shape their identities based on the experiences, beliefs, and expectations of their different trajectories before and after professional training. In this sense, these narrative research findings have allowed us to see the teaching profession from a broader angle.

22 ■ Although research on the construction of language teachers' identity has generally been carried out with participants who have not yet formally worked as teachers, unlike the participants in this research, a clear relationship between expectations and beliefs can be identified from aspiring teachers and empirical teachers. The empirical teachers in this research found the human meaning of the profession manifesting itself in their passion for teaching and in their willingness to position themselves as teachers from an active, vigilant, and transforming role of attitudes and skills without feeling attracted to the teaching profession as the career professional of your choice. The former tells us that their initial trajectory and positioning as language teachers was based on their sense of belonging, the ability to overcome pedagogical obstacles due to their lack of professional training, and their autonomous investment in their own assets for high performance. In the same way, we can align the agency's idea with our findings so that the conceptions of teacher professional training need a greater foundation in the importance of building their identity rather than a predominantly academic foundation.

In this sense, we believe a new element that has not yet been explored materializes from this research. John and Mariana began to build their identity from the sense of wholeness, comfort, and pride that emerged from the experience. This idea complements other studies that have proposed that teachers' professional identity is based on the theoretical and practical elements offered during professional training and, in turn, these elements

provide a human meaning to sustain their identity (Quintero Polo, 2016). The beliefs and experiences of our participants as empirical language teachers determined their identity. During their interviews, the message and the perceived feelings told us that the experience rather than the training made them aware of the human dimension of the profession and, therefore, shaped their identity.

Regarding the implications, this research may show a new vision of constructing the teaching identity that we believe could benefit university programs. IT may be considered one of the topics within the curricula and as its foundation. On the other hand, it reaffirms what we consider the most valuable element, which is clearly framed in the human dimension of the profession and follows its naturalistic appreciation: vocation. Therefore, future teachers in training in bachelor programs could observe that universities attach great importance to teachers' identity throughout the process of becoming professionals and that this is complemented with the specialization subject to forge integral teachers.

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Annex 1

The interest in developing these narratives was based on the acquisition of data that served as input for our research. It consisted of analyzing the beliefs, experiences, and expectations of pre-service teachers before and after entering professional education and interpreting the changes in the (re)construction of their identities.

The participants in this study were chosen because they were students of the last semester of the undergraduate program in English teaching, and because they had served as teachers before entering university education. They shared their different experiences by participating in an interview. The compiled recordings were transcribed and turned into a narrative which was later reviewed and approved by the interviewees.

The subsequent analysis of the three narratives yielded a series of repetitive data that were used as categorization patterns. "Analyses of narrative content [...] follow the procedures of coding for themes, categorizing these and looking for patterns of association among them" (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015, p. 101). The three predominant categories that surged from the narratives were: *Sense of Belonging*; *Giving my 100%*; and *Expectations*. Then, an interpretation was given to it by the researchers. Finally, those categorization patterns were interpreted and legitimized by the respective theory that supports them.

Sense of Belonging	
Textual Quotes	Interpretation
<p><i>"There is something that has been with me always, and this is a quote that I made up. A teacher is born. He's not made. You see what I'm saying? A teacher is born, not made through his experience" (John).</i></p> <p><i>"The training lasts for a month. And I began working there as a teacher and I said, well, I like it, it's like something natural came out of me."</i></p> <p><i>"Well, that was a long time ago when I had my first job at the Meyer Institute. I said 'I am a teacher. I'm not going to be a lawyer, administrator or a pilot. I want to be a teacher.'"</i></p> <p><i>"And I was like 'wow they're calling me a teacher now!' and that made me very proud of myself."</i></p> <p><i>"So those moments of one to one tutoring gave me, like, the... the opportunity to identify that I liked teaching and that I had the ability to transmit knowledge" (Mariana).</i></p> <p><i>"Life made me a teacher first before the academy. And that is totally what happened" (Mariana).</i></p> <p><i>"I guess knowing that, that being a teacher is also part of having, like, the gift of teaching, eh, and not necessarily having an academic background in teaching. So I guess it was just eh, the opportunity that I had to teach and discovered that I had the skills and that I enjoyed what I was, what I was doing" (Mariana).</i></p>	<p>There is a strong belief that a predetermined "something," a predisposition or inherent characteristic that people innately have and develop as a teacher, even without prior knowledge or experience in the field.</p> <p>The discourse in this quote shows that by choosing the word "natural," the participant believes that it is in his nature to belong in a classroom.</p> <p>There is a very clear feeling of pertinence towards teaching. The sense of belonging was there all along.</p> <p>The fact that he is identified and named "teacher" by other people made him feel more comfortable, as if he really belonged in a classroom.</p> <p>It is clear that the two participants in this research strongly believe that their vocation as teachers arose from their experience in this field, even without having previously considered it from a professional perspective. That is, culturally we have the belief of developing a professional career based on our interests. Our participants, contrary to being interested in teaching as a profession, came across it by chance and discovered their passion for it. As Mariana said, it was life what made them teachers.</p> <p>Based on the descriptions of their first experiences as teachers, or what we have called in this research "empirical teachers," we can assume that this is not just a career choice. Being a teacher is a matter of talent, regardless of the difficulties in terms of pedagogical knowledge; it is also a matter of doing what you love and deciding upon a newly found self-concept.</p> <p>Thus, this is a clear example of "imagination of possible selves" in a way that experience was the start point of how these <i>empirical teachers</i> began to shape their identity. This imagination of possible selves makes us believe that their self-concept was redirected when they found this new passion, discovered abilities for doing it and above all, enjoyed it.</p>

Theoretical Support

Álvaro Quintero (2016), citing Barkhuizen, suggests that people (re)create their identities based on different stages. One of them is the stage of retrospection. It is very peculiar to find that some pre-service teachers believe that they were meant to be teachers, even before they were born. It could be argued that their identity, retrospectively, was already determined by certain aspects.

Hernández and Gutiérrez (2020) observed in their research that pre-service teachers who interacted within their community of practice, developed not only agency, but also what could be understood as a *sense of belonging*. By taking part in their communities, participants started feeling like they belonged there more and more, and that it was through these interactions that others could feel the same way as well. From this, it can be said that the different participants in our research at Universidad San Buenaventura also had a feeling of belonging once they immersed themselves in their school, classroom, and other communities of practice as well. It is vital to highlight that the interactions were very important, even more so than the community itself.

Savickas et al. (as cited in Araxi Sachpazian & Papachristou, 2018) described how people make their career choices based on how they view themselves. "The imagination of possible selves" as named by the authors, is connected to the self-concept.



Giving my 100%	
Textual Quotes	Interpretation
<p><i>“The training was hard, and I thought, ‘I’m not going to make it. I’m not a teacher’. ‘Then I said, ‘No, I have to do it.’ I put all my effort in it and at the end I made it” (John).</i></p> <p><i>“I need to be back in the classroom. I need to be there and teach. So, I gave my one hundred percent and then made it” (John).</i></p>	<p>It wasn't easy for the participants to get to where they are right now. Just like any other person, they had to overcome struggles and challenges. They made conscious efforts to surpass these obstacles.</p>
<p><i>“I was able to grow as a teacher and to develop the teaching skills [...] it was like the experience was at my school. Right? I mean, experience was my teacher. And of course, at the same time, I would try to inquire about some teaching methodologies or teaching practices. And then, ah, some years after that was when I decided to, to start the, the bachelor’s degree” (Mariana).</i></p> <p><i>“Having the experience to teach for... for whatever number of years, of course, gives you tools and gives you some knowledge and everything to apply in your classrooms, but once you pursue or you complete the program, you have more like, eh, theory or more, eh, academic background that can help you understand things better...” (Mariana).</i></p>	

Expectations	
Textual Quotes	Interpretation
<p><i>“Now I can look for a job as a coordinator and I can do many things now that I have my degree” (John).</i></p> <p><i>“...once you pursue or you complete the program, you have more like, eh, theory or more, eh, academic background that can help you understand things better or learn like the roots of the teaching language, process and everything. So it gives you more confidence, I guess, and, and more like academic background so that you can understand things better. And like feel, as I mentioned, make more secure and more confident in what you are doing.”</i></p>	<p>There is a very concrete and clear expectation that getting the degree will serve as a pathway to new opportunities, jobs and higher income.</p>

	Theoretical Support
	<p>Sarasa (2017) considers investment and agency to be a personal, conscious and attentive spending of their personal assets into their teacher education process. The participants' investment is clear; they willingly spent personal assets to advance in their careers: "we conceive agency as teachers' fully autonomous capacity to act, to feel, and to adapt, [...] refuse and resist" (Sarasa, 2017, p. 29).</p>



	Theoretical Support
	<p>Savickas et al. (2009) argue that TI emerges from individual identity, as the construction of the self-concept includes how we imagine ourselves in the future. Under this premise, it is related to the expectations of teachers, who reflect about what they expect from their teaching practices and their future professional goals to be met (Torres-Cepeda & Ramos-Holguín, 2019).</p>

