RESEARCH ARTICLES

Beyond the endorsement of reflection in language teaching and learning[1]

Traspasando las fronteras de la reflexión en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de los idiomas

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Abstract

This paper reports on the first phase of an exploratory qualitative study carried out with in-service language teachers pursuing a graduate degree in Colombia. It aims at analyzing their practices, needs, and challenges, examined under two perspectives—the teacher as a learner and the teacher as a teacher. The study made use of interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires as the primary sources of data. Data analysis included a grounded theory approach and the use of coding, triangulation, and validation procedures. Results unveiled the difficulties that current in-service teachers have in different domains (cognitive, metacognitive, and linguistic), and also inform how the teaching challenges within their specific contexts influence their beliefs, practices, learning and teaching outcomes, and their professional growth. The study presents both theoretical and applied considerations to tackle the needs and challenges reported, aiming at offering a systematic analysis and approach for the endorsement of reflection, and thus, setting milestones for the enhancement of effective professional development for language teachers in educational communities such as in Colombia as well as overseas.

Keywords: language teaching, language learning, professional development, reflection, self-regulation

Resumen

Este manuscrito da cuenta de la primera fase de un estudio cualitativo exploratorio realizado con profesores de idiomas en ejercicio que cursan estudios de postgrado en Colombia. Su objetivo es analizar sus prácticas,

necesidades y desafíos, examinados desde dos perspectivas: el profesor como estudiante y el profesor como docente. El estudio hizo uso de entrevistas, grupos focales y cuestionarios como fuentes primarias de datos. El análisis de los datos se hizo con base en la teoría fundamentada y el uso de procedimientos de codificación, triangulación y validación. Los resultados revelaron las dificultades que los actuales profesores en ejercicio tienen en los diferentes dominios (cognitivo, metacognitivo y lingüístico), y también informan sobre cómo los retos de la enseñanza en sus contextos específicos influyen en sus creencias, prácticas, resultados de aprendizaje y enseñanza, y su crecimiento profesional. El estudio presenta consideraciones teóricas y prácticas para abordar las necesidades y desafíos reportados, con el objetivo de ofrecer un análisis y enfoque sistemático para el desarrollo de la reflexión, para así establecer ejes fundamentales en el mejoramiento del desarrollo profesional de los profesores de idiomas.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de idiomas, aprendizaje de idiomas, desarrollo profesional, reflexión, autorregulación.

Introduction

English language teaching is a field in constant change, embedding a triad in which needs, demands, and opportunities converge. For decades, teachers and practitioners have nurtured different ways and approaches to engage learners in the learning of English, some of which have demonstrated greater success than others. At present, everyone immersed in the field should be coping with the conditions that a post-modern society has brought alongside such as rapid engagement in digital worlds, involvement in a globalized and multicultural society, and the call for personalized and lifelong instructional and learning opportunities that are not restricted to the classroom itself, but instead transcend its boundaries to synchronous and asynchronous times and contexts.

The improvement of English teaching in Colombia has been mainly led by the Ministry of Education and supported by a number of other initiatives from the public and private sectors, also accompanied by research and continuing education programs led by higher education institutions (Cárdenas, González, & Álvarez, 2010; Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2014). With this challenge in mind, during the last five years, the government has focused on developing a set of strategies aimed to change the trends and practices in terms of quality of education, with a specific focus on the strengthening of professional development programs and practices. The first core area has been the initial training of teachers which was strengthened by the quality accreditation required for licensure programs. The second area focused on the continuing training of teachers framed upon a formative assessment framework and delivered through semi-annual leveling courses offered by higher education institutions for those teachers who needed to strengthen their classroom practices. Such assessment, in contrast to previous years, focuses especially on the teaching practice. Last but not least, in order to strengthen the advanced training of teachers, the Ministry created the Scholarship Program for Teacher Excellence, which has awarded more than six thousand grants to teachers and directive staff as reported in October 2016.

We can assert that English teachers' professional development in Colombia has evolved from being merely involved in courses or programs provided by experts with no further or systematic follow-up, reflection, and intervention phases, to being provided within the teachers' own educational contexts. In such a view, the role of teachers as 'consumers of knowledge' (Borg, 2015) has been changing, giving way to a more critical position where teachers act, research, evaluate, and implement new strategies that endorse knowledge construction from various sources. However, numerous efforts still remain to be made given that traditionally-led mentalities still prevail in many teachers, perhaps due to their lack of training and/or reticence to try out new teaching and learning approaches (Cuesta Medina, Anderson, & McDougald, 2017b). In addition, there are still many educational institutions, agents, and stakeholders who are equally reluctant to change. Hence, the more professional development opportunities that both pre- and in-service teachers may have, the better equipped they will be to meet the demands that the teaching of new generations

of learners pose. In this way, they are also able to visualize and broaden the scope of what the act of language teaching entails which, in Colombia, has often been reduced to the mastery of language structures (Gutiérrez, 2015). Such a view echoes the principles of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2009) in that they call for the involvement of education systems and agents (including policy makers and stakeholders) to seek and provide teachers with opportunities for professional development in order to maintain a high standard of teaching and to retain a high-quality teacher workforce. Notwithstanding, it should be acknowledged that effective professional development is on-going, includes continuous training, practice and feedback, and should provide timely follow-up support.

In the last decade, regional approaches have been planned and executed as part of the initiatives held by governments, advocating that the quality of higher education and development are changing. Particularly, these approaches have focused on a twofold perspective. On the one hand, they have worked towards fostering quality assurance in higher education and, on the other, have supported the increase in the number of postgraduate students as a way to improve the quality of national research and development (University of Oxford, 2015). As per Colombian higher education institutions, more attention has been placed on areas such as the development of critical thinking and lifelong learning, highlighting the role of reflection as pivotal to gauge effective teachers who learn from their learners, tutors, and peers (Fandiño, 2013). However, there is still much work to be done.

From an academic perspective, it is necessary that English teachers become aware of all the aspects of their teaching practice, and that they adopt a critical stance with respect to the various approaches, methods, techniques, and strategies they have at hand and which might be suitable for their contexts. Pursuing a continual articulation between beliefs, needs, and practices would gradually lead to the development of awareness and the understanding of their impact on classroom practice (Farrell & Ives, 2015). Therefore, it is of utmost importance that teachers engage in such a process

while being supported with effective scaffolding from more experienced teachers/tutors, and that both the educational system and stakeholders allow this to happen. Reflective practice is seen, then, as the proposed bond that helps teachers bridge the gap between context, personal, and professional constraints and help them succeed while undertaking a twofold role—that of being a learner and of being a teacher.

In the present paper, we report on the identified necessity to unveil the aspects associated with teachers' professional development in a group of in-service English teachers pursuing a master's degree in English teaching. We recognized during the needs analysis stage (via interviews and focus groups) that participants demonstrated limited abilities in the areas of self-reflection and self-assessment (specifically concerning self-monitoring), while they displayed a lack of systematicity in their actual analysis of learning and teaching performance. Therefore, the study was carried out with the aim of exploring the factors that either facilitate or restrict their teaching and learning practices. The present manuscript will make reference to the core principles underlying a suggested approach for effective professional development taking into consideration the population and the graduate program under study. Consequently, we provide theoretical considerations that guided the path of the study, accompanied by a thorough discussion of aspects underpinning the chosen fusion of principles. Lastly, we address the methods and procedures carried out and report on the results and derived implications, providing suggestions for further adaptations of the study towards the enhancement of reflective teaching and learning scenarios.

Theoretical Considerations and the Fusion of Principles

The promotion of effective practices that include permanent reflection about the teaching and learning process is based on the seminal work of Dewey (1988) who referred to reflection as "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further

conclusions to which it tends" (p. 118). In the area of language teaching and learning, the concept of reflective teaching gained importance in the last two decades of the twentieth century through the work of Kolb (1984), Richards and Nunan (1990), Wallace (1991), and Richards and Lockhart (1994) among others. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, for example, states that in order for learning to take place, reflection is a necessary step. Thus, the fusion of theoretical grounds such as reflective practice, both from the views of teaching and learning, the humanistic paradigm of Randall and Thronton (2001), and the Vygotskian concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in the curriculum (Vygotsky, 1978), will build the upcoming discussion.

Such a view requires that teachers must be provided with target pedagogical knowledge (e.g., methods, procedures, skills, etc.) to examine critically what they do in the classroom (Randall & Thronton, 2001) so that they can be engaged in nurturing connections between theory and practice, and also have a clear rationale behind their teaching actions, as well as their "own theories and practices" (Farrell, 2016, p. 234). This will promote the understanding that engaging in reflective practice is a predictor of improvement in the quality of teaching practice towards language learning in classroom (Ashraf, Samir, & Yazdi, 2016), as one can gradually be able to understand and monitor one's own actions and identify strengths and improvement outcomes. Undertaking reflective practice also means taking an active role in learning and recognizing one's personal responsibility for one's own lifelong learning (Sibahi, 2016), since there is an intrinsic commitment to constantly improve and apply the target knowledge in the different domains of one's own life.

We believe that the endorsement of reflective practice (including both learning and teaching) could potentially bridge the gap between teachers' lack of awareness, their understanding and involvement in the use of self-regulatory strategies (specifically self-monitoring and self-assessment), and their lack of systematicity in their actual analysis of performance, due to personal and contextual limitations concerning teachers' own professional development opportunities. Thus, amongst the

principles that enhance the fusion of reflective teaching and learning, we fused the humanistic paradigm of Randall and Thronton (2001) and the Vygotskian concept of ZPD in the curriculum (Vygotsky, 1978) so that reflection and assessment opportunities could take place throughout the training sessions the learners would be engaged in. Although the present paper reports on the first stage of an on-going project investigating the profiles and challenges of current in-service teachers, it illustrates both theoretical and applied considerations rooted into a systematic analysis and an approach to tackle the needs and challenges reported in order to pursue effective professional development for language teachers. Findings from the second phase of the study will be reported in an upcoming publication.

Firstly, the humanistic paradigm proposed by Randall and Thornton (2001) allows for the interaction between experiential learning theories, class-centered counselling, and reflective practice and lays the foundation for the continuous professional development of the teacher as an individual. Secondly, Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978) allows for the construction of knowledge through dialogue and interaction. In this interaction, the student-teacher is aided by the tutor in the process of advancing through their ZPD by means of scaffolding. This is evident in the class observation scheme, where the tutor observes the student-teacher and helps them to build new knowledge (see Figure 1).

Fusing Theory to Map Reflective Practice Interventions

This process integrates three stages. The first is reflection-for-action (Farrell, 2016) where the teacher designs a lesson plan and discusses it with the tutor in the pre-lesson conference. Amendments are made as applicable during and after the discussion with the tutor while mutual knowledge construction takes place. The second stage is reflection-in-action (Schon, 1983) where the teachers make decisions while teaching in response to the varying circumstances of the lesson. Here, there is a clear interplay among the teacher's skills and the contextual situation that take place in the classroom. The teacher is advised to record
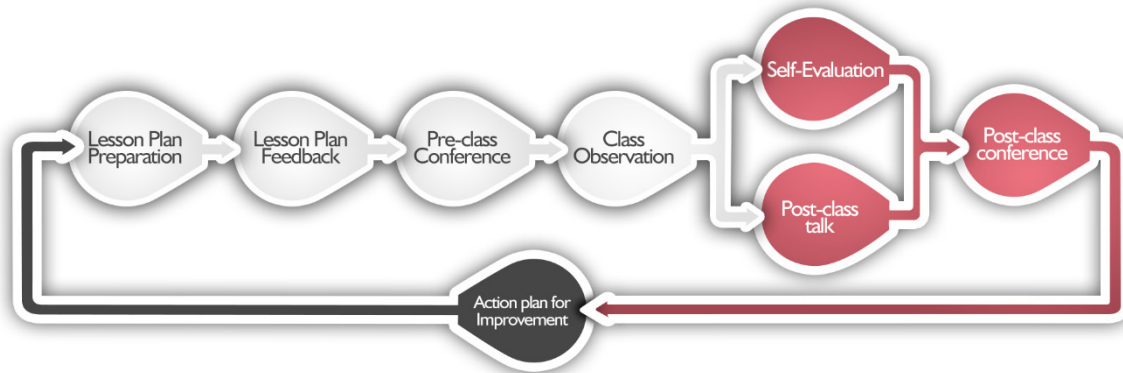
CLASS OBSERVATION SCHEME

Figure 1. Classroom Observation Scheme.

and reflect upon every situation so that there is information for a clear and efficient follow-up in the subsequent phase. The third stage is reflection-on-action (Schon, 1983) in which the teacher, guided by the tutor, analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the lesson and proposes an action plan for further development, turning to the reflection-for-action and activating the cycle again. In this phase, active dialogic interactions take place aiming at building solid reflection, planning, and evolving teaching scenarios. In this way, the reflective cycle turns into a tool for professional development, including three specific stages of reflection: reflection on action, reflection in action, and reflection for action. As Yanuarti and Treagust (2016) suggest, "while reflection on and in action applies during and after teaching practice, reflection for action is concerned with using reflection as a basis for planning future action for further benefits of self-continuous improvement for teachers" (p. 280).

Through permanent analysis and reflection on the underlying principles used to map the class, combined with the participants' classroom experience (i.e., experiential knowledge; Martin, 2016; Wallace, 1991), both teachers and tutor can foster dynamic iterations directed to effective reflection and assessment. It is fundamental that professional development programs are designed taking into account their prospective students' profiles so that instructors are cognizant of the needs and the most suitable directions to guide

learners' professional development. Additionally, time constraints must be examined and carefully mapped out given that such an approach demands significant investment of time to plan and follow-up actions (on tutor's side), and requires constant involvement, self-monitoring, and self-assessment (on the teachers' side).

Materials and Methods

Participants

This exploratory qualitative study took place at a private university located in Chía, Colombia. Participants (11 male and 12 female) were 23 in-service English teachers pursuing a master's degree in English teaching. Their ages ranged from 24 to 58 years old ($M = 33.9$). 56.5% worked in public schools and 43.5% were teaching at private schools. All participants pursuing the MA program were invited to participate and all granted consent to do so.

Data Collection and Analysis

We used a 27-item questionnaire (see Appendix A) that inquired about the participants' self-regulatory and reflective practices (if any), as well as information about their teaching philosophy, current practices, and contexts. In addition, a 20-minute semi-structured interview and a focus group (see

Appendices B and C, respectively) were designed and applied in two different stages of the study. The first stage, upon entrance to the master's program, and the second was administered in the second semester of their studies. Both sets of data aimed at examining factors associated with the teachers' needs, practices, and challenges during their professional development both attending to a two-fold perspective—the teacher as a learner, and as a teacher.

Both interviews and focus groups aimed at providing target information that broadened the information collected in the initial questionnaire by inquiring further on the learner and teacher challenges, the ways to tackle them, and the perceived value of self-monitoring, self-reflection, and self-assessment practices in general. All responses were anonymized and participants' responses were issued a code (P1, P2, P3, etc.). Defined as a systematic, qualitative procedure used to generate a theory, Grounded Theory was used to analyze data, and triangulation and validation procedures such as peer-debriefing (Creswell, 2014; Mills, Gay, & Airasian, 2012) were exercised. The emergent codes of the first analysis were refined and contrasted with the codes resulting from the second analysis. Afterwards, the answers from both sets were revised in light of the resulting emergent data, evolving into categories that were mapped through mind maps and charts, validated by a team of researchers.

Results and Discussion

Four main dimensions were unveiled in the study. These included teacher and teaching challenges, weaknesses and strengths of in-service English teachers, target goals and limitations in reflective teaching, and difficulties in endorsing self-regulation (see Table 1). These categories integrate the core category of the study: *An overview of in-service English teachers: Salient assets and challenges*. These core aspects helped identify the profiles and factors associated with the difficulties for the endorsement of reflection, learner-centeredness, self-regulation, and thus integrate the fusion of principles we advocate for, towards a

dynamization of the learning and teaching practices in the language classroom.

Table 1. Categories of the study.

Subcategories	Core category
Teacher and teaching challenges	
Weaknesses and strengths of in-service English teachers	
What is beneath reflective practice: Skills, goals and limitations	An overview of in-service English teachers: Salient assets and challenges.
On the road to self-regulation: Gauging pivotal change in the language classroom	

Teacher and Teaching Challenges

The discussion regarding the participants' perceptions of their needs is framed within the construct of *teacher cognition*, conceptualized as the "unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching—what teachers know, believe and think" (Borg, 2003, p. 81). This conceptualization supports the participants investigating themselves as learners and also as practitioners, and the researchers' understanding that their beliefs and their own identities have been shaped by their own schooling, professional education, and classroom practice (Phipps & Borg, 2007; Suárez Flórez & Basto Basto, 2017). Finding out about participants' needs may help teacher educators to better understand their needs and their beliefs and, hopefully, to contribute to the provision of more effective teacher education.

One of the needs revealed in the analysis of the participants' views from their role of learners is related to what teachers know about the strategies to monitor their own learning, as one teacher noted in their reflection: "*I try to learn and continue improving my English level and although I have a progress* [sic] *when I do it by myself, I have the need* [sic] *to have someone to guide me*" (P02). This fragment suggests some degree of awareness of the value of self-study but the lack of effective strategies to monitor their progress. Such awareness

is facilitated by affective factors including the desire to learn and improve and also by cognitive factors such as critical awareness and existing beliefs (Clavijo, Guerrero, Torres, Ramírez, & Torres, 2004; Gutiérrez, 2015; Phipps, 2009). Although 60% of participants revealed this type of need, the fact that they are somewhat aware may help them to encounter appropriate learning strategies to monitor their language learning and to strive for further professional development opportunities. Thus, the remaining mission is to strengthen such awareness by establishing a strategic pathway for an effective course of action.

Interestingly, when asked the question "*Do you take control of your learning?*", most of the participants referred to their knowledge about language (Borg, 2003). Although with this question the possibilities were open for them to reflect upon their self-actions in managing their learning, including any usage of learning strategies or conducive actions to do so, their answers indicated that 95% of the participants did not exercise self-control of their learning, but they claimed to be aware of their language limitations. Such preference to prioritize their language knowledge over their perceived capability to endorse any self-regulatory (metacognitive) development suggests that participants have limited knowledge of their metacognitive and self-regulatory actions and also that their performance of professional roles, in this case that of a language teacher, is closely related to their perceptions concerning how knowledgeable of the foreign language they feel that they are. This reveals that their professional and personal identities are closely interrelated (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006).

A second theme elicited from the participants related to the challenges found in their teaching contexts. These challenges range from the need to cope with their students' shortcomings to the restrictions posed by the context itself (e.g., a large number of students, limitations in teaching schedules, and scarce resources to teach, etc.). Following Borg's (2003) assertion that "teachers' practices are also shaped by social, psychological and environmental realities of the school and classroom" (p. 94), the study revealed that 38%

of the participants considered the development of the productive skills (speaking and writing) a major difficulty in their classrooms. As one participant commented, "*the students are not exposed to speaking activities, so their biggest weakness is the speaking skill*" (P06). In addition, the low levels of engagement and motivation, and the absence of self-regulatory and autonomous behaviors in their student population (28% and 14%, respectively), are representative of how contextual realities that may be beyond their control restrain the normal development of their teaching activity.

Restricted access to learning materials and the large number of students were also reported as a source of concern and a challenge. As one participant suggested, "*I usually have 40 students in my teaching groups. Many of those students can't afford the book and dictionary needed, it is difficult for me to teach those classes*" (P05). Although during class observations, conducted in preceding stages of this study, we noted that in school contexts with limited resources, teachers tend to design their own materials and then show them to students using a projector or TV screen. However, in large groups physically and conventionally arranged, those students sitting at the back of the classroom are more likely to have problems visualizing the resources properly, may become easily distracted and thus find limitations both in their language development and their classroom environment. This panorama brings additional tensions to teachers deviating from their target teaching plans.

In Colombia, the current policies put forth by the Ministry of Education demand that teachers help students reach a competence level in English that allows them, in turn, to improve human capital and economic development by increasing participation in the largely English-speaking global economy (British Council, 2015). However, one factor that restrains teachers from achieving this objective, and discourages continuity and consistency in the learning process, is the limited amount of English instruction per week. As one teacher posits, "*the school isn't bilingual, so the three hours a week aren't enough to have* [sic] *a great improvement*" (P09). The discomfort unveiled in this excerpt might be supported by the evident

hurdles of limited hours of instruction and also by the fact that the teaching context exerts a powerful influence on teachers' ability to teach in line with their beliefs (Phipps, 2009).

As learners need time and extended opportunities to access, process, and produce knowledge, in this study, participants from the public sector reported that the limited amount of teaching hours was a severe constraint that their learners faced to achieve significant improvement in their linguistic proficiency. Unfortunately, with the restricted scheduling for English instruction in most public schools, these actions cannot be easily achieved. Such conditions have previously been reported by the British Council (2015) displaying significant differences among public and private education sectors mainly in terms of the offer for a more comprehensive English language education, and the English proficiency outcomes their graduates would achieve:

> The effectiveness of English teaching in public education is limited by a lack of teacher training, resources and funding, large class sizes and unenforced standards. While some local authorities administer and fund their own programmes, decentralisation means that the provision and implementation of national policy and funding is often uneven. (p. 20)

Given that interaction determines and affects the conditions of language acquisition, especially in contexts where exposure to the target language is limited (Ekembe, 2014), upcoming educational reforms concerning language learning should evidently include thorough analysis in this area, in search of additional ways to expand the chances for language interaction to take place efficiently in the classroom.

Weaknesses and Strengths of In-Service English Teachers

Results revealed other pitfalls such as the inability to self-assess, self-monitor, and self-evaluate their academic performance, as well as shortcomings in linguistic proficiency. Participants successfully exposed the perceptions of their limitations in terms of subject matter knowledge (language learning) as students. Most of these participants said that they are not familiar with appropriate tools to self-evaluate English language use. Therefore, they might find it difficult to assess their learning processes and outcomes due to the lack of appropriate techniques for self-assessment and/or the limited opportunities to engage in such metacognitive practices, as one participant suggested, "*self-assessment is difficult to me, I don't know how to do it*" (P07). Thus, they need guidance to learn that self-assessment should be immersed in their toolkit as autonomous language learners so it can be used as a device for personal self-monitoring (Gardner, 2000). This would allow teachers to move from being field dependent users who generally require a tutor to manage their progress (Witkin, Moore, Goodenough, & Cox, 1977). The excerpts below illustrate the need for students to count on their tutor and/or instructor to guide and assess their progress. Thus, it can be asserted that in dealing with self-regulatory practices at an early stage (like the one these learners are in now), sound and timely scaffolding needs to take place so that learners are well equipped to gradually take on the control of their own learning.

> *I try to learn and continue improving my English level and although I have progress when I do it by myself, I have the need to have someone to guide me.* (P07)
> *I improve academically by reading extensively on the topics being discussed during tuition time.* (P08).

Another emerging pitfall regarding participants' cognitive needs in terms of the exercise of their teaching profession was the linguistic barriers they hold. Even though these teachers have, in general, a wide range of experience in language teaching. Specifically, a concern raised by some of them was their limitations in terms of language knowledge including use of academic discourse in contexts that require understanding and practice of academic lexicon. These acknowledged linguistic and cognitive needs represent a concern for in-service teachers who perceive that their weaknesses in handling the foreign language restrain them from being efficient language teachers. However, the engagement in the present study was both an opportunity and a predictor of further action and change for the participant population.

In agreement with Hyland (2013), this is a systemic problem, in that literacy has been traditionally seen as embedded in the beliefs and practices of individual disciplines, instead of being conceived as a generic skill that students have failed to develop at school. Therefore, this helps explain the difficulties both students and academics have in controlling the conventions of target disciplinary discourses. Specifically, and concerning their proficiency in the foreign language, participants reported having difficulties in their performance in academic writing, limitations in vocabulary, and pronunciation issues. In their view, these problems are mainly related to their lack of autonomous learning skills and continual professional development, as one participant claimed: "*I realize that I need to improve my reading, my listening, my speaking and my writing, so I need to study a course to review some concepts in order to learn in a better way.*" (P05). Therefore, in the light of such comments, the majority of participants (90%) seem to be convinced that they need to have someone to guide their language learning process as they are not able to make much progress on their own. At an earlier stage to self-regulate one's own action, guidance and facilitation by an expert instructor should become available, so the gaps between language and pedagogies are bridged. This finding also correlates with those of Richards (2017), as there is a salient need to teach the specialized language skills required to teach English through English and find connections between their language proficiency and teaching ability, while raising the concern to include such components in the design of language development programs for language teachers. It also echoes Cuesta Medina, Anderson and McDougald's findings (2017a, 2017b) with respect to the teacher-dependent perspectives that Colombian teachers have.

The lack of knowledge to monitor their progress was another challenged reported by all participants, asserting that they did not have specific or established methods to do so. Some even mentioned that they might be doing it, but not consciously. Not surprisingly, traditional (and somehow obsolete) ways of monitoring their academic progress are apparent in their answers such as relying on comparing standards (numerical scores/grades)

they have obtained from standardized tests. Participants claimed being limited in completing the tasks and assignments required by teachers but avoiding work beyond what is explicitly requested mainly due to their non-existent habits or skills. For example, the question: "*What do you do before you start working on an academic task?*" prompted responses included the following: "*I just review the material for the specific academic task, such as the photocopies*" (P03), "*I do the important home tasks for not to be thinking or worrying about them.*" (P10), "*I am not always aware of the importance of this task and I don't have this habit.*" (P01). These responses display little experience in strategic actions to monitor their work and to trace strategic goal-setting tasks and procedures.

The study also uncovered the misconceptions they have regarding self-evaluation which, unfortunately, occurs infrequently in their professional development. "*I think it is a not very common activity teachers do because maybe we do not have the tools to do it in order to improve our teaching practice, sometimes there is not enough time to do it or just we think we are doing the things in the best way possible.*" (P02). They reported that they self-evaluated at times only and their answers did not evidence the use of specific criteria to judge their own language performance on a daily basis. Thus, it is manifest that for better performance in self-assessment, the participants of this study need to work harder in the understanding of how to assess their own work, provide feedback on their self-assessments, and create new goals and action plans periodically. As stated by Kremer-Hayon and Tillema (1999), a great deal of the students' success lies in the assessment process and participating in self-assessment can help learners to become skilful judges not only of their weaknesses, but also of their own strengths, being better able to establish realistic goals for them and gauging their capacity to be self-directed.

Regarding the participants' strengths, the most common assets posed were related to organizational skills, willingness to improve, and the use of learning strategies. However, only 10% of the participants openly expressed that they have these positive assets towards language improvement. Willingness to

design self-assessments to check their knowledge is common in their answers, in order to discover their own weaknesses and set up strategies to overcome them. However, they do not mention the strategies they use to do so, which suggests a lack of certainty about the effectiveness of their methods and reduced knowledge in this regard. They are willing to succeed in their language learning and their field of study, but the majority (80%) do not follow a systematic process of learning. Although they report being mostly effective regarding organizational skills, prioritizing what needs to be done and when it should be done, and also attending to their busy schedules both at work and home, they assert that further training on prioritization and task management could be desirable. Consequently, the attempts to take action may go in vain as there is not a consistent and strategic follow-up.

Let us keep in mind that learners who use metacognitive self-assessment are aware of their abilities and perform better than those who are unaware of their abilities. Hence, based on the examined situations, we advocate in light of this study for strategic planning of varied modes of assessment that are timely included in the agenda of teacher preparation programs.

What is Beneath Reflective Practice: Skills, Goals, and Limitations

Up to this point, there is sufficient evidence portraying participants' needs of reflection and control of their learning towards the enhancement of their professional development. During the completion of the questionnaire applied in the second stage, participants were asked whether they considered themselves reflective teachers. Although 86% of the answers were positive and only 15.4% were negative, it was significant that they had difficulties in conceptualizing and making connections between self-reflection, self-monitoring, and self-assessment. In regard to the specific reflective teaching actions, they reported on their need for change, but although there is some awareness of the importance of paying closer attention to such matter, there is not much evidence on what such change might imply. Thus, these findings suggest that the training on self-regulated learning and systematic reflection to

improve professional practice should be constant and progressive, in order to generate the expected impact on the group of intervened professionals.

'I try to reflect on my students' shortcomings when planning a lesson', 'sometimes I just think about how to improve something that was wrong or I take notes of it' (P04).
'I'm starting to change. I know I have to pay more attention to students' reactions' (P08).
'Although I inquiry my teaching practice many times, and found [sic] problems in them; I do nothing to overcome them...sometimes I think [sic] is not worthy' (P01).

Although the former excerpts account for attempts concerning reflection, none suggest concrete ways that lead to improvement in their teaching. In the first case, note-taking appears to be a strategy exercised at a descriptive level, which requires a great deal of training to gain critical reflection so that action may take place; while in the second case, there is a slight allusion to the importance of paying closer attention to the target group of students and their actions. These ideas contrast with the latter case, in which participants did not show willingness to reflect on their practice. Overall, such a situation suggests the need for training and gradual scaffolding to guide participants along the transition from developing awareness to the endorsement of reflection to undertake effective teaching actions.

In the group of participants, only one reported the use of reflective teaching strategies and linked perceived success in using strategies such as questioning to control personal progress: *'I am constantly questioning my effectiveness in achieving specific goals in my classes, in order to find improvement strategies for future lessons'* (P09). Following Kolb's (1984) model of reflection (framed upon the principles of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation), this particular teacher has gone beyond the concrete experience stage as not only has s/he referred to his practice, but also moved forward to review and reflect on the experience. The teacher may still need to draw conclusions on what could be done differently and what could be improved so that afterwards, he

may even attempt to take action by activating the experimentation stage. However, this teacher is able to exercise reflection and questioning to improve practice, as reported in the response. In our view, questioning seems to be a good starting point for in-service teachers, especially to gather information on their performance and to develop their aptitude for introspection, as they may connect experience, progress and outcome, and gain a certain degree of power over their teaching by asking *what* and *why* questions (Bartlett, 1990). Hence, the findings suggest that there is remaining work to be done with this group of participants, as they need further opportunities to move from guided to more autonomous practices, in which they develop and exercise self-regulatory skills and endorse reflective learning opportunities.

All things considered, the findings reported in this study unveil multiple opportunities to advocate for reflective learning as a necessary condition for the emergence of reflective teaching. We claim that individuals who self-assess their learning actions are more prone to transfer those habits and/or practices in their daily lives, and specifically, in the case of teachers, endorse them in their classrooms. However, our findings suggest that this ideal scenario is not yet exercised by the target group studied, nor by other teachers in Colombia, as Cuesta Medina, Anderson and McDougald (2017b) have claimed. This may happen because teachers still have difficulties to build up their self-regulatory skills and are inclined to use very traditional strategies to teach English, mainly behaviorist-oriented, suggesting a severe lack in strategic learning and critical thinking practices, as well as limitations in their language proficiency and academic skills. Thus, teachers appear to be framed upon methodologies that do not really respond to present-day needs. In addition, there seems to be a prevalence of teacher-centered methodologies and teachers apparently lack the tools necessary to make the shift to learner-centered classes. So, we claim that teachers should work toward bridging the gaps they have as learners to be able to extrapolate their progress, and target outcomes to their own teaching settings.

Accordingly, we suggest that teacher reflection needs to evolve from the technical type to a practical to a critical one (Cote, 2012) so that teachers may undergo the personal and professional transformations that allow them to become agents of change in their educational communities. Their classrooms are the mirror of their beliefs, and their voices (actions) either echo or distort their preexisting beliefs. In agreement with Nunan (2004), everything teachers do in the classroom is supported by the beliefs about the nature of language and about language learning. Consequently, it is urgent for teachers to transcend from traditionally-rooted to unprecedented procedures to language learning and teaching, in which teachers acquire both language savvy and strategic learning proficiency, while acquiring other life skills that help them be competitive professionals around the globe.

On the Road to Self-Regulation: Gauging Pivotal Change in the Language Classroom

This is the core category that best depicts the integration of findings of the study. We believe that participants could be assisted in the development of self-regulatory skills as they grow in their professional continuum to face the challenges set by their teaching contexts while they bridge their learning gaps. If scaffolding does take place effectively, they will be better equipped to tackle both their learning and teaching difficulties, transferring the knowledge gains they acquire in their learners' role to their teachers' domains. Hence, we argue that the participants in this study should re-conceptualize the value of teaching and learning English, through an effective scaffolding and a systematic reflective teaching and learning scheme, which will gradually take them to monitoring, understanding, and being able to adapt and modify plans, goals, strategies, and efforts according to varying contextual conditions (i.e., cognitive, motivational, and task conditions) on the road to become self-regulated learners (Winne & Perry, 2000; Zimmerman, 1989). Such a road will consequently lead them to a successful transformation in both their own learning and teaching. Secondly, teachers need to be prepared to face the challenges of contemporary education by shifting from obsolete and outdated ways of teaching to the design and development of more

inclusive learning environments; tailored assessment systems and also through the strengthening of their professional skills (Viáfara & Largo, 2018). Finally, we believe that the triad comprising of systematic reflection, learner-centeredness, and self-regulation leads to the dynamization of the learning and teaching practices of the language classroom and also constitute the pillars (we believe) that are necessary to respond to the needs of contemporary professionals (see Figure 2).

Additionally, in agreement with Cuesta Medina (2014), knowing how to plan, self-regulate, and evaluate are skills that may have a direct influence in students' learning awareness and learning control in academic settings. Students can begin to develop academic work habits in school-related tasks (Corno, 1986) and therefore impact their practices and self-regulatory learning processes. Thus, in the case of teachers, they can first acquire these skills and then transfer them to their students, using all that they might have gained in their personal and professional transformations.

Individuals perform at high levels if they have confidence in themselves, and when they realize that their thoughts control their actions, they can positively affect their own beliefs, motivations, and academic performance (Pressiey, Borkowski, & Schneider, 1987). Having these skills can help students to generate critical reflections on their own learning process while being autonomous and more efficient in decision-making scenarios. Those abilities need to be sequentially taught and learned (from a lifelong perspective) by teachers and students aiming at creating self-regulated learning environments so that intellectual proficiency in the target subject matter is acquired, while there is development of skilled self-regulatory (metacognitive) processes (Glaser, 1986). In countries such as Colombia, in which traditional practices have been hierarchized, the change of paradigms in teachers and students (as well as in administrators and policy makers), need to be endorsed and gradually scaffolded, so that such efforts can be materialized in more self-efficacious teaching and learning actions, consciously held through the planning and implementation of learner-centred practices.
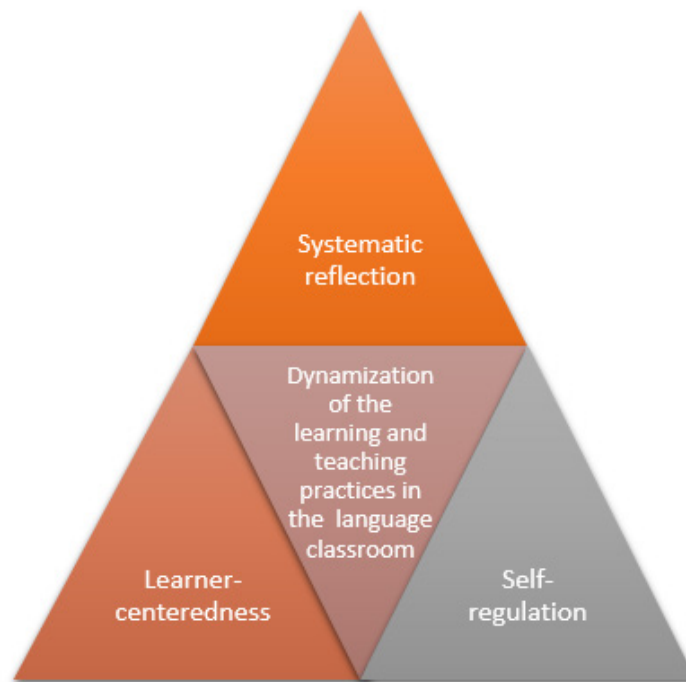

Figure 2. Pillars underlying the road to effective learning and teaching practices.

Pedagogical Considerations and Concluding Remarks

Taking into consideration that the fosterage of reflective teaching and learning in the classroom is a challenging and time-consuming mission, we suggest the design and development of a systematic plan, delivered not only through the class observation scheme illustrated above (see Figure 1) but also through the development of reflective strategies in the subjects/courses where such a component is included (in the case of professional development programs). In the setting where the study took place, this has been achieved by making adjustments to the program curriculum, in which the inclusion of reading and discussion tasks, the sharing of teaching experiences, and the training in self- and peer observation in diverse educational settings has proven effective.

Echoing Cuesta Medina, Anderson, and McDougald (2017a), if teachers are not themselves self-regulated learners, it will be very unlikely that they can guide their students effectively to develop self-regulated learning competences. Therein lies the need to keep investigating and nurturing practices and studies of this kind that help broaden the scope and understanding of such panorama, especially in our country where the process is still at a relative early stage.

In agreement with Mcclinton (2005), we believe this leads to a change in the participants' perspective, as it paves the way for a lifelong transformation process based on critical reflection, and causing a disruption of their previous paradigms. Reflection, as part of any academic endeavor, should help professionals to develop the capacity to re-create themselves, equipping them with different tools for the improvement of their professional practice as they advance in their career path. We believe that through continuous and systematic reflection, teachers can become cognizant of the theoretical and practical knowledge that will aid them in using the most appropriate methodology according to their students' needs and their context, while they also learn to re-define, think, plan, and assess their own and their colleagues' performance for the enhancement of their personal and professional development.

From a teacher-educator perspective, this study presented teachers' perceptions of themselves as learners and as practitioners. Teachers reported that their difficulties in mastering the foreign language represent a constraint that affects their confidence when they teach the language. As a consequence, teacher-educators should consider those difficulties when designing in-service programs. A high level of awareness of teachers' beliefs, cognitive, and linguistic factors should enable teacher educators to design and offer programs that facilitate a more effective and reflective teaching practice. As discussed in Phipps and Borg (2009), teacher education affects teacher's beliefs and practice, and so do "teachers' prior beliefs on their teaching and their learning from formal education" (p. 196). Such understanding can help teacher-educators to have a closer profile of their students and therefore to devise actions that inspire more consistent teacher learning and help them evolve from awareness to set and manage action, while they take responsibility of their own progress and self-improvement.

Findings in the present study also correlate with former findings that demonstrated the value and impact of reflective practice in teachers' professional development and classroom practice (Cote, 2012; Farrell, 2015), and suggest the emergence of new research studies of this kind. However, we argue that teaching teachers to build on reflection and assessment skills is not an easy path (Herrera & Macías, 2015) given that ingrained habits on traditional education actions are at times prioritized and hard to be removed. Furthermore, teachers might not have had prior experience on self-assessment and/or self-regulating their learning experiences. Thus, teachers will need a scaffolded, organized plan to build on such skills, so they can gain expertise to self-control and focus on their target professional outcomes, while they are mentored by an expert trainer/tutor. We have found that a guided plan helps teachers to set the ground to sequentially endorse reflection and assessment in their daily practice.

In this line, further research could examine the routes and strategies through which assessment is generated from within (*self*) and from an external

agent (*tutor*). This is necessary to analyze the different ways in which teachers develop along their professional development pathways and the possible transformations that they experience. In addition, the establishment of peer-teacher mentoring schemes could not only help bridge the divide between what teachers need to develop their reflective practice, how they can collaborate to reach their awareness-raising towards such needs, and what they need to plan to undertake an effective course of action to be carried out in the classroom.

In all, our findings allow us to elaborate a panorama on the profile of current in-service teachers who enroll and participate in professional development programs. We find that such teachers possess several limitations (metacognitive, cognitive, linguistic, and procedural), yet hold (somewhat) defined learning outcomes in their path towards becoming effective facilitators in foreign language education. Beyond this, our initial study has helped to identify ways to tackle the phenomenon under investigation by depicting numerous strategies for the enhancement of reflective learning and teaching actions, which might be applicable to both the ELT community in Colombia as well as overseas. In this light, we recommend that teacher preparation programs support the inclusion of curriculum components that foster the development of reflective and self-regulatory skills, so that from early stages in their teaching and learning trajectories, teachers can recognize and endorse the value of learning to self-reflect, self-assess, and take on the control of their own learning. This would result in being able to transfer their knowledge and practical experience to their learners, as they also move on to the way to become more metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally conscious.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

Discovering myself as a learner and as a teacher…

This short questionnaire collects information about your experience as a teacher and as a learner. Your anonymity will be respected, and the answers you provide in this form will be used solely for educational and research purposes. It is expected that you would be able to complete the questionnaire in 20-25 minutes.

Thanks for your collaboration.

Cordially,
The SRTL research project team

Universidad de La Sabana
Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures

1. I understand and agree that my answers may be used for the purposes of research at the Department of Languages & Cultures at the University of La Sabana.

    Yes
    No

Part 1. Answer the questions below:

2. Age

    20-25
    26-35
    36-45
    46-55
    55-

3. Gender

    Male
    Female

4. Working place

    Language Center
    University
    Private school
    State school
    Other

5. Years of teaching experience

    1-4
    5-9
    10-14
    15-19
    20-

6. Highest education degree obtained

    Bachelor
    Specialization
    Master´s

7. Level in which you teach

    Preschool
    Elementary (Grades 1-5)
    High school A(Grades 6-9)
    High school B(Grades 10-11)
    University (A1)
    University (A2)
    University (B1)
    University (B2)
    University (C1)
    Other (specify)

Part 2. Answer the questions below:

8. Do you take control of your learning? Yes/No
Explain

9. What do you do before you start working on an academic task?

10. Do you monitor your academic progress? Yes/No
Explain

11. Do you self-assess? Yes/No
Explain.

12. If you answered YES to the former item, support your answer. Otherwise, skip this question.

13. Does self-assessment influence your learning? Yes/No
Explain

14. When in need, what actions do you set for academic improvement?

Read the following text:

Ambiguity tolerance has been defined by McLain et al., (2015) as "an individual's systematic, stable tendency to react to perceived ambiguity with greater or lesser intensity" (p. 2), and also by Budner (1962) as the tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as desirable. Budner has also examined this construct by conceptualizing its opposite: Intolerance of ambiguity, which is the tendency to perceive (i.e., interpret) ambiguous situations as sources of threat. In order to better understand this question, please read the following passage from Adrian Furnham and Joseph Marks (2013, p. 718):TA is however usually measured on a one-dimensional scale: those who are intolerant of ambiguity are described as having a tendency to resort to black-and-white solutions, and characterised by rapid and overconfident judgement, often at the neglect of reality (Frenkel-Brunswik, 1949). At the other end of the scale, ambiguous situations are perceived as desirable, challenging and interesting, usually by individuals who score highly on an Openness to Experience scale (Caligiuri, Jacobs, & Farr, 2000) and show both sensation-seeking and risk-taking behaviour (McLain, 1993; Lauriola, Levin, & Hart, 2007; McLain, 2009).

15. Based on the former discussion, do you perceive yourself as an ambiguity-tolerant person or as an ambiguity-intolerant individual? Please explain.

16. Briefly describe the context where you teach.

17. What are the main English teaching challenges in your context? Mention two.

18. What would you need to overcome the language teaching challenges described in item 10?

19. What approach(es), if any, do you follow in planning and teaching your English lessons? Explain.

20. Mention two aspects that are successful in your English classes.

21. Mention two difficulties that you face in your English classes.

22. Are you a reflective teacher? Please explain.

23. How do you perceive your learners in general? Select the option that best suits you.

   a.   As a threat to your personal balance
   b.   As a challenge to be overcome every day
   c.   As an opportunity for professional growth
   d.   As human beings with full potential
   e.   As individuals with very little ambition
   f.   As the owners of a wealth of knowledge

24. Based on the answer given in question 22, explain the rationale of your choice

25. Categorize the following statements in order of the importance (1-8) they have for you as a teacher (1= least important; 8= most important)

   a.   The teacher is an authority figure
   b.   Students are the reason why teachers teach
   c.   A teacher must motivate students on a daily basis

d. Students' problems must be catered for by every teacher
e. Teaching is a way of earning a decent salary
f. Teaching is an opportunity for self-accomplishment
g. Teaching goals must be related to the teacher's personal goals
h. Teachers also learn from their students

26. From the following activity types, choose the ones you use in your English classes:

   -Group work
   - Individual study
   - Grammar exercises from a textbook
   - Silent reading
   - Pair work
   - Dialogues to act out
   - Interviewing other students
   - Filling the blanks exercises based on grammar
   - Creation of diagrams
   - Listening to recordings and completing tables
   - Listening to recordings and filling in the blanks
   - Translation of specific words
   -Other

27. What do think you need to be a better teacher?

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview

1. What do you understand by reflective practice?

2. What type of challenges do you encounter in your daily teaching?

3. Describe the weaknesses (if any) you have as a learner.

4. How have you tackled them?

5. What is the value of self-assessing one's own performance?

6. Do you self-monitor your own learning performance?

Appendix C

Focus Group

1. Do you self-reflect upon your own teaching performance? Explain.

2. When planning your lessons, do you search for external sources that might assist you? This might include your colleagues, the Internet, your Professors, etc. Why?

3. Provided the characteristics of your teaching contexts and the challenges you have been exposed to when teaching such populations, mention at least two ways in which as a teacher you could help your learners to reach both, language and learning objectives traced.

4. How could teacher preparation institutions help trainees in moving away from conventional ways to approach language teaching and learning?