Making Sense of SLA Theories through Reflection

Luz Janeth Hernández
Universidad del Atlántico
Barranquilla, Colombia

Abstract

The adoption of a reflective approach to facilitate the development of student teachers' pedagogical competence has generated interest in Colombian pre-service teacher education programs. This study examines the conceptualization process of fifth semester student teachers as a result of pedagogical strategies used in a second language acquisition (SLA) course. Results from class observation, surveys and prompts to motivate reflection show the value of reflection to empower participants to become aware of their beliefs about learning and teaching and helped them to build an identity as future educators. At the end of the course, participants gave evidence of having formulated their own perception of the teaching profession, and of the teaching practice of English teachers in Barranquilla.

Keywords: Reflection, student teachers, teacher education

Resumen
El uso de la reflexión para la comprensión de las teorías de aprendizaje de una segunda lengua
La adopción de un enfoque basado en la reflexión que facilite el desarrollo de la competencia pedagógica de los futuros docentes ha generado interés en las licenciaturas colombianas. Este estudio examina el proceso de conceptualización de estudiantes de quinto semestre como resultado de estrategias pedagógicas utilizadas en un curso sobre el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua. Los resultados de encuestas, observación de clases y pautas de motivación a la reflexión indican el valor de la reflexión para empoderar a los participantes en la identificación de sus creencias sobre la enseñanza y el aprendizaje y para construir su identidad como futuros educadores. Al finalizar el curso, los participantes demostraron el desarrollo de una concepción propia sobre la profesión docente, y la práctica del docente de inglés en el contexto de Barranquilla.

Palabras clave: Reflexión, estudiantes de licenciatura, educación del docente

Résumé

Utilisation d'une approche réflexive pour comprendre théories de l'apprentissage d'une deuxième langue

L'adoption d'une approche réflexive pour faciliter le développement de la compétence pédagogique des futurs enseignants a éveillé l'intérêt dans les licences pédagogiques des universités colombiennes. Cette étude analyse le processus de conceptualisation des étudiants de cinquième semestre à travers la réflexion sur des activités proposées dans un cours sur l'apprentissage d'une langue seconde. Les résultats des enquêtes, des observations de cours et la suite de règles de motivation dénotent la valeur de la réflexion pour faire que les participants s'appropient de l'dentification de leurs croyances sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage afin de construire leur propre identité en tant que futurs enseignants. À la fin du cours, les participants avaient une vision intégrale de la profession des professeurs et la pratique de l'enseignement en anglais dans le cadre de l'enseignement **à** Barranquilla.

Mots clés: réflexion, futurs enseignants, formation des enseignants

INTRODUCTION

Colombian pre-service teacher education programs have received great attention in the last decade as the pillars that support the quality of efficient language teaching. Results from SABER PRO and international tests such as PISA underscore the connection of the quality of the education offered in elementary and high schools with the one provided to the country's teachers (Barrera-Osorio, Maldonado & Rodríguez, 2012). Quality in teacher education, especially in EFL, has been central in several national events such as Encuentros Nacionales de Universidades Formadoras de Licenciados en Lenguas Extranjeras and ASOCOPI's events. This explains the marked emphasis on supporting teacher development found in the recently launched Colombian National English Program 2015-2025.

However, more research is needed to examine teacher education offered in Colombian universities to foster evidence driven reforms. Carrillo, Forero, & Hernández, (2009) explored the profile of the English teacher educated in Colombian universities and reported great dispersion in content and range of competences to be developed. In an analysis of Latin American pre-service teacher education programs, Vaillant (2005) pinpointed a conflicting dichotomy between the way student teachers (ST) are taught, mostly characterized by teacher centeredness

and knowledge transmission, and the methodology courses offered by the institution that advocate for the implementation of new teaching approaches.

Teacher education programs need to examine ST' learning process in order to facilitate the education of self-critical teacher candidates (Giovannelli, 2003; Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2004; Santana-Williamson, 2001; Yost, Sentner, & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000) to understand the impact of teacher education on teachers' cognition (Borg, 2006) and to explore the sociocultural aspects that constitute teacher identity as they approach teaching and learning in specific contexts (Miller, 2009). Teacher initiation courses need to complement the content element with both practical and reflective elements as novice teachers start conceptualizing their theory of teaching (Borg, 2006; Johnson, 2005; Vaillant, 2005).

This article examines an approach to strengthen the quality of education in a SLA course taught to fifth semester ST at Uniatlantico Licenciatura en Educación Básica con Énfasis en Idiomas Extranjeros. It attempts to document the use of reflection as a tool to gain a better understanding of the ways pre-service teachers construct their theory of teaching and learning. It provides evidence of ST' conceptualization process or personal practical knowledge about learning and teaching (Golombek, 2009). Basic questions illuminating the experience here reported include: 1) What evidence is there that reflection promotes a better understanding of SLA theory? 2) Can an emerging teaching theory of participants be identified? 3) Does it change as a result of reflection and class activities?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three aspects support the research process: 1) the use of reflection to aid teacher conceptualization, 2) the social nature of learning, 3) class observation.

The value of reflection. The use of reflection as a tool to promote teacher development has been documented in several studies (Borg, 2006; Edge, 2001; Giovannelli, 2003; Golombek, 2009; Miller, 2009; Snow, 2005; Vaillant, 2005; Wallace, 1998; Yost et al., 2000;). By encouraging systematic reflection, teacher educators may be fostering the habit of autonomous learning as ST are empowered through class discussions and guided

reflection to articulate their philosophy of teaching (Borg, 2009; Crookes, 2008). Moreover, as ST share insights gained during their reflective consideration of course topics and activities, such exchange facilitates the understanding that learning takes place with and from others.

Renewed interest in reflection as a strategy to educate professionals was spurred by Schön (1987) when he contrasted "reflection-in-action" (the careful analysis of decisions as they are made) and "reflection-on-action" (the revision of an experience to increase understanding). The latter entails a restructuring of the event with the intention of considering new outcomes or alternatives to be tested (Giovannelli, 2003). This study examines the role of unassessed take-home journal reflections used as a strategy to identify the student teachers' perceptions on theory and pedagogical implications of topics discussed in a SLA course. Thus, a "reflection-on-action" approach was adopted.

Teacher education should offer ST intellectually stimulating tasks and situations that promote critical thinking, thus encouraging reflective practice (Snow, 2005; Vaillant, 2005; Yost et al., 2000). Reflection plays a crucial role to document would-be teachers' conceptualization process as they register insights gained from the analysis of case studies, practical examples, and class observation. Reacting to those experiences through the keeping of learning diaries, for instance, serves to explore appropriate alternatives or possible implications for teaching practice as ST examine a teaching and learning event to gain deeper understanding. Golombek (2009) claims that studies about teacher cognition and the use of reflection as a learning strategy enable researchers to see how teachers' personal practical knowledge provides a framework to make sense of their classrooms.

Dewey (Yost et al., 2000) defines reflection as the purposeful examination of an opinion resulting from a consideration of its underlying principles and implications. Reflection stands for the spontaneous, but careful analysis of actions and processes present in a specific situation or context in order to inform coming decisions (Giovannelli, 2003; Kane et al., 2004). To Kane et al. (2004) reflection constitutes the attempt to organize an experience, problem or body of knowledge. In this study, reflection refers to the careful analysis of the stages of an event or the elements present in perceptions in order to gain a better understanding of it and draw implications to inform future actions.

The social nature of learning. The social dimensions of learning have been neglected in teacher education (Byrnes, 2005; Cloud, 2005; Crookes, 2008; Golombek, 2009). People learn with and from others. Byrnes (2005) advocates for teacher education programs that foster the development of an academic community that resembles the real professional community whose members are well accustomed to addressing their educational or intellectual interests and practices in a cooperative and mutually supportive way. Such practice would better prepare ST to join academic and professional learning communities. Teacher education programs should recreate the conditions of collaboration and collegiality needed among professionals in order to deliver effective course programs to students (Cloud, 2005).

Teachers' learning is greatly helped by encouraging discussion with peers. This leads to the development of conceptualization necessary to formulate a philosophy of teaching through the instances of agreement, disagreement, or modification of beliefs due to exposure to insights from peers and professors (Crookes, 2008). Crookes identifies *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* characteristics involved in the process of learning and developing conceptual frameworks. The former results from the analysis of one's teaching practice or the insights achieved while observing others, while the latter results from instances of agreement, disagreement and/or modification of one's perspectives upon examination of other people's conceptualization. Giving ST the opportunity to voice and examine their perceptions as a regular activity in course sessions serves two purposes: It bolsters their conceptualization process mediated by an awareness of options to inform their teaching decisions and it facilitates their grasping of the significance of learning with and from others (i.e., of developing their interpersonal characteristics).

Class observation. Guided class observation provides pre-service teachers with the opportunity to explore assumptions, raises awareness of beliefs and creates conditions for discussing them. It also contributes to bridging the gap between theory and practice. Golombek (2009) states that teachers continually enact a conversation between previous knowledge and the conditions in a specific classroom to make sense of their classrooms. Wallace's reflective model (1998) illustrates the relationship between theory and practice in teacher education by identifying two stages: 1) "The pre-training stage" which accounts for

the formation of ST' conceptual schemata (p. 49) and 2) "the stage of professional education or development", where the relationship between received knowledge and experiential knowledge is explored through reflection and ensuing practice.

Golombek (2009) claims that L2 teachers' personal practical knowledge shapes and is shaped by understandings of teaching and learning: "Teaching is socially constructed out of the experiences of and classrooms of teachers as students and as teachers". Thus discussion and reflection of class observation should provide insights of the beliefs that inform pedagogical knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

This is a classroom-based study stemming from the researcher's experience with a SLA class. The course focused on aspects such as characteristics of different learners, learning contexts, theories of learning, strategies for learning vocabulary and improving reading, and the use for reflection as a tool for teacher cognition. Whole chapters from several ELT books were used as instructional material. Worksheets to review content were made available. This experience lasted for 16 weeks and classes were organised in two-period sessions once a week. Classroom methodological features include: cooperative work (small groups) and whole class discussions. Course assignments included reporting on the treatment of error and the identification of the underlying assumptions held by the observed teacher in one of the class observations assignments for the practicum. Writing vocabulary cards to study the pronunciation, part of speech, meaning, and the sentence where the new word appeared was encouraged and class time was devoted to review them. Reflection entries were a take-home non-graded activity which started from week three to the end of course. Informed consents were gathered in week two.

Illuminated by an action research approach which aimed to explore the use of reflection to support novice teachers' cognition process as they grapple with SLA theory, a case study design was adopted since it reports findings from a bounded system (Creswell, 2007) and a specific group of participants: all the registered students were invited to participate. Data collection involved reflection journals, a survey administered at the beginning and at the end of the course and a report about an observed

class. Information gathered was analyzed and triangulated to prevent the formulation of hasty conclusions (Diaz, Alarcón, & Ortiz, 2012).

Participants. Universidad del Atlántico is a public funded university. Most of its ST attended public schools and live in the vicinity. Library resources are scarce and access to internet either at the university or at home are somewhat limited due to financial reasons. The institution provides a Moodle platform to support teaching; however it still faces some technical challenges to remain available. In 2012, the subjects of this study had not been requested by another professor to work with the platform.

Nine students attended the course. They were invited to participate during the research presentation made in week 2. While they all accepted, only eight actually wrote the reflection entries. Participants were five females and three male novice teachers, age ranging from 20 to 45 while the majority was in their early twenties. They were enrolled in a B1 English course.

Instruments

Due to the nature of the questions motivating the experience, three data collection instruments were used: journals, surveys and observation protocols.

Learning journals. Available literature on journal writing pinpoints the convenience to provide a framework to guide reflection for users (Smyth, 1989). During the presentation of the research project, in week two, a letter-sized learning journal format was presented to participants. It provided blank spaces for name, class session, and date. It was a simplification of a reading activity that had been designed to explain Smyth's four stages of reflection: description, information, confrontation and reconstruction.

So as to mitigate possible conflict of interest since the researcher was also responsible for learners' assessment, students were informed about assessment procedures and the bearing of each technique used. It was made explicit that journal writing was not a constituent part of the course assessment. They were exhorted to participate in a study aiming at improving the course, its contents and methodology. They were explained about the benefit of journal writing for the improvement of writing competences and as a learning tool if written in English.

However, since the main interest was on initiating them into the process of reflection, the option of writing in Spanish was given. Journals provide a window into ST's insights and perceptions to gain better understanding of their conceptualization process (Edge, 2001).

Two sets of directions to write the reflection entry were provided. First, the participant was referred to write his reflection answering to the following prompts: 1) Describe … what you learned today 2) inform… what it meant both as an L2 learner and as a student teacher 3) confront … explain how you came to think this way; and 4) reconstruct … how you might do things differently.

The second set of directions presented three questions prompts which were seen by the researcher as an strategy to aid the reflection process: 1) What did you learn about being a teacher?; 2) What did you learn about the process of learning English? ; 3) What did you learn about being a teacher in Barranquilla? While the researcher's intention was to provide class time to write the learning journal entries in class, only the last ten minutes of the class were devoted to this task; consequently reflection entries had to be finished at home.

Class observation format. The participants in this study were expected to start class observations in local public schools as part of their practicum. It is frequently the case that during the practicum tutoring teachers may experience difficulties to articulate for novices the rationale for their actions in the classroom (Tarone & Allwright, 2005). They may also have very little time to spend with novice teachers. Therefore, to support ST this process and to facilitate the connection between theory and practice, the researcher, requested her subjects to focus on the treatment of error in one of their compulsory class observations). The ensuing discussion ought to aid novice teachers to become aware of their personal values and to be able to express their philosophy of teaching (Crookes, 2008) or emerging teacher identity (Miller, 2009). The format used was inspired by one produced by Bilkent University School of English Language. ST' work concentrated on: 1) Identifying five instances of error 2) learning emerging from observed teacher's approach towards error correction 3) their perception of observed teacher's view on SL learning and acquisition. Again, they were assured the completion of this activity was not to be assessed.

Survey. A survey devised to document beliefs about SLA was administered twice: at the beginning of the course and at the end, to identify possible variations in perceptions. It had two sections. The first part, adapted from Santana-Williamson (2001), gathered information about participants' age and their degree of familiarity with learning journals. The second part, devised after the work of Crookes (2008) and Horwitz (2007), examined perceptions on how a foreign language should be taught. Answer options were agree, disagree, it depends. The initial survey (IS) was administered in the second week of classes. The final survey (FS) took place in week 16. Both were completed at one of the university computer laboratories.

ANALYSIS

Results are presented and analyzed here.

Survey Results

The survey aimed to identify initial beliefs (IS) and to explore if possible changes had occurred as the result of instruction (FS). Eight participants answered the IS and six responded the FS. The analysis showed there was no real gain by having the it depends option, as it did not offer significant information about the nature of the beliefs. Results indicating whether or not ST perceptions regarding each SLA issue changed at the end of the course are shown in Table 1. The first column identifies each of the questions asked. The second row indicates the topic each question addressed; the third column informs whether or not ST perceptions had changed. Answers point to an emerging ST's theory of learning; however, they should be approached cautiously.

Some perceptions remained unchanged, basically SQ1, SQ5, SQ8, and SQ17. ST had expressed in the IS favorable perceptions of the significance of reflecting on what they had learned (SQ1), of the convenience of using authentic materials in the class (SQ5), of the convenience of engaging students in cooperative tasks or projects (SQ8), and of adopting a content-based methodology (SQ17). Course activities reinforced these beliefs.

There were changes in the way STs perceived some issues at the beginning and at the end of the course. Miller (2009) acknowledges the

changing nature of teachers' beliefs as a result of classroom work and discussion. The benefits of keeping a journal became evident (SQ2). Regarding the best time to learn a language (SQ4), participants initially agreed that it was best to learn a foreign language during childhood; however, only 50% chose that option in the FS. With regard to peer correction (SQ6), answers in the FS showed a more favorable attitude. Answers to SQ7 suggested STs started distancing themselves from the notion that L2 learning was synonymous to rot repetition. The role of the native language in SLA is seen as less influential (SQ9); the centrality of grammar is doubted (SQ10), and so is the value of controlled practice for

Table 1. Survey Analysis

SQN	Type of belief regarding SLA issues	PC
SQ1	Importance of devoting time to reflection on what has been learned	N
SQ2	Previous experience using of learning journals	Y
SQ3	Value of keeping a learning journal	Y
SQ4	Best time to learn a language	Y
SQ5	Convenience of using authentic materials	N
SQ6	Peer correction	Y
SQ7	Relationship between L2 learning and memorization	Y
SQ8	Value of approaching tasks through collaborative learning	N
SQ9	Influence of L1 on L2 learning	Y
SQ10	Central role of grammar	Y
SQ11	Value of controlled practice for language learning	Y
SQ12	Error fossilization and feedback	Y
SQ13	Importance of language exposure and challenging materials	Y
SQ14	Similarity of language learning with other types of learning	Y
SQ15	Group work and mistakes making	Y
SQ16	Learners learn what they are taught	Y
SQ17	Possibility of learning content and academic language simultaneously	N

Note: SQN=Survey question number. PC= Perception change. Y=Yes. N=No.

language learning (SQ11). Regarding the dangers of error fossilization, feedback is considered of paramount importance for beginner students (SQ12). Answers to SQ13 suggest a greater awareness of the importance of language exposure and perhaps a receptive attitude to use somewhat challenging materials. Answers to SQ14 reveal ST are less convinced that learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects. ST seem less concerned about the possible ill effect of pair work or group work on learners' accuracy (SQ15). Finally,

participants feel unsure about the notion that learners learn what they are taught (SQ16).

In conclusion, survey answers may be indicative of an emerging teaching and learning theory of participants and document a possible change in perceptions as a result of reflection and course activities such as lesson observation and journal writing. Some possible shifts in perceptions refer to areas such as the importance of reflection; fossilization of unnoticed errors; limitation of imitation and controlled practice to facilitate L2 learning; learning an L2 and age; interference of L1; importance of grammar in language teaching; communicative exchanges in pair or small group work and error imitation; inclusion of vocabulary and grammar just above students' knowledge; learning process. Finally, there is the belief that students learn what they choose to learn not necessarily what their teachers intend them to.

Learning Journals

The analysis showed that not providing enough class time to complete journals impacted data collection as not all of STs submitted learning journal entries (Es) for all classes. There was a maximum of nine entries per participant, although a total of twelve Es, corresponding to twelve class sessions were expected. Each E is identified by a number, reflecting course order and a participant. This way, ST2E2, corresponds to journal written for class session 2 by ST2. It can be appreciated that there are two broad themes: prompts attempting to probe into STs' learning as related to SLA from sessions (JP1-4) and those focusing on their future job as English teachers in Colombia (JP5-7). These latter prompts were supposed to be responded based on classes observed by STs. Scrutiny was based on: 1) the number and clarity of prompts to elicit reflection, 2) the degree of exploration of underlying issues and 3) the identification of STs' beliefs that could reveal aspects of their philosophy of L2 teaching and learning.

The number and clarity of prompts to elicit reflection were essentially appropriate. Providing seven prompts to explore what STs had learned about SLA facilitated reflection. Table 2 presents ST8E2' reflection and it illustrates how prompts facilitated a shift from a learner perspective to that of a future teacher. To enhance appreciation of ST2's voice no corrections have been made to the excerpt.

Clarity of prompts JP5 and JP7, however, was not appreciated. At first, they may seem repetitive; yet, they aimed to explore different aspects. JP5 sought to facilitate focus on the analysis of topics and to, hopefully, aid STs to surpass a possible tendency for just enumerating them, while the latter, proposed examination of the conditions and characteristics of the local context. Explicitness of these prompts became blurred as STs could not carry out the compulsory observation of classes in local schools scheduled as part of practicum due to institutional challenges. As a result reflection elicited by these prompts was of a very general nature. Reformulation would have been desirable. Table 3 illustrates the difficulty with JP5 and JP7 observed in ST8E1. Table 4 with excerpts from ST8E1' journal shows lack of clarity remained for the following session.

Table 2. Sample for the Analysis of the Prompts taken from ST2E2

PT	Prompt & Reflection
PL	**JP1. Describe … what you learned today**
	I learned the way to facilitate my reading comprehension by reading first the headings and the words that stand out to make me see a global view.
	JP2. Inform… what it meant both as an L2 learner and as a student teacher
	That's very important to me because I can understand better and organize my ideas when I study and when I was a teacher I will learn this, to help them to study in the best way.
	JP3. Confront … explain how you came to think this way
	I have read the copies about "Explaining second language learning" and after study this subject in class I read again the copies and I can understand them better.
	JP4. Reconstruct … how you might do things differently.
	Now I take into account what I learned when I am going to read something.
PT	**JP5. What did you learn about being a teacher?**
	As a teacher I have to try helping my students by teaching this tool for a better reading comprehension
	JP6. What did you learn about the process of learning English?
	I learned that if I want to study efficiently I have to apply this technique
	JP7. What did you learn about being a teacher in Barranquilla?
	Being a teacher in Barranquilla is not easy because some students don't know how to do a good reading, that's why they can hardly understand when they read.

Note: PT= Prompt type. PL=Prompt for learning. PT= Prompt for teaching

Table 3. Illustration of difficulty with JP5 and JP7 observed in ST8E1

JP	Reflection
5	Acerca de ser profesor aprendí que un profesor necesita conocer mucho sobre su profesión, conocer las teorías sobre currículo, métodos de investigación, sobre teaching and learning, un profesor (debe) profundizar todo lo relacionado a las asignaturas que pretende enseñar. Y desarrollar estrategias que le permitan ser eficaz en su trabajo.
7	No recuerdo (haber) tratado este tema en clase. Pero, bueno, yo pienso que uno debe prepararse muy bien porque en el sistema educativo actual se requiere un alto nivel de competencia y sentido de responsabilidad social. Se requiere tener compromiso y amar mucho el trabajo de enseñar a nuevas generaciones.

Note: JP= Journal prompt type.

The second aspect analyzed in the journals, the degree of exploration of underlying issues of topics discussed in class, revealed variation across the participants. Table 5 illustrates this. Smyth (1989) annotated that reflection is a process in which stages in the depth of analysis can be identified. Findings in this study suggest that encouraging systematic reflection fosters deeper analysis, yet it is up to the individual to commit to such practice.

Table 4. Lack of clarity for prompts JP5 and JP7 as observed in ST8E2

JP	Reflection
5	Sobre ser profesor aprendí que no es suficiente llevar a la clase unos contenidos que los estudiantes deben memorizar sin otro fin; sino que se le debe proveer herramientas que faciliten la racionalización de los conceptos aprendidos en clase teniendo en cuenta que cada estudiante posee sus propias características.
7	Acerca de ser un profesor en Barranquilla aprendí que la ética y los valores también son necesarios para el desempeño eficaz de la profesión.

Note: JP=Journal prompt.

The third aspect studied examined in the Es was the findings about STs' beliefs and their role in giving a glimpse into their philosophy of L2 teaching and learning. Beliefs resulting from reflection on what was learned, both as a student and as a ST include: understandings of processes or theory, awareness of the responsibilities that being a teacher entails, their duties as EFL learners, the type of commitments that STs are willing to make to reorient their education, the source that lead to a realization of new understanding, and finally the characteristics of Barranquilla teaching context.

Reflection about understanding of SLA processes revealed an awareness of the role of learners' characteristics and the learning environment, the need to practice the language, and finally the variety of learning styles, as illustrated by STs' excerpts from different journals (E) in Table 6.

Table 5. Variation in degree of exploration of JP2 by two different STE E2

ST	Reflection
7	Para mí ser un estudiante-maestro significa mucho ya que es un proceso que nos hace crecer como profesionales mientras aprendemos para enseñar y contribuir con el desarrollo del país.
5	Para mí es de gran importancia seguir conocimientos y medios para mejorar mis competencias. En la clase de hoy el refuerzo dado a la lectura será de mucha ayuda para mi formación como profesor, especialmente, porque me permite conocer mis debilidades en mi proceso lector. Todos los días estoy expuesto a leer todo tipo de documentos y textos, aprovechar todos los consejos en la clase para preparar a mis alumnos en la lectura como herramienta de conocimiento.

Note: ST=Student teacher.

Table 6. Beliefs related to SLA processes

E	ST	Beliefs on SLA processes
5 6	8	No todo lo que expone el behaviorism debe ser visto como inefectivo o inadecuado más bien que debe ser un complemento de lo que proponen las nuevas teorías sobre adquisición del lenguaje
1	8	Las características del estudiante y las condiciones del entorno deben ser tenidas en cuenta
8	2	Learners' feelings can affect their language acquisition positively or negatively
3	1	Una clase con socialización y participación es más productiva
8	3	Saber cuál es el concepto de enseñanza que manejo me da una idea de cómo enseñaré a mis alumnos.

Note: E=entry. ST=Student teacher

Teaching is seen in a new light as there is better understanding of the responsibilities it entails: it places demands on continuous teacher education, it calls for specific characteristics, and it requires teaching the person not just content. It implies taking social responsibility. It also requires drawing pedagogical implications from theory. Furthermore, it demands more than knowledge transmission. Teachers learn by trial and error. Golombek (2009) stated that personal practical knowledge has emotional and moral dimensions as well as moral and emotional tensions

faced by preservice teachers become evident in an examination of their personal practical knowledge. See Table 7 for excerpts.

Various resources facilitated new levels of understanding. ST identified course activities, their own preparation for the course and classmate input that pointed to the benefits of learning with and from others. See Table 8 for excerpts.

As for the type of commitments that STs are willing to make to reorient their education, their entries suggest that some students consider teaching and learning as inextricably bound. Participants saw the need to have a variety of strategies that should be taught explicitly in their future L2 classes and to address the weak areas in the use of L2, thus recognizing the importance of autonomous learning. Notice how ST5 expresses satisfaction derived from learning a foreign language. Language learning is seen as an engaging cognitive skill that brings pleasure. See Table 9 for excerpts.

Regarding the characteristics of the teaching context, attention was drawn to the responsibilities and difficulties L2 teachers face. Most answers focused on the many responsibilities bestowed on teachers, among them the choice of an appropriate methodology, the role of the teacher as an agent to improve society, and the opportunity to promote encountering other cultures in the EFL class. In the last entry by ST3, the perception of the strengths of the context, the supportive environment provided in some schools, may be the result of previous experiences since as it was made clear earlier, these ST could not observe lessons as part of the practicum course. See Table 10.

Table 7. Beliefs on Teaching

E	ST	Beliefs on Teaching
6	3	Es una labor muy seria que pone a prueba tus capacidades cognitivas y como persona, que somos individuos que podemos cambiar la vida de nuestros estudiantes en la medida en la cual sabemos cómo aprender y sabremos enseñarle.
3	3	No sólo podemos enseñar a nuestros niños la información que necesitan sino que también podemos crear en un método de aprendizaje que les ayude a aprender más rápido y eficazmente no sólo en nuestra clase y también en las otras áreas de aprendizaje.
2	8	No es suficiente llevar a la clase un contenido que los alumnos deben memorizar sin otro fin, sino que se les debe proveer las herramientas que faciliten la racionalización de los conceptos aprendidos en clase teniendo en cuenta que cada estudiante posee sus propias características

3	4	A veces lo más importante no es tener éxito en cada actividad que hagamos, sino aprender de los errores que se nos presenten.
8	4	Debo tener claro lo que significa enseñanza, para no mirar este proceso como eso en lo que solamente se dan contenidos y en los que las personas se forman, teniendo en cuenta más que la práctica, lo teórico.

Note: E=Entry. ST= Student teacher.

Table 8. Beliefs in Relation to Cooperative Work

E	ST	Beliefs associated to collaborative learning
1	1	Me doy cuenta de la importancia de la elaboración de las herramientas que faciliten el aprendizaje quizás esto entre en la didáctica que utiliza el profesor. Soy consciente que utilizando métodos y estrategias de estudio podemos mejorar nuestra manera de aprende
4	4	Luego de muchas actividades con mis compañeros y mi profesora, pude comprender de manera más clara y precisa todo lo aprendido en clase, despejando de esta manera todas las dudas que en algún momento tuve.
8	4	Comprendí que no debo aprender para mí sola, sino que por el contrario, debo dejarme enseñar por los demás, ya que a veces son las otras personas las que nos ayudan a entender los aspectos que a nosotros nos son difíciles de entender
1	6	Aprendí estrategias que mis compañeros usan cuando leen libros académicos.
4	6	Estoy aprendiendo a mostrar mi punto de vista ya apropiarme más de la clase

Note: E=Entry. ST= Student teacher.

Table 9. Beliefs on Continuous Development

E	ST	Beliefs associated to continuous development and learning
8	3	Al sacar mis conclusiones de lo que aprendí en clase, he cambiado mi forma de ver la enseñanza y aprendizaje de los idiomas extranjeros, ya que no es sólo llegar a un salón de clases y enseñar cómo conjugar los verbos. La enseñanza es un proceso amplio que abarca muchos temas y por esto es que hay tantos estudios de cómo enseñar y aprender idiomas. Lo que haré diferente será modificar mi modo de estudio influenciándolo con lo mejor de estas dos teorías y encaminar el proceso de enseñanza para el futuro.
5	3	A partir de lo que aprendí haré algunos cambios en mi método de aprendizaje en idiomas extranjeros, estaré más pendiente en cuanto a traducción se trata para no cometer transferencias negativas en L2, y practicar aún más la estructura gramatical del idioma que deseo aprender
4	2	(It) is better understand what I study instead of memorizing and repeating
3	6	Debo seguir practicando la pronunciación

| 8 | 3 | Saber cuál es el concepto de enseñanza que manejo me da una idea de cómo enseñaré a mis alumnos. |
| 1 | 5 | Es satisfactorio saber que todos los días aprenderé algo nuevo. |

Note: E=Entry. ST= Student teacher.

Table 10. Beliefs Associated to Context

E	ST	Perception on being an English teacher in Barranquilla
8	4	Aprendí que ser profesor en Barranquilla es un trabajo que demanda mucho sacrificio y esfuerzo personal. Es una labor que no debe mirar la falta de recursos o las limitaciones de todo tipo, sino que debe propender por el mejoramiento de la sociedad en general
8	6	Más que todo aprendí que en Barranquilla hay que formar mentalidad, alumnos que se sientan seguros y que respondan a las necesidades de nuestro diario vivir en la ciudad, para ello es importante sembrar en ellos confianza, pero también enseñarles a ser independientes y decididos
8	8	Saber cuál es el concepto de enseñanza que manejo me da una idea de cómo enseñaré a mis alumnos.
4	3	Buen ambiente en algunos colegios.

Note: E=Entry. ST= Student teacher.

In conclusion, findings support the use of reflection as a valuable strategy to document STs' beliefs about SLA. Learning journal entries revealed perceptions about the role and responsibilities of EFL teachers, and about their own learning process. While it became difficult to prove a change in beliefs since there was no initial statement of those beliefs in the journals, the reflective writing provided valuable information about the impact of course materials and class activities to raise STs' awareness of their perceptions on SLA and on their philosophy of teaching. Realization of the role of teachers as social agents to promote changes that affect learners' life is significant at this stage of their education. Had it not been for the reflection journal those perceptions would probably have gone undetected.

Journal entries portrayed participants that displayed Dewey's open-mindedness or the commitment to consider different perspectives, wholeheartedness or the determination to make significant changes (Yost et al., 2000). Reflection Es showed empowered STs that formulated long-term goals for their practice as they gained clarity about the different roles of teacher and learner (Giovannelli, 2003).

Lesson Observation

Due to institutional inconveniences regarding the requirement of observing lessons as part of their practicum, STs were assigned the task of observing at least one lesson focusing their attention on error correction. However, only five STs completed the assignment. According to reports, errors were due to pronunciation problems or vocabulary choice. Other problematic areas were word order and spelling. Their reports pinpoint to the preponderance STs assign to accuracy instead of fluency. Most STs considered that the teacher's view on L2 teaching was essentially of the communicative nature of language though. Comments made about insights gained through the observation of error correction focused on the encouragement of self-correction or the lack of it. Excerpts taken from two STs' report are included: "I feel all mistakes were corrected appropriately by the teacher. She gave learners the opportunity to self-correct and practice the right form." (ST3) and "I think there was no time for self-correction. It looked as if the teacher was the only one who corrected the mistakes." (ST6).

Despite being just one isolated assignment, reports offered valuable information about how these STs might approach the treatment of errors in their soon-to-start teaching practicum. Obviously, more class observation tasks should be provided and perhaps a wider range of options as to the focus of the observation should be discussed with the class. The problems to make arrangements for a class observation needed to be taken into consideration by the course instructor before assigning the task.

CONCLUSION

The study sought to explore the power of reflection as a strategy to promote a better understanding of SLA theory, to identify perceptions held by participants about EFL learning and teaching and to find out if class instruction had had an effect on those beliefs.

Learning journals documented the value of reflection to enable participants to become aware of their beliefs about SLA and their responsibility as L2 learners and as EFL STs. Reflective writing and the report on class observation provided valuable information about the

specific knowledge base needed to inform teacher preparation (Cloud, 2005). It also offered feedback about course materials and activities. They highlighted the significance of helping students to establish connections between theory and praxis.

In face of the difficulties faced by the researcher including, the limitations of prompts, the organization of observation instances, the challenges of public universities, it is clear that more and better instruments and techniques will be necessary in future studies.

The experience here described depicts the long way ahead for the researcher in terms of designing better instruments and finding other sources of information; thinking about new prompts to aid the reflecting process for future students within similar course; writing proposals so that education programs adopt journals as inherent for the education of educators-to-be; sharing experience with other faculty; contacting subjects before they graduate to see how much their set of beliefs in relation to SLA issues and being a teacher in the context has changed as result of more courses or practicum experience.

The researcher appreciated feedback gained from journals to identify areas that needed clarification and to pinpoint course activities necessary to facilitate the processes of conceptualization and operationalization of the knowledge base in teacher education (Snow, 2005). Strategic learning should be greatly emphasized in all the Program courses in order to foster autonomy. Practical implications about pedagogy in Universidad del Atlántico classrooms underscored the importance of designing course activities that enable STs to articulate and examine their own thinking about teaching and their roles as teachers (Kane et al., 2004). Further studies would be desirable to document the role of reflection and the connections these participants make between theory and practice once they begin teaching practice.

Course activities such as the inclusion of frequent class discussions to share perceptions to clarify ideas and to gain awareness of beliefs and the writing of their reflections enabled participants not only to regard classmates and themselves as a valid source of knowledge, but also to improve command of English (Crookes, 2008). The use of reflective writings allowed documentation of participants' awareness of their role to bring about change in students' lives, thus confirming that personal practical knowledge has a moral and emotional dimension as well

(Golombek, 2009). They formulated professional goals that included continuous teacher education and the need to improve pedagogical competences. Comments were made that acknowledged benefiting from the construction of knowledge with and from others (Kane et al., 2004). González (2007) addressed the importance of academic communities to gain professional needs of self-esteem and self-realization. It may be that after recognizing the benefits of pondering ideas with others these participants have become more enthusiastic about setting up communities of learning. However, a follow up research would be advisable.

Promoting reflection proved to be a valuable strategy to gain access to STs' perceptions. Thus, experience falls more into a focus on teacher education than into teacher training (Freeman, 2009) as they seemed to have moved from the immediate challenges of learning the tricks of a language-learning-teaching framework to a more complex view of teaching where teachers are agents of social change who want to impact learners' life and not just teach the foreign language (González, 2007). The study identified their beliefs in the need for lifelong continuous learning. For the researcher it has been one step in the forth and back continuum of practice and learning about class research.

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SOBRE LA AUTORA

Luz Janeth Hernández Peña

M.A. in Linguistics (American University). Full time professor of Second Language Acquisition and English at Universidad del Atlántico School of Education. Member of the research group CELIKUD.

Correo electrónico: luzhernandez@mail.uniatlantico.edu.co; lujahernandez@yahoo.com