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Reclaiming the Colombian English Language Teaching Field to Sow the Seeds of Change Through Self-Study

Recuperando el campo de la educación en enseñanza del inglés en Colombia para sembrar semillas de cambio a través de un autoestudio

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A growing interest in teacher identity and decision-making has emerged in language teaching; however, studies where English language teaching (ELT) educators reflect on their own practice are limited. We engaged in a self-study to understand how our experiences influenced our ELT educator identity at a public university in Colombia. A constructivist paradigm enabled us to focus on intra and interpersonal reflection as we created artifacts and met to discuss our teaching experiences. Using collaborative analysis, we developed our main themes represented by a red poppy. Based on the findings, our teaching identity is shaped by our families and teachers (roots), teaching misconceptions (leaves), new teaching experiences (new blossoms), other identities (petals), world views about education (cotton soul), and social justice agenda (seeds of change).

Keywords: English language teaching education, self-study, teacher identity, teaching experiences

En la enseñanza del inglés, ha crecido el interés por la identidad y la toma de decisiones del docente; sin embargo, son limitados los estudios en los que los docentes reflexionan sobre sus propias prácticas. Desarrollamos un autoestudio para comprender cómo nuestras experiencias influyen en nuestra identidad como docentes de inglés en una universidad pública colombiana. El paradigma constructivista favoreció nuestra reflexión intra e interpersonal, creando artefactos y discutiendo experiencias de enseñanza. Propusimos categorías principales representadas en una amapola roja, para lo cual empleamos el análisis colaborativo. Los hallazgos revelan que nuestra identidad docente está conformada por familias y profesores (raíces), concepciones erradas de la enseñanza (hojas), nuevas experiencias docentes (flores), otras identidades (pétalos), percepciones de la educación (alma de algodón) y una agenda de justicia social (semillas de cambio).

Palabras clave: autoestudio, experiencias docentes, identidad docente, programa de enseñanza del inglés

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Introduction

Kumaravadivelu (2003) described three different teachers: (a) the *technician* passes on information to students; (b) the *reflective practitioner* examines their classroom, positionality, sociocultural context, and actions; and (c) the *transformative intellectual* understands social, political, and cultural power dynamics and how they affect the classroom while striving for equity with students.

We situate the current study within the Colombian context. Historically, Colombian ELT educators have been seen through a deficit lens that positions them as technicians. Deficit views were strengthened in the early 2000s when the Colombian government, aided by the British Council, administered two tests that measured English language educators' proficiency and pedagogical/content knowledge. The results showed that only 1.8 % of teachers had an advanced level of English (Usma Wilches, 2009). Though the tests lacked reliability and validity (Correa & Usma Wilches, 2013), the results were used to establish the British Council as the official consultant to the Colombian Ministry of Education (Ramos Holguín, 2019). More than 20 years have passed, but Colombian English teachers remain under deficit frameworks due to language policies that favor native speakerism (González-Moncada, 2021).

Preparing future Colombian English language teachers requires professional development programs to reconsider the technician role imposed by a deficit lens. Ramos Holguín (2019) argues that Colombian language education programs see future language teachers as part of a sociocultural context; thereby, those programs tend to focus on holistic pedagogies. However, the same programs must prepare future teachers to meet a C1 English level (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). Ramos Holguín says: "The validation of only one type of knowledge is seen in the insistence to develop only one type of research project (action research), leaving behind other methodologies and knowledges that could benefit our communities" (p. 72, our translation). Though university programs strive to prepare future ELT teachers for the demands of the field, decolonial research methodologies and critical reflection that center teachers' and communities' identities and agency as valid ways of knowing and being are dire in the Colombian ELT field.

Clavijo (2016) advocates for the use of the self-study methodology in the Colombian ELT field. She argues that "self-study research is a fairly new approach to teacher research that views teachers as reflective practitioners and focuses on the critical examination of one's own practice" (p. 7). Through reflection, self-study challenges "inherited beliefs on the status of knowledge and practice" (p. 8) while expanding our understanding of English language teaching and learning. The current study brings together four ELT educators working in a School of Languages department at a Colombian public university. As newcomers to the department, it was necessary to explore our identities to understand who we are and what we stand for as educators of future ELT teachers. We asked: What do our experiences reveal about who we are as teachers in a language education program at a public university in Colombia? Through our reflections, we discovered the multiple labels placed on us by the institution and other external actors through a deficit lens and the ways we have pushed back to name who we are. We metaphorically take back the field while nurturing existing literature on self-study in Colombia, providing an example for future ELT educators to liberate themselves from deficit lenses and sow their seeds of change.

Positionality

We identify as four ELT women educators, a term we use to describe our role in preparing future ELT teachers. Paula, Julieth, and Sonia grew up in three different towns in Boyacá, Colombia. Anna grew up on the East Coast of the U.S. and currently resides in Northern California. We met in a master's in language teaching program where Anna was the professor, and

Paula, Julieth, and Sonia were MA students. When we started this self-study, we had all recently started working in a School of Languages department. Anna started in 2019; Paula, Julieth, and Sonia joined in 2021. Initially, we shared a common interest in being self-reflective practitioners and found that our research interests aligned with social justice practices. Hence, we were driven to self-study methodology because we believe that ELT educators shape and are shaped by their communities. Our work is rooted in transformative justice and liberation, which includes reflecting on ourselves to keep each other accountable.

Theoretical Foundations

Identity

Exploring our identities is relevant, considering that our realities, experiences, and personalities are at the core of our decisions as teacher-researchers. For Morse (2006), researchers must "[reexamine] what [they] are doing and why, starting with the assumption that together we are creating a new discipline, one that will make a new, different, and significant contribution to developing knowledge" (p. 94). Identity is an ongoing, dynamic process that allows people to develop and evaluate their mental self-image within a social context (Chatman et al., 2005). Identity connects to our experiences and interactions situated in time and space. Furthermore, identity engages the meanings surrounding people and their experiences as community members. Therefore, identity construction is related to the sociocultural context, where other identities like gender, race, and nationality intersect with teacher identity (Fajardo-Castañeda, 2011).

Teacher identity is influenced by three factors: individual, practice-based, and external (Hsieh, 2010). Individual factors relate to personal and professional experiences. Practice-based factors focus on subject matter, curriculum, and classroom goals. External factors are present in the teachers' positionality about external discourses on teaching and learning. Additionally, understanding one's teacher identity is connected to "knowledge, beliefs, emotions, and motivations" (Fajardo-Castañeda, 2011, p. 23) and the larger "macro cultural structures intimately linked to the professional actions undertaken in performing [our] roles" (p. 23) as teachers. Hence, teacher identity awareness is enriched by personal reflection and social interaction, often mediated by our educational and professional experiences (Macías-Villegas et al., 2020). In this study, we centered our teaching experiences to analyze our identities as ELT educators.

Teaching Experiences/Practices

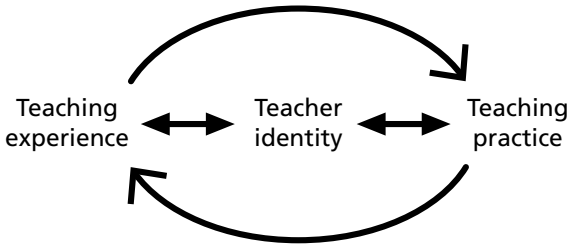
Experience is life-long knowledge, expertise, and development acquired on a particular topic, ability, or skill. Roth and Jornet (2014) describe it as "a minimal unit of analysis that includes people (their intellectual, affective, and practical characteristics), their material and social environment, their transactional relations (mutual effects on each other), and affect" (p. 107). Clandinin and Connelly (2004) state that teachers' knowledge comes from their experience, and such knowledge must be put into action when teaching.

Teaching demands a humanistic approach to the learning process since teachers are human beings, and their practices are connected to their experiences and identity. Teaching practice—the dynamic interactions between teachers and students—allows teachers to learn and grow in their personal and intellectual skills. Khader (2012) defines teaching practices as a "set of strategies and methods of instruction employed in the classroom" (p. 77). Through these strategies and methods, teachers make choices on how to foster students' critical thinking, relay diverse knowledges, and identify themselves in society.

Our personal, social, and professional identity is highly influenced by our experiences, which account for our knowledges, positions, affective characteristics, and relationships with others and our contexts.

Meanwhile, teacher identity influences the practices we bring into the classroom. Figure 1 shows how we see the interconnection between teacher identity, practice, and experience. However, none of these constructs are static as they continue to build on each other in a cyclical process.

Figure 1. Teacher Identity Formation Cycle



Research Design

As a qualitative research methodology, self-study emerged from teacher educator programs in the 1990s as a way to research teaching practices (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015). Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998) mentioned that self-study is inquiring about what does or does not constitute one's actions, ideas, and self. Self-study connects autobiography, history, culture, and politics to reflect on experiences, texts, and interactions with others, making it much more than a methodology: It is a "stance toward understanding the world" (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, p. v). Self-study helps teachers understand their practices in context (Hauge, 2021). Emerging interest in teachers' self-study led to self-study of teacher education practices (henceforth S-STEP), which provides a framework for teachers to collaboratively examine their practices from different perspectives and build on what they find. S-STEP fosters reflection and inquiry in personal and professional spheres, opening its findings to public critique (Samaras & Freese, 2009). It draws on diverse qualitative data methods such as journaling, videos, interviews, poetry, photography, and performance (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2009).

Berry and Kitchen (2020) stated that self-study "has important contributions to make in these times for documenting the experiences and insights that come from radical educational change" (p. 123). Our study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and while we were initiating as new faculty; hence, we needed to understand our experiences and identity amidst these drastic changes. Furthermore, "the field of self-study continues to evolve, and the term itself can be used in a variety of ways" (Pithouse et al., 2009, p. 45). Hence, the following self-study is significant in that it contributes to new adaptations of S-STEP in the Colombian ELT context. By using S-STEP as a political stance to reclaim the validity of our knowledge as ELT educators, we see ourselves as preparing and nurturing the Colombian ELT field for future self-studies that may emerge. We did this work following Vanassche and Keltchermans' (2015) main components of self-study as a methodology: (a) focusing on practice, (b) using qualitative research methods, and (c) collaborating. To this third point, collaboration meant much more than meeting to discuss our experiences. It was intentional care and support throughout and after the process.

We situate the study under a constructivist paradigm that sees knowledge as multiple and co-constructed in dialogue with others. Grand et al.'s (2015) notion of constructivism as a "strategy-as-practice" research stream considers participants' particularities, contexts, and idiosyncrasies.

We collected data during five sessions via Google Meet following Kelchtermans' (2009) five components of self-understanding—self-image, self-esteem, job motivation, task perception, and future perspectives—to develop our guiding questions. Recorded group sessions were transcribed and coded. In addition, we created artifacts for each session that included poems, essays, and artwork. Each of us chose what to create based on what experience we wanted to discuss. Table 1 offers an overview of our sessions.

Table 1. Self-Study Sessions

Session	Guiding question	Kelchtermans' (2009) self-understanding components
1	What are the decisions that made us transition to the School of Languages?	Job motivation
2	What challenges have we faced when starting at the School of Languages?	Task perception
3	How are we coping with family life and remote learning?	Self-esteem
4	How do we see ourselves as teachers in the School of Languages?	Self-image
5	How do we see ourselves in the future?	Future perspectives

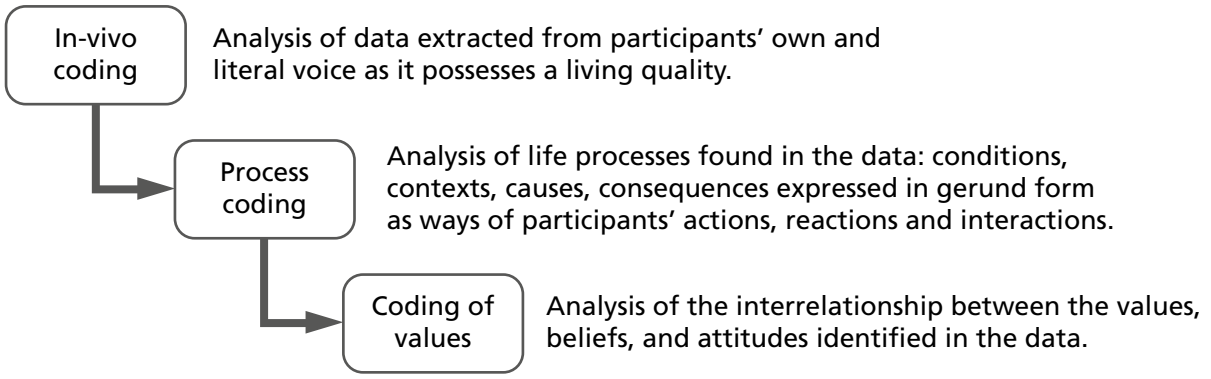
Findings and Discussion

Collaboration is a primary component of self-study, which is why we implemented collaborative qualitative analysis—an approach grounded in thematic analysis with several researchers analyzing the data (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). We followed the steps recommended by Richards and Hemphill (2018):

1. Preliminary organization and planning
2. Open and axial coding
3. Agreeing on codes and developing a table
4. Pilot testing the code table
5. Final coding process
6. Reviewing the final categories

For Steps 2 and 3, we used Saldaña and Omasta's (2018) coding methods, facilitating line-by-line in-vivo code transcription (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Coding Method Adapted From Saldaña and Omasta (2018)



Once we had our main codes (Table 2), we created the flower shown in Figure 3. The flower showed up in many of our artifacts to represent how we saw each other. In one of our sessions, Anna discussed the biological components of a flower and how the roots, leaves, petals, and seeds are all interconnected. Reflecting on our data analysis, we represented our findings as a red poppy.

Table 2. Data Analysis

Colors	Main categories	Description
Brown	a) Our roots: Connecting past events to our teacher identity	Illustrates the way our past experiences have shaped our identity
Green	b) Our leaves: Challenging beliefs	Disclaims teaching misconceptions and stereotypes about our profession
Yellow	c) Our new blossoms: Being unsure of new challenges	References our insecurities in our new role and feeling intimidated by experts in the field
Red	d) Our petals: Reaffirming our essence	Reaffirms our identity as teachers and how our teaching goals are intertwined
Celeste blue	e) Our cotton soul: The human being inside of us	Highlights how our ethics stand out and how our morality drives us. Talks about our health and the connection between our mind, body, and spirit
Indigo	f) Our seeds of change: Our social justice and our students as agents of change	Shows our social responsibility and desire to work and empower our communities

Figure 3. Visual Interpretation of the Categories

Note. Created by Anna.

Our Roots: Connecting Past Events to Our Teacher Identity

This category connects to the various references we made to our families to describe how we saw ourselves as ELT educators. In Session 4, Paula read her essay describing her identities. She referred to herself as "resourceful":

> I learned from my parents to be *resourceful* since very little because I come from a poor background in which my mother always knew how to make everything possible with crumbs. She has done her best to show me that we can let others flourish if we just try to *be positive* at all times.

Paula attributed her resourcefulness to her parents, especially her mother because she was able to make do with little. Her mother showed her that she could help others if she remained optimistic. Hence, Paula's resourcefulness and positivity were gifts from her mother. After reading her essay, Anna commented:

> I think that something we have been talking about and has been popping up a lot is knowing who we are, and here you write you know who you are. You know, like when you talk about your mom. When did that "who I am" come from? It comes not just from my education but from my family and from my experiences.

Here, Anna made the connection between knowing "who I am" and when that discovery came about. In this sense, Anna acknowledged Paula's understanding of her connection to her family and experiences. Both Paula and Anna spoke about their mothers being their greatest support. Paula mentioned, "I will always acknowledge the love for my mom in everything that I do in my job." Therefore, her actions in the teaching profession are connected to her love for her mother.

Meanwhile, Anna began conversing about how her parents played a role in her success. She stated, "But now, I truly understand what my parents went through for me." Julieth agreed that understanding what our parents went through is essential to comprehend who we are:

> Because we really need to understand that when you are grown up. I think that if you are grown without knowing that, you grow old without realizing that, then you cannot fulfill the expectations as a human being because you really need to know where you belong and why you are who you are.

In this excerpt, Julieth emphasized the need to understand our parents' struggles to provide for their children. Thus, she connected her being to knowing where she belongs and why she is who she is. As she mentions, part of being human is comprehending our own and our families' efforts to become who we are.

As the conversation continued, Paula, Anna, and Julieth discussed their parents' efforts, particularly their fathers'. A commonality shared by the three teachers was that their fathers had limited schooling and held blue-collar jobs. Paula's and Julieth's fathers worked in the construction business, while Anna's father was a car detailer. In their memories, their fathers endured long work hours and harsh working conditions. Julieth described, "My father works building houses, and he has hurt his back, his hands; he doesn't have *huellas* (fingerprints). He has lost his fingerprints. His hands shake a little bit because of damage in the muscles."

Understanding our parents' struggles is a driving force in how we see ourselves as educators and the actions we take. Paula mentioned: "I say this from what I know from my classmates in the master's and other teachers, probably, that we always want to make things different for our parents because we know how much they suffered."

The previous excerpt shows how Paula linked her understanding of what her parents went through to her desire to make things better for them. She expanded this notion to include what other colleagues in the ELT field may feel. We point out that our parents' efforts also nourish our desire to help others; as Julieth stated: "I think that is what made us strong, and also what makes us keep fighting for what we got to help others and help the community. I think that is something that we all share."

Hence, our roots play an essential role in how we see education, who we think should have access to education, and what we should do as teachers to ensure everyone has an opportunity to succeed.

Our Leaves: Challenging Beliefs

This category refers to instances when we have challenged imposed ideas on what it means to be a teacher. The leaves metaphorically represent obtaining ideas (sunlight) to create new identities (energy). This category begins with a conversation that emerged in Session 3, in which Julieth shared a poem:

> Walk a path made of bravery
> with this cotton soul.

When asked why she chose the words "cotton soul," she replied:

> Because one of my biggest fears when I accepted this job was that I was too soft. I have always considered myself somebody who likes being sweet. At the same time, I also accepted the job because I truly believe that I have the right to be who I am, and we have to let aside the stigma that somebody who is sweet cannot be a leader

> or cannot direct or deserve being respected or taken seriously. If I think this from the very beginning that I am thinking about the possibility of doing this job, it's because I am perpetuating that idea and I felt like no.

Julieth expressed her worry that she would be taken advantage of because she is a sweet person and would get hurt. However, she claimed her identity, stating she has the right to be who she is. Likewise, if she continued thinking this way and limiting her opportunities, she would perpetuate the idea that a sweet and supportive teacher cannot be a leader. She took a position to challenge this idea with her students.

Julieth demonstrated how being herself is a way to negotiate preconceived notions of the teacher-leader. As a supportive leader, she explored the possibility of breaking down the hierarchies of power in the classroom, which also included respecting "each other in our different ways." Finally, Julieth shared an experience she had at home, where her mother intervened and told her to be a more serious teacher:

> She said, "You should be serious; otherwise, they are going to think they don't have to send you papers. You should be very serious." And I said I want to challenge that. I want to challenge that belief…I won't change who I am. And that is something that I really, really learned at the master's.

Again, we see that Julieth reiterated her intention not to change who she is to fit a societal norm. She is willing and able to challenge stereotypes, attributing her decision to lessons learned in her master's program.

In addition to reflecting on our roles in the classroom, we also talked about helping students challenge societal norms. The following example comes from Session 3, in which Paula discussed an activity she carried out on gender roles in the classroom.

> We believe this is not normal. But it's just because the way people normally think, and that's first the problem…So, I really like the activity because I notice the personality of the student through those baby dinosaurs. And it doesn't matter if it's like the kind of homework or activity that a girl would do.

Paula talked about how she challenged social gender roles with a dinosaur activity. Through these dinosaurs, the students were able to express more about their personalities without being inhibited by social gender roles. In this case, Paula was more concerned with getting to know her students and, therefore, proposed activities that allow for diversity and freedom of expression.

To conclude, we would like to highlight the role research plays in challenging beliefs. Anna stated, "What drives me is the fact that if we want other people to pay attention and to listen to us, it has to be through research" (Session 5). Our imagined teacher identity includes being a researcher because it is how we have found to make changes within our contexts and have our voices heard.

Our New Blossoms: Being Unsure of New Challenges

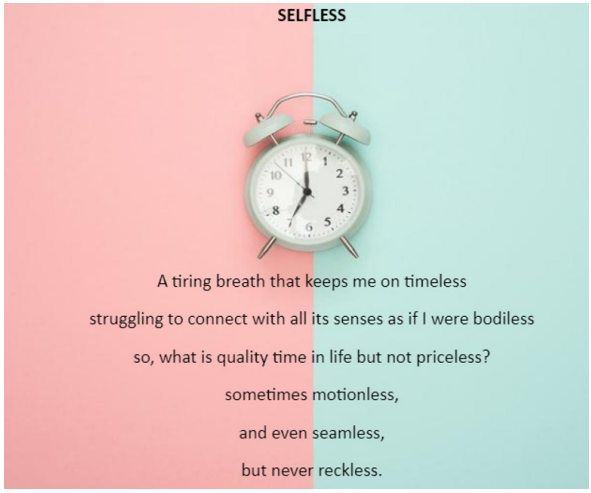
This category encompasses a multilayered view of insecurities and changes as new ELT educators in the School of Languages department. During our meetings, we addressed many intrapersonal and interpersonal issues in the workplace, as further explained below.

On the one hand, the intrapersonal level was concerned with issues we commonly discussed, such as the fear and difficulties faced after leaving our previous teaching comfort zones. We felt more experienced teaching younger learners than undergraduates, but we also acknowledged the need to challenge our new roles. For instance, Sonia and Paula agreed they should feel less worried about fulfilling their new expectations. In Session 2, Sonia commented: "At the end of the day, I have to leave the fears, I have to allow myself to make mistakes, and allow [students] to make mistakes."

On the other hand, we shared interpersonal concerns due to the COVID-19 pandemic and our

interactions with others. During the self-study, we were teaching online. Teaching remotely brought several feelings, such as wanting to be available for students at all times but feeling burnt out. We also experienced sedentarism, anxiety due to excessive foretelling or procrastination, desire to establish stronger spiritual connections with our faith, feeling compared to senior colleagues, limited ability to build relationships with students, and facing disrespect from students' interactions in the online-mediated classroom. Paula read a poem she wrote to portray her body-mind-spirit connection while teaching online from home. It promoted discussion around self-esteem, self-care, and happiness (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Paula's Selfless Poem First Stanza



In Session 4, Paula expressed her struggles with technology and classroom management, exemplified when one student sabotaged her online session by sharing audiovisual adult content:

> I remember just once, one experience of students sharing the screen with content for adults, and I didn't know how to control the situation. I am very nice, and I remember that day I was close to crying because I didn't understand why students did that to me…so it was very annoying; it made me change a little my positive way with online education because I was more afraid of this situation happening again. Fortunately, it never did, but you never know, so it's something you have lost…not authority, but let's say respect in our roles.

Here, we see how negative experiences/interactions in the classroom can, at least temporarily, change how we view our teacher identity. In Session 2, Anna shared her artwork based on a situation she experienced when she first started working in the School of Languages. She stated:

> So, I was thinking, when the student took off his T-shirt, what am I going to do?... I continued to learn: How do we get to know our students? How do we scratch the surface to get to know them? Who are they as people? How do we reach them? How can we touch their hearts? It's really difficult.

When identities clashed, she learned that she needed to be comfortable with how she felt and teach her students to feel the same. She suggested that educators can find colorful souls and touch hearts once they look beyond their students' surfaces. For Paula and Anna, negative experiences led to further reflection on themselves and their students rather than rerouting their efforts toward classroom punishment.

Another challenge was our position as new teacher-researchers in the ELT field. In Session 5, Anna stated, "After all, teachers still have to battle with an image of being less than the experts. In that sense, I do feel small. I feel intimidated in this vast world of experts."

Similarly, Sonia expressed her view about the challenge of being a teacher in the School of Languages department, as she compared working at the public university with an act of bravery:

> Walk a path made of bravery; because I know that, working at the university is like a big school, and you need to do your best. It's a path of learning, you will learn a lot, but you have to be brave to support your ideas and to keep being who you are. (Session 1)

Reclaiming teacher identities requires significant effort on behalf of new ELT educators who face negative classroom experiences and deficit perceptions of their "expertise" due to imposed labels. Such considerations become especially relevant for students' intercultural competence and critical awareness development, requiring a more profound recognition of our roles beyond academia.

Our Petals: Reaffirming Our Essence

This category emerged from understanding and standing up for our identities. Figure 5, a painting by Anna, symbolizes the people who have shaped her teacher identity.

Figure 5. Water Lilies by Anna

> I see myself as the water lilies. Each paint stroke represents one of the many people who have touched my life. The bright white paint, my mother's brightness. The red hues, my students' passion to pursue their dreams. The blues and greens, the teachers who shaped me.

The excerpt and painting show how our identities connect to people who have inspired us. The colors represent the diverse communities that shape us, making each teacher's identity unique. We chose to represent this category with bright red petals, as they represent our strength and beauty in being who we are.

Sometimes, being ourselves can be seen as going against societal norms. Julieth mentioned the following in regard to her emotional self:

> It is very hard for me to remember or to attach myself to those feelings. I feel them. I feel when maybe something like that happens, and I put so much effort in something, and [students] don't acknowledge it. But then I remember the moments when I was doing it, and it felt like it was so warm in my heart, and it made me grow as a person.

Julieth began a discussion on how being kind and supportive led to working extra for others in our former workplaces. Our effort often goes unnoticed by others, but Julieth mentioned that helping others warmed her heart. She also grew from these experiences. She validated her feelings as being part of who she was. Paula mentioned she was also taken for granted in her former employment, and Sonia commented the following to support her: "I think you are amazing. You are very human . . . not everyone is like that. You always give more than a normal person. That is just amazing. It's beautiful. That is what makes you who you are."

During the self-study, we recognized and reaffirmed our identities by encouraging each other that we had the right to be who we were as teachers despite pushback from others. Examples of this reaffirmation come from Sonia (Session 1) and Julieth (Session 5):

> I am going to be myself, but I am going to be also somebody that people respect, and they will see me as their professor but also as somebody they can talk to. We are going to break that wall of power and hierarchies in the classroom. (Sonia)
>
> I would like to continue teaching and learning and not getting away from the classroom. It is one of the spaces where my soul goes free. So, I really love doing it, being in the classroom, learning, and teaching to and from my students. (Julieth)

Reaffirming our essence as human beings and teachers encouraged us to appreciate our worthiness and engage with our communities and roots. In Session 4, Anna and Paula explored a similar understanding of teachers' recognition of their identities.

> And I can see in all of you that there is this recognition. This is who I am. And a mutual recognition of me being able to see you and say: "I know who you are too, and you know who I am," and we are strong in knowing that. (Anna)
>
> I have tried to be a mirror for all people who I worked with so far. I strongly believe that being a transparent person lets me project the best version I am. Something kept in my head is the way I can be trustworthy for everyone since many people don't hesitate to reach out to me for advice. I reflect that being a good listener and loving person somehow brings me closer to all. (Paula)

Our Cotton Soul: The Human Being Inside of Us

We named our third category after the emotions and struggles experienced at a personal and professional level, which constitute the core of our ELT educator identities. Cotton is both soft and strong, portraying the duality of our practices as teachers. On the one hand, we are sensible, which permeates our discourses and decisions, and we face our fears and insecurities without diminishing our love for learning and teaching. On the other hand, we also have strengths, such as our ethics and an unwavering commitment to our professional development.

In Session 1, we talked about the difficulties we have faced to balance our responsibilities and expectations at work with our emotional, mental, and physical needs. In this regard, Paula expressed,

> The last days I was working initially in the university and at the same time at a private institution. I was feeling really sick because I was not actually sleeping at all, like one or two hours sometimes, and that happened for about two or three weeks. So, I was finishing like a month doing the two jobs at the same time, and I had to go to the hospital because I was having *taquicardia* [a rapid heartbeat].

We see how Paula's health was affected by work overload. She expressed concern about performing well in two jobs, representing how our personal needs can be overlooked to fulfill external requirements. As the conversation continued, Julieth and Anna also reflected on taking care of our bodies despite having demanding tasks at work. Anna stated,

> It is amazing how our body is connected to our emotions, connected to our heart…Yes, we can work, we have the mental capacity to do it, and we are good at what we do, no question about that…in my case, I want to finish. I am not going to get away from the computer until I finish . . . But what does that mean? I am not taking care of myself. We put aside what we need to do the work other people need.

This reflection allowed us to analyze how, regardless of our capacities, positioning the needs of others over ours usually makes us deny our emotions and the humanity that must prevail in our practices. Being loving and caring individuals should start with ourselves.

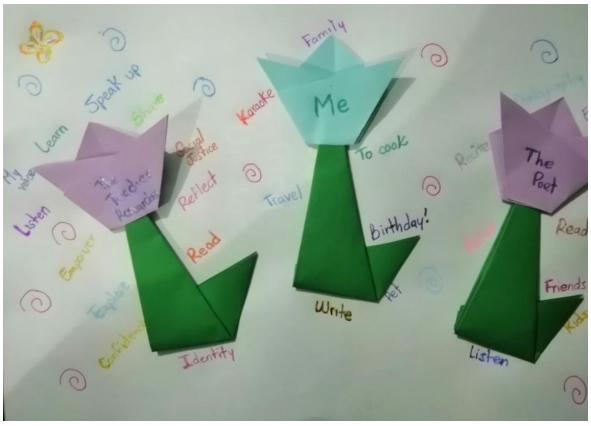
Throughout this self-study, we questioned erroneous perceptions of the ELT teachers' and educators' roles. We discussed how emotions are traditionally linked to weakness and lack of authority. Our reflections propose new understandings regarding vulnerability in the classroom. When Julieth shared a poem approaching the way certain traits of her personality (sweetness and care) have been previously criticized, mainly while teaching, Anna commented,

> Cotton seems pure or soft, but at the same time, cotton is strong. Cotton is forever. Cotton is timeless. It clothes us. We use it for everything. That is beautiful because maybe we see kindness as a weakness, but kindness actually is strength.

Anna's words showed a firm conviction to transform preconceived ideas regarding the feelings a teacher could have. In this sense, educational paradigms could shift to reflect humanizing and holistic research that accepts love, disappointment, mistakes, and challenges as central to its pedagogical goals. As our sessions continued, we considered how sharing that we are being transparent while teaching contributes to enjoying our jobs and building communities of learning that enrich personal growth. In this sense, Sonia shared a text describing her emotions, experiences, and learning in this stage in Session 3: "I enjoy my classes in that way. Maybe not all of them are perfect, but I enjoy looking at my students' homework and activities and listening to their opinions, their comments."

Our identities as ELT educators result from experiences, practices, and other intersecting identities with a unique core, none other than the cotton soul naming this category. Our cotton soul calls for us to embrace vulnerability and emotions as essential to our teaching practice, acknowledging that emotions are part of who we are. As the conversation continued, Julieth shared a garden she made with origami flowers (Figure 6), explaining that these represented a personal goal to establish connections among diverse sides of her identity, which at times were contradictory.

Figure 6. Julieth's Origami Garden



We concluded that reaffirming a personal identity may allow us to understand each other better, create a network of bonds with others and encourage acceptance. As Julieth and Anna stated in Session 3,

> I feel that way. So, we should make connections with other people but also inside ourselves. (Julieth)
>
> You have to have connections within yourself to be able to grow in connection with your environment to be able to survive too. (Anna)

In conclusion, we remarked on the importance of studying the self, exploring emotions, and comprehending our decisions and positionality when teaching. This path enlightens options for transforming our practices and succeeding in any challenge.

Our Seeds of Change: Our Social Justice and Our Students as Agents of Change

The last category emerged from our shared ideas, feelings, emotions, beliefs, and experiences with social justice. In Session 1, Julieth commented that we needed to respect "each other in our different ways." She emphasized that all of us, as human beings, have similarities and differences; we all think and act in different ways. Therefore, it is essential for her to respect each other when sharing time in the ELT classroom. She mentioned how sharing with students and learning from them should be our goal as ELT educators to spark societal transformation. She also witnessed her students' commitment during activities she had assigned related to social justice.

In Session 2, Julieth described the characteristics and social role she played with her students, opening spaces to explore their contributions, power, and voices to the world:

> The teacher I want to be is somebody who starts the path with her students but allows them to discover things and to explore how they can contribute to the world through languages, how they can come to meet the change, to use

> language to get together and discover what their power and their voices are.

For Julieth, language goes beyond its linguistic structures; it carries the power to transform social hierarchies. Through shared meanings, students can come to comprehend one another, leading to dialogue and liberation. In the same spirit, Paula stated that we, as ELT educators, need to consider the social component in the classroom and promote dialogue and respect with our students by becoming "context-sensitive educators, prioritizing the social component in the classroom." Based on Paula's research interests, she mentioned that we could implement UNESCOS's Global Citizenship competencies framework for education.

In the final session, Paula and Julieth referred to the work we could develop with our communities by empowering others and helping them make their voices heard. Paula shared insights on how we could contribute to our communities through volunteering or activism. Likewise, Julieth mentioned it was essential to "acknowledge all voices so they can be heard… empower our communities." As seen in Figure 7, she considered it vital for female ELT educators to raise their voices and "return to the communities." Her comic concluded with a poetic analogy of how loving ourselves to love others could allow all of us to be heard and valued. We acknowledged how education in a master's program boosted our intrinsic motivation to become aware of social justice as a fruitful path.

Finally, we saw education and ourselves closely connected to the role of the transformative intellectual (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). The transformative intellectual sees themselves as an educator and activist rather than a passive technician, as someone who works toward personal growth and regards students as agents of change. As Julieth asserted in Session 1: "Let's start a new smile against injustice. So, we should smile and start changes in society…We can make nice stuff to change the world." Hence, in everything we do in our classrooms, our desire to help others and empower our students stands out as our teacher identity's main characteristics.

Figure 7. How Julieth Sees Her Future Self

Conclusions

To answer the question, "What do our experiences reveal about who we are as teachers in a language education program at a public university in Colombia?" we can say that our backgrounds, experiences, views on education, and future selves all contribute to shaping our ELT educator identities. To begin, our identities are connected to our parents. Understanding our parents' struggles is a driving force in how we see ourselves as educators, as well as the actions we take. Additionally, we defy preconceived ideas about what a teacher should say and act like. For example, we challenge the idea that leadership must be strict and serious. On the contrary, being supportive is one way to empower our students and guide them to develop intercultural stances and critical awareness. Based on how we see the teacher identity, we can also take action on how we treat our students, what we value in our classes, and even how we break away from social norms.

Furthermore, we discussed our identity as a multilayered and colorful composition constructed by the people who have touched our lives. Former teachers, parents, current colleagues, and students contribute to our self-perception as ELT educators. This myriad of contributions influencing who we are diversifies our identities and actions. Accordingly, we identified the mutual recognition of ourselves and others' identities as being unique, diverse, special, and worth standing up for. In this sense, our study summoned a particular interest in social responsibility and engagement that other ELT educators may incorporate to empower their communities.

Our cotton soul emerged as the representation of our humanity, approaching dialogues on fears, challenging expectations, and self-care. We analyzed how the will to help, being competitive, and fearing failure influenced our decisions, excluding our personal needs to work on others'. We reflected on the close connection between our identities and emotions, mainly described here through sensibility, which raises awareness of our students' struggles. However, being supportive has been replaced by the "ethos of individualism" in higher education (Scering, 1997, p. 62), thus affecting our students' perceptions of authority in the classroom. In this regard, ELT education programs and educators should join forces to incentivize a critical agenda that collectivizes and makes future ELT teachers' reflections more visible. In particular, the findings revealed three major contributions. First, it placed our understanding of our ELT educator identity as paramount for our praxis and professional development goals. Second, self-study acknowledges the worthiness of our experiences as ELT educators, especially as newcomers, and when seen through a deficit lens, encourages us to achieve future endeavors. Last, self-study, intertwined with our S-STEP reflections, motivated us to re-claim and nurture the ELT field through decolonial research methodologies.

When addressing social justice, as ELT educators, we must start changes in society with our students. We can empower them to explore their identities, power, and voices. Therefore, our views on education and society led us to define ourselves as transformative intellectuals, knowing that, to bring change, we must work with our students. We invite other ELT educators to pursue self-study to understand the self, our teaching practices, and the communities surrounding us. Self-study with other educators and students sheds light on who we are as human beings in the classroom. Furthermore, it has helped us openly discuss how we felt during our transition process while initiating a supportive research group to listen to each other.

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