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Prospective Teachers’ Self-assessment of International Sojourns: Pedagogical Byproducts and Language Ability Gains

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Auto-evaluación de viajes internacionales de docentes en formación: subproductos pedagógicos y mejora de habilidades lingüísticas

Auto-avaliação de viagens internacionais de docentes em formação: subprodutos pedagógicos e melhoramento de habilidades linguísticas

Origen del artículo

El artículo es producto de una investigación titulada “Colombian Prospective English Teachers’ Travelling Abroad Experiences: Intercultural, Communicative and Pedagogical Learning”, avalada (sin financiación) por la División de Investigaciones (DIN) de la Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia.

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Abstract

Fifty student teachers who travelled abroad through three types of programs, namely, *au pair*, teaching assistantship and work abroad, while enrolled in two public Colombian universities, provided interview and survey data for this mixed method study which privileges a qualitative approach. Researchers analyzed these participants' reports with the purpose of determining how their international sojourns leveraged their language abilities and their pedagogical learning. Results show participants' self-perceived language betterment as anchored in their strategies and attitudes to capitalize on the multifarious learning opportunities they encountered. At the pedagogical level, expanding teaching skills and perspectives concerning methodology, the role of culture in learning, material design and curriculum became serendipitous achievements which hinged upon student teachers' relation with mentors and participation in various pedagogical scenarios.

Keywords: work and study abroad; travelling abroad; EFL pre-service teachers; pedagogical learning; language ability improvement

Resumen

Cincuenta futuros profesores quienes viajaron al exterior en tres diferentes clases de programas, *au pair*, asistencia a profesores y trabajo en el exterior, mientras estuvieron vinculados a dos universidades públicas colombianas, contribuyeron con entrevistas y encuestas para este estudio mixto con énfasis cualitativo. Los investigadores analizaron los reportes de los participantes con el propósito de establecer cómo sus viajes enriquecieron sus habilidades lingüísticas y aprendizaje pedagógico. Los resultados muestran que la percepción de los participantes respecto a su mejoramiento en inglés se relaciona con sus estrategias y actitudes para aprovechar las múltiples oportunidades que encontraron. A nivel pedagógico, ampliar sus habilidades de enseñanza y sus perspectivas en relación con las metodologías, el papel de la cultura en el aprendizaje, el diseño de materiales y el currículo se convirtieron en logros fortuitos basados en su relación con sus mentores y su participación en varios escenarios pedagógicos.

Palabras clave: intercambio estudiantil; viajes al extranjero; inglés como lengua extranjera; aprendizaje pedagógico; desarrollo de habilidad lingüística

Resumo

Cinquenta futuros professores que viajaram para o exterior em três diferentes tipos de programas, *au pair*, assistência para professores e trabalho no exterior, enquanto estiveram vinculados a duas universidades públicas colombianas, contribuíram com entrevista e inquéritos para este estudo misto com ênfase qualitativo. Os pesquisadores analisaram os relatórios dos participantes com propósito de estabelecer como as viagens enriqueceram suas habilidades linguísticas e aprendizagem pedagógica. Os resultados mostram que a percepção dos participantes no que diz respeito do melhoramento em inglês é relacionada com suas estratégias e atitudes para aproveitar as oportunidades múltiplas que encontraram. No nível pedagógico, expandir suas habilidades de ensino e suas perspectivas em relação com as metodologias, o papel da cultura no aprendizado, o design de materiais e o currículo mudaram para logros fortuitos baseados no seu relacionamento com seus mentores e sua participação em vários cenários pedagógicos.

Palavras-chave: intercâmbio estudiantil; viagens para o estrangeiro; inglês como língua estrangeira; aprendizado pedagógico; desenvolvimento de habilidade linguística.

Prospective Teachers' Self-assessment of International Sojourns: Pedagogical Byproducts and Language Ability Gains

Introduction

A common world trend in prospective teachers' study and teaching abroad programs is to structure these experiences within university curricula. Research targeting these programs in higher education institutions evidences participants' consolidation of pedagogical and language skills (Badstübner y Ecke, 2009; Larzén-Östermark, 2011; Lee, 2009; Mendelson, 2004). Regarding Colombian English as a foreign language (EFL) prospective teachers' international sojourns, Viáfara and Ariza (2015) argue that participants' experiences in public universities are shaped by the job-related nature of the companies offering these opportunities. Colombian EFL prospective teachers' international sojourns emerge as "working, living, and studying abroad." Study becomes ancillary and the disconnection between international agencies' agendas and university curricular platform is evidenced.

Bearing in mind the difference between the more familiar university curriculum-based model and the Colombian circumstance, this study seeks to cast a light upon Colombian participants' possible academic and personal gains under these conditions. Specifically, this research inquires into what the participants' self-assessment regarding their experience abroad informs us about their language ability and pedagogical development.

Irrespective of the nature of traveling abroad programs in which student teachers enroll, research shows that language and pedagogical improvement emerged as the students' pivotal expectations (Badstübner & Ecke, 2009; Mendelson, 2004). In this study, Colombian participants' expectations align with this tendency. However, the unfavorable circumstances which privilege working over studying might determine the extent to which these aspirations are met. By examining sojourners' growth at the language and pedagogical levels, this research seeks to determine the extent to which student teachers' expectations are met and the implications this might have for teacher education programs.

Studies on the area of residence, traveling, and studying overseas frequently account for the experiences of North American and European international students (Allen, 2010; Marx & Pray, 2011; Willard-Holt, 2001). Central, South Americans, and more specifically Colombian participants, are rarely the focus of these explorations, being underrepresented in the literature; consequently, conducting this research broadens knowledge in the field. The following section reviews basic concepts underpinning this study and summarizes related research.

Study abroad and intercultural communicative competence: reviewing the concepts

Even though study abroad programs were initially rooted in academic goals, other interests have emerged through the decades. Currently, various religious, business, and charitable organizations are enrolling students in international sojourns (Cushner & Karim, 2004). Considering the nature of the organizations promoting these experiences, in Colombia, the trend is for organizations to offer job opportunities and, on the side, language courses abroad.

In the case of study abroad programs involving prospective teachers, studies reveal that generally university programs focused on academic goals, intermixing their curricular structure with their study plans (Osler, 1998; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Vatalaro, Szente & Levin, 2015). Conversely, in the case of the targeted Colombian sojourners' experiences, public universities do not integrate international traveling as part of their education programs, despite the existence of International Relationship Offices (ORI) in these institutions.

A general goal of study abroad programs is to enhance students' "culture-based international education" (Engle & Engle, 2003). This

implies, as the previous scholars discuss, not only intercultural development, but also language proficiency enrichment. Considering the education of a prospective language teacher, these two components become essential when envisioning a desirable professional profile.

In the field of foreign language education, Byram's 1997 model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has been broadly welcomed. This scholar associates the ICC development with attitudes, skills, and knowledge that individuals need to potentiate. Attitudes refer to individuals' eagerness to discover the world around them and flexibility when interacting with others, so that there is a balanced reading of one-self and the other's cultural values. Skills relate not only to the capacity to understand cultural artifacts from an interlocutors' culture and the creation of connections with one's own culture, but also to the ability to develop skills and knowledge when establishing actual contact with others.

Finally, Byram's ICC model suggests that knowledge development relates to one's and others' cultural products, behaviors, and means of relationship building. This understanding, which in Byram's model is limited to the idea of countries as geographical boundaries, is expanded by Risager

(2007, p. 232). Risager elaborates upon the idea of knowledge in a global perspective defining it as: “the world citizen’s knowledge of the world and his/her identity as a participant in processes and issues of potentially global scope.” Ideally study abroad teacher education programs should aim at integrating student teachers’ development of language and pedagogical skills while being permeated by an intercultural perspective.

The influence of study abroad on language ability and pedagogical growth: reviewing the research

Research based on student teachers’ self-assessment of their language ability development while traveling abroad do not differ broadly from those results found in research employing pre and post-tests and comparisons of experimental and control groups which have been summarized by, among others, Freed (1998) and Coleman (1997).

Self-reports of language improvement include various areas. Students perceived that their language fluency increased and the biggest progress was made in their listening and speaking (Lee, 2009; Meara, 1994; Mendelson, 2004). Badstübner and Ecke (2009) found that their participants’ expectations for language skills betterment, which ranked listening, speaking and vocabulary at the top were mostly fulfilled through their study abroad experience. Students’ self-assessments in Lee’s (2009) study reveal that they gained awareness about the diversity of English varieties regarding vocabulary, pronunciation, and register. Larzén-Östermark (2011) reports that self-perceived improvement in students includes fluency and sociolinguistic features in speaking, intonation, and the use of informal English. In Kaplan’s (1989) survey study, participants perceived that their comprehension skills, both in listening and reading, had improved.

Reading and writing are not usually regarded as the skills in which the most improvement has taken place. In Mendelson’s (2004) study, these two skills are at the bottom of participants’ self-perceived achievements list. Meara’s (1994) research reports

that less than 50% of students thought that their improvement in reading and writing skills was superior to their improvement in speaking and listening skills. Though in Badstübner & Ecke’s (2009) report participants did not mention either reading or writing as a skill in which they expected to obtain significant improvement, in the end they perceived that they had made more advances in reading than in speaking. Badstübner and Ecke (2009) also determined that their participants did not expect to improve their German grammar as a result of their sojourn which matched their self-perception that these skills seemed to be the least affected by their experience.

Concerning personality variables affecting sojourners’ language enhancement, while in Larzén-Östermark’s (2011) study, participants became frustrated when they failed to acquire a native-like accent, in Mendelson’s (2004) report, students were disappointed about their perception that they had wasted opportunities to learn and their limitations to comprehend native speakers. On another note, participants increased their self-confidence when using the target language, felt satisfied with their learning and less worried about their limitations in Tanaka and Ellis’s (2003) research. Masgoret, Bernaus and Gardner (2000) found a correlation between participants’ perception of lower levels of anxiety and higher level of gains and vice versa.

In addition, factors affecting participants’ language ability development include individual differences (Freed, 1995; Regan, 1995), especially participants’ language proficiency at the beginning of programs (Kaplan, 1989) since weaker students seem to make more gains (Freed, 1995; Milton & Meara, 1995). Scholars highlight other factors such as sojourners’ age, former travels to the country of immersion (Brecht, Davidson & Ginsberg, 1995; Lapkin, Hart & Swain, 1995), experience in learning a second language (Brecht, Davison & Ginsberg, 1995), students’ opportunities, willingness, and agency to establish contact with people in the communities where they reside (Allen, 2010; Lee, 2009), and the nature and duration of the program (Mendelson, 2004).

Reviewing the research on study abroad, several common trends in student teachers' pedagogical learning appear. The first one involves prospective teachers' awareness of similarities and differences between various curricular components of the host and home educational systems through comparing and contrasting specific lived instances in their international experience. In this vein, participants built up knowledge regarding the context of schools, the teachers' roles, teaching styles, students, student – teachers' rapport, the social surrounding, and even the physical structure of educational institutions (Brindley, Quin & Morton, 2009; Cushner, 2009; Lee, 2009; Osler, 1998).

Secondly preservice teachers gained a broader understanding of pedagogical skills and reshaped their teaching and assessment strategies (Lee, 2009). Participants developed more abilities to communicate with others which encouraged them to convey meaning in classroom interaction instances (Larzén-Östermark, 2011). Outstanding teachers' features such as "Sensitivity/empathy, Flexibility/thinking on feet, Patience, Reflectivity" have also been evidenced (Willard-Holt, 2001, p. 508).

Thirdly, sojourners reported transformations of their teaching practices upon their return from their experiences abroad as described in Lee (2009). This scholar highlights that, in their home country school context, student teachers analyzed the feasibility of integrating the pedagogical knowledge they had gained before they actually took the risk of implementing it. In another study, participants integrated contents related to global topics and teaching techniques they observed in their host contexts, "preservice teachers described a more realistic view of the interrelatedness of the world" (Willard-Holt, 2001, p. 511).

Finally, student teachers' reflections about programs' structure and participants' personal drive became a powerful mediating tool used to build pedagogical knowledge from their international experience (Brindley, Quinn & Morton, 2009; Lee, 2009; Osler, 1998; Phillion, Malewski, Sharma & Wang, 2009; Willard-Holt, 2001). Other factors affecting pedagogical knowledge have been pointed

out by Lee (2009, p. 1100): "teaching strategy workshops, school visits and school placement, and mentoring of associate teachers."

Research Design

Rooted in participants' points of view, and a holistic approach to answering our query, the study adopts a mixed method approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), privileging a qualitative perspective (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Fifty undergraduate English prospective teachers were involved in this research. Twelve participants studied in or had graduated from a four-year university program in a principal city. The other 38 students were attending or had completed their studies at a five-year university program in a regional institution. Among the 50 participants, 9 were women and 41 men. When they participated in traveling abroad programs, between 2004 and 2011, their ages ranged from 20 to 30 years.

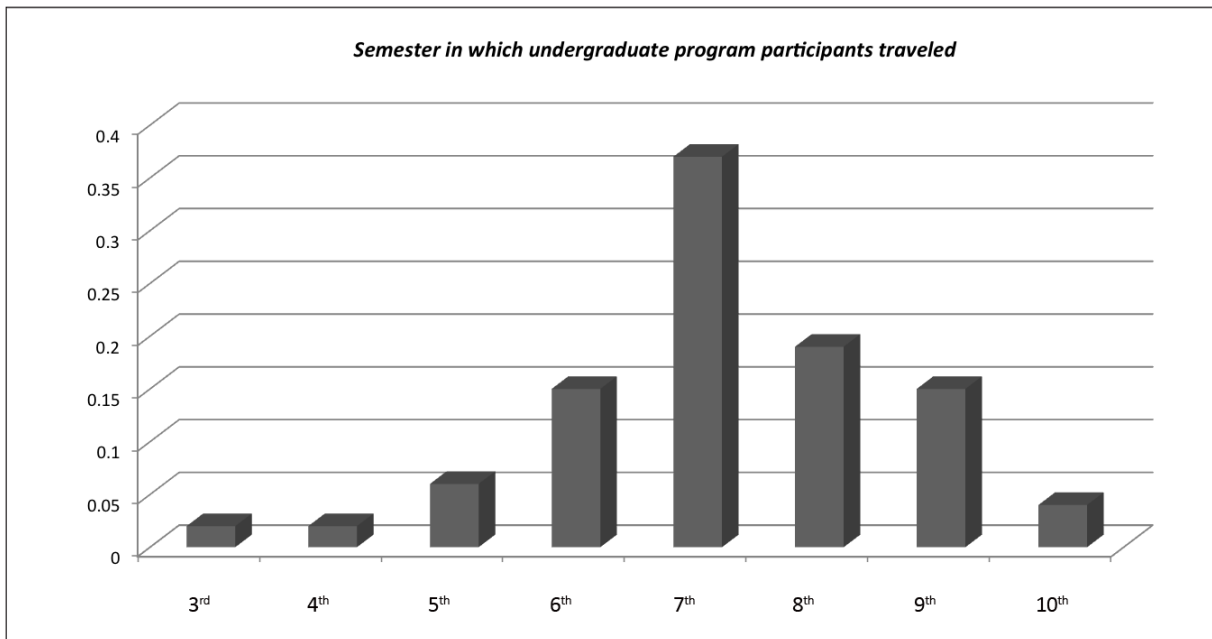
Participants' decisions to travel abroad were based on their own initiative. Universities did not offer any support to either contact or enroll in the programs. Figure 1 relates to the program semesters and the percentage of student teachers traveling at various points during the program. Most participants embarked in international sojourns by the 7th semester in the program, with a significant number also traveling in 6th, 8th, and 9th semesters. A very low percentage of student teachers travelled at the beginning or at the very end of their university studies.

Considering the length of their experiences abroad, figure 2 shows that the majority of the sojourners spent from 1 to 3 years in the United States of America (the U. S.) and a substantial number also travelling from 6 months to 1 year.

Sojourners' choices of traveling programs

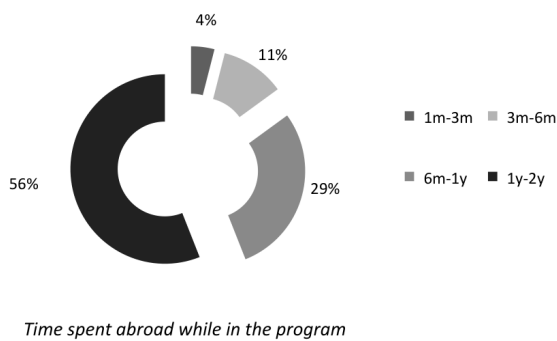
All of the participants enrolled in one of three types of programs to travel to the U. S.: Au pair program, teaching assistantship, and work abroad programs. These programs are described in detail in Table 1 below.

Figure 1. Semester in which undergraduate program participants traveled



Source: own work

Figure 2. Time spent abroad while in the program



Source: own work

Collection and analysis of data

This study gathered data from preservice teachers who were or had been involved in travelling abroad experiences. Data collection was conducted over a year, from 2011 to 2012. The process started by contacting participants who had attended courses taught by the researchers via internet. Initially 100 participants received invitations to be part of this study, and in the end 50 replied and provided consent forms. The table

2 below provides details concerning data collection instruments and procedures.

With the mixed-method nature of this study in mind, we employed descriptive statistics to analyze quantitative data from surveys. Regarding qualitative information, we use grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1998) in order to describe, analyze, and interpret data. Through a constant process of data comparison and reduction we established the categories used to answer the research question. By means of researcher and methodological triangulation, we corroborated the study's findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Findings

Metaphors illustrate the findings regarding what participants' self-assessments about their experience abroad reveal. "Novice Players: Entering an International Language Game" and "Language Gamblers: Learning the Tricks" are the first two metaphors. Based on students conceived as players who move from the Colombian English as a foreign language use context to the U.S. multilingual context, these images encompass

Table 1. Description of the traveling abroad Programs Main Characteristics

Name	Au pair	Teaching assistantship	Work abroad
Type of Program¹	Long-term	Long-term	Short-term
Objective	Daily care of children within families	Spanish assistance for elementary or high school teachers	Working in different types of tourist-based locations
Enrolment requirements	- 18 to 26 years of age -Secondary education degree, -Certified experience caring for children, -Conversational English proficiency	- 21 to 29 years of age -English proficiency -Enrolled in education programs	- 18 to 29 years of age -Sufficient English proficiency -Advanced university studies
Advertised learning opportunities	Cultural experience through family contexts	Becoming cultural ambassadors	English improvement Acquaintance with US culture
Pre-sojourn preparation	-Information about documents required and travel arrangement -Tips to develop specific jobs -Tips about living in the U.S.	-Information about documents required and travel arrangement -Tips to develop specific jobs -Information about cultural facts	-Information about documents required and travel arrangement -Tips to develop specific jobs

Source: own work

Table 2. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

	Survey	Interview
Objectives	To elicit information regarding sojourners' personal background, expectations, pedagogical and language gains and limitations (see appendix A)	To deepen into information gathered from surveys.
No. of respondents	50	16
Characteristics	Close (multiple choice and ranking) and Open questions. Qualitative and quantitative data (see appendix A)	Semi-structured, audio-recorded. Qualitative data.
Instrument Preparation	Piloted with 15 and refined	Protocol based on survey questions
Instrument administration	On-line: Monkeysurvey application	On-line (9 interviews) via Skype Face to face (7 interviews)

Source: own work

findings in connection with student teachers' language awareness and endeavors to enhance their communicative skills. Another metaphor, "Methodological Pieces: Scattered Parts of their Teaching Preparation Puzzle", connotes sojourners' possible gains regarding their pedagogical abilities and knowledge as prospective English teachers. Their gains are characterized by their

serendipitous opportunities for learning, resulting in disconnected pieces of teaching-related knowledge.

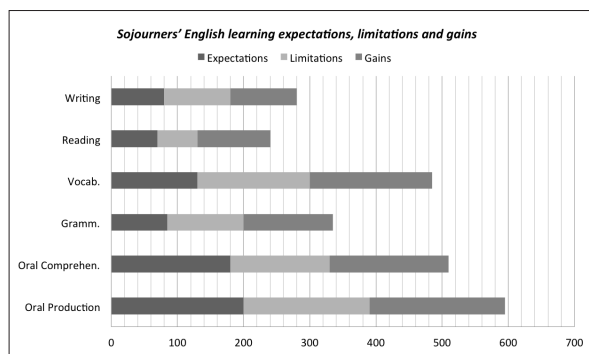
Novice players: entering an international language game

Student teachers arrived in the U.S. exhibiting a specific language background constructed mostly

out of their academic university education. As newcomers to this communicative context, they struggled and advanced in their language learning while they became familiar with the dynamics and guiding principles of language use in international contexts. Sojourners constantly assessed their previous experiences and the language progress they noticed they made along the path through their residency abroad.

Participants were asked about their self-perceived expectations, limitations, and gains concerning their language skills. Figure 3 shows quantitative data describing their responses. Speaking and listening comprehension were among the three skills in which students reported higher improvement expectations and this correlates with their self-perceived gains. These findings concur with Lee (2009), Meara (1994), and Mendelson's (2004) reports. Nonetheless speaking and listening were also considered among the most challenging skills in actual interactions. At the other end of the spectrum, student teachers' expectations concerning their progress in reading and writing were at the bottom. Again, this correlates to the lowest limitations and gains reported as also found by Badstübner & Ecke (2009), Meara (1994), and Mendelson (2004). The next paragraphs share qualitative data that expand upon and corroborate these findings.

Figure 3. Sojourners' English learning expectations, limitations and gains



source: own work

Oral skills: speaking and listening. Questionnaires and interviews revealed that when participants arrived in the U.S., they experienced

difficulties in establishing communication with people. Fifty-four percent of the participants reported limitations in their oral comprehension and, similarly fifty-six percent claimed they struggled with their speaking. Slang, fast pace, variety of accents, pronunciation, certain speech acts, spontaneous encounters, and lack of colloquial vocabulary emerged as common challenges during their interactions. Participants in Ginsberg's (1992) and Mendelson (2004) studies reported similar limitations. The following excerpt illustrates how participants experienced limitations and frustration at the beginning of their overseas experience.

When one arrives to the airport, generally because of nervousness and even because of accent, which is not familiar, one practically feels that one doesn't know any English... When one wants to express himself, at the beginning, one feels some frustration because one becomes aware of one's accent and of the problems one needs to work on. (4, WA, S.)²

As sojourners' stay moved along, they gained fluency and spontaneity in their use of language. Most participants claimed that they improved their oral skills. In interviews and surveys, they self-reported gains in skills necessary to perceive sociocultural varieties of English, becoming used to some phonological features of the language and increases in their understanding of language conveyed through different mediums, e.g. face to face, telephone conversations, and television. Likewise, they could talk in English about various topics with people from diverse countries; they adapted their language according to specific situations, and were able to convey meaning by using speech acts. Similar findings were reported by Larzén-Östermark (2011) and Lee (2009).

Being able to participate in situations that led them to improve was associated with their self-perceived increasing confidence and their resiliency despite challenges as they were also noted in studies by Pence & Macgillivray (2008) and Tanaka & Ellis (2003). As reported by participants in Dekeyser (1991), Fraser (2002), and Milton &

Meara's (1995) research findings, the majority of pre-service teachers acknowledged a substantial increase in their knowledge of lexicon: "I learned many new words in different contexts. Now it's easier to understand anything in English, especially on TV. I became more fluent because I had plenty of time to practice my conversational abilities" (17, TA, S.).

As this participant commented, vocabulary learning was at the core of their linguistic gains. Their expansion of specialized vocabulary fueled their oral skills. This concurs with the 70% of the total number of participants who expressed similar views, while the 38% emphasized that, at the beginning of the experience, their English vocabulary was a limitation.

Reading and writing skills. Student teachers' testimonies related to their reading and writing skills were scarce compared to oral skills. In some cases they commented that they were not aware of what occurred at these levels. At the level of writing 16% of student teachers faced challenges when starting their residence in the U.S. Among the reasons they discussed for these difficulties were their pre-sojourn limitations and their lack of practice in the U.S. which is related to the nature of the traveling abroad programs. Furthermore, the academic skills they had developed seemed to make their performance unsuitable in informal use contexts. Conversely, 12% of pre-service teachers noticed some gains in writing as they increased their confidence and progressed in the courses in which they enrolled. The following excerpt supports this discussion: "I knew how to write before traveling but my level was not good enough to write coherent essays, so I decided to take a course: English writing for academic purposes." (42, Au, S.).

It was hard for me to write academic essays, free essays. I was the only Latina, the others were born there. Then it was hard to present my essay, not to compete but to compare it with those from others who wrote in their own language. (24, Au, Int.)

Regarding reading, 6% of the participants

reported difficulties due to their lack of familiarity with the cultural design and the complexity of the texts. As far as improvements are concerned, 12% were sure they became skilled readers of various types of texts. They also mentioned that reading became a habit because they started to imitate reading cultural patterns in the U.S. society. Finally, reading was perceived as a means to overcome weaknesses in other skills:

I began reading books and I kind of grew that habit. I saw how the girls at home sat each one at a different corner to read a book and I heard kids at school saying "I read twenty books a month". I noticed that people here had a nice reading culture and I began motivating myself, I also need to read. I was always increasing that reading culture. (6, TA, Int.)

Another aspect in connection to reading improvement was, as participants above suggest, the encouragement that originated from their job related activities.

Before turning to a deeper discussion of the second language improvement-related category, we will look at student-teachers' self-assessment of grammar learning. For 8% of participants, grammar knowledge did not increase substantially. Though they were praised because of their accurate grammar learned in their home university academic settings, they perceived that, when they used it in everyday context, it sounded strange and it did not guarantee being understood. They felt that daily communicative encounters did not demand a "proper" use of grammar. Eighteen percent of students asserted that their previous grammatical knowledge was an asset and that they made sense of grammar throughout the experience. This percentage compared to oral skills shows a low self-perception of improvement which concurs with study results from Badstübner & Ecke (2009) and Mendelson (2009).

Language gamblers: learning the tricks

As sojourners' traveling experience continued, they became more skillful in their language abil-

ity. Data collected through surveys and interviews show that they developed strategies and faced diverse learning situations, not only in the contexts where their job assignments placed them, but also in the diverse settings in which they lived. These findings align with Fraser's (2002). Other spaces for language practice included classes and travelling program gatherings. The following excerpt reveals a participant's answer to a question about their language learning opportunities: "with clients not really much, I worked in a restaurant as a cashier and there was not much interaction. I interacted more with people I worked with, not with clients, with them it was only when they paid" (34, WA, Int.). Akin to the previous testimony, participants in Lee's (2009, p. 1098) study acknowledged the relevance of communicative encounters for language ability betterment.

In contrast to the perceived gains that interactions with various people from these rich environments generated, several prospective teachers in our study also judged the contact with Spanish speaking Latinos as a drawback in their efforts to find practice opportunities:

My host family told me: 'it's cool that you have Latino friends who know different cultures but you're not practicing English'. I began changing and I thought I came here to learn English and I have not fulfilled my expectations of improving in a year. I started looking for people from other countries with whom I were forced to use only English. Being a Latino makes a big impact when you're alone and you need a friend, someone to listen to you and who understands you. (45, Au, Int.)

A similar situation was reported by Mendelson (2004) when describing the experience of American sojourners socializing more with fellow citizens than local Spaniards and French in Allen's (2010) report.

Using some strategies at a personal level was also considered a source for learning. They spent substantial amounts of time listening to the radio and television programs as also discussed

by Kaplan's (1989) study. Others recorded new language in personal files and made efforts to remember what they had learnt at their home university. The following excerpt illustrates participants' use of strategies: "After a while, and thanks to the time I spend watching TV, and because I spent a lot of time interacting with English speakers, I realized I had improved" (49, Au, S.). Prospective teachers' own initiative to better their language ability through the aforementioned strategies corroborates findings in Allen's (2010) study which highlights the role of agency in his participants' learning.

Taking courses was important to the process of consolidating language skills as it was also reported in Lee's (2009); however, only participants in long-term programs (Au Pair and Teachers Assistantship) accessed this opportunity. Nonetheless, given travelling agencies lack of sound structure to support participants' education goals, in some cases there were reports of frustrating experiences related to misplacement and lack of suitable course choices:

We took an exam, we passed it and we were placed in a very low level and we suggested to be changed to another level and they changed it but still it was too low and we continued in that course just to get the six credits. (28, Au, Int.)

The previous section discussed prospective teachers' self-assessed growth regarding language abilities. Subsequent pages address their perceptions in connection with their advancement in their teaching-related skills and knowledge.

Expanding pedagogical knowledge: a byproduct of the international sojourn

On the whole, data from interviews and surveys characterize participants' self-reported gains as side effects of their involvement in travelling abroad experiences. Considering the job-related and limited academic nature of these overseas stays; indirect, random, and weak-structured pedagogical pieces of knowledge in relation to

what EFL teaching entails emerged as findings.

Methodological pieces: scattered parts of pre-service teachers' teaching preparation puzzle

The second metaphor to explain findings in this study connotes the atomized learning that prospective teachers developed. Their answers suggest their efforts to establish connections between the experiences they lived and the eventual use they could make of them in their future pedagogical practices. Nonetheless, when asked about the contribution of their sojourn to their pedagogical learning, for some participants this connection was not evident:

It didn't help me at the pedagogical level at all because I spent most of the time watching the kids and I didn't have the chance to either go to school and learn from other teachers or participate in academic environments. (38, Au, Int.)

As in the case of the previous participant, other three (8%) student teachers did not perceive substantial gains in this area. These findings corroborate Larzén-Östermark's (2011) Finnish participants' views that there was no connection between their language-practice in Britain and their learning as teachers. Conversely 26% of participants in our study highlighted their language gains as relevant for future teaching. The relevance of increased language ability as a predictor of good teaching practice should be cautiously evaluated. In the aforementioned study, for instance, Suvi, a participant, remarks that excellent language ability is not a "guarantee for successful teaching" (Larzén-Östermark, 2011, p. 464).

Partial conceptions of what language teaching involves were not only found in the belief that language improvement abroad would assure teaching expertise, there were other instances revealing this tendency as the next section will show.

Building attitudes and skills for language teaching

Seventy-four percent of prospective teachers reported that they grew not only in their way to approach various aspects in the profession,

but also in the methodological strategies they acquired. These aspects broaden their prospective future roles as language teachers. Their self-assessed experiences were not restricted to the teaching of English, in fact several participants had the opportunity to guide Spanish lessons for speakers of other languages and that contributed to the enrichment of their pedagogical profile. In the extract below a sojourner answers a question about whether her experience abroad impacted her teaching abilities: "Yes in the approaches, class routines, and strategies to improve discipline and grading in class" (30, TA, S.).

In addition to the type of methodological strategies mentioned in the previous excerpt, prospective teachers claimed that they implemented procedures to teach language skills. By way of example, several became skillful in using storytelling, which in the case of Au pairs was not only a common practice with children, but also later employed when participants reported their experiences teaching Colombian students.

Concerning teaching attitudes, participants claimed that they increased their self-confidence, social skills, and resourcefulness as prospective teachers:

This was my first real experience in connection with what it means to be a teacher, so it affected my idea about teaching. My idea was born in the U.S. context and when I had to work in my practicum I realized that context was very different from the Colombian one. I didn't know what to do. Finally I adapted and applied some ideas and realized that it was innovating. (6, A, S.)

As described by the previous participant, innovation was manifested in their adaptation of teaching materials, strategies, and techniques when returning to the home country. She acknowledges the contextual nature of teaching and how that realization led her to become resourceful and confident in resolving the challenges that using her acquired pedagogical knowledge from the U.S. posed upon her return to the Colombian school setting. This adapta-

tion process was mediated by student teachers' analytical and reflective skills, as it was also determined by Lee's (2009) research study.

In addition, for participants, adapting teaching methodologies and resources implied that there was a need to reevaluate the significance of recognizing learners' differences as a guide for lesson planning and implementation. The issue of learning styles also appeared to manifest in the connection between theory and practice that a few students could make (10%): "Those were the times when I confirmed what a specific author said about how a child or an adolescent learnt" (15, TA, Int.).

Expanding cultural views of the English language teaching (ELT) curriculum

International sojourns led participants to broaden their ideas regarding the relationship between language and culture. Fourteen percent of these participants reported not only their own learning concerning the cultural realm, but they also had the intention or actually enriched their pedagogical practices by involving their students in cultural awareness raising activities. In this vein, student-teachers' self-assessment of their pedagogical skill enhancement can be associated with the first two intercultural development levels identified by Viáfara and Ariza (2015). The next excerpt illustrates their first level that accounts for the shallowest stage, "Awareness of cultural patterns": "Sometimes there are experiences I remember from when I lived there (the U.S.) and I share them with students. Somehow I teach them, for instance, about Thanksgiving Day, Christmas and so on" (5, Au, Int.).

Other participants considered more substantial pedagogical interventions which would align with Viáfara and Ariza's (2015) second level of intercultural development, "Critical reading of L₁ and L₂ cultures":

It is important to begin teaching students who have not lived the experience themselves, that in real life there are diverse people speaking

different types of English and they have different lifestyles. Cultural elements are the ones that modify language. (7, WA, Int.)

In addition, sojourners' gains at the curricular level encompassed the acquisition of more knowledge about the U.S. and home countries educational systems' similarities and differences. Findings, as the one illustrated by the participant above, corroborate conclusions in previous studies conducted by Brindley, Quinn & Morton (2009), Lee (2009), Osler (1998), and Pence & Macgillivray (2008). The three traveling abroad programs generated different learning opportunities at the pedagogical level. The next section will fully discuss findings in this realm.

Sketching scenarios for pedagogical ventures

The two long-term programs (au pair and teaching assistantship) are similar in that participants in them claimed they gained more pedagogically than those enrolled in the short-term sojourns. However, there seem to be substantial variations in pedagogical gains between these two programs. This does not come as a surprise since the traveling abroad programs had divergent purposes.

When characterizing scenarios as facilitators of participants' pedagogical growth, student-teachers' testimonies revealed that experienced teachers' support in formal or informal conferences contributed substantially to their learning: "The head teacher conducted different activities which were always of my interest and she was often advising me about how to work with the kids and how to plan activities and so on" (11, TA, S.). Similarly pre-service teachers in Lee's (2009) reported that during their field experiences in primary schools associate teachers were a substantial factor in their construction of pedagogical knowledge.

Sojourners' involvement in pedagogical practices was the second scenario associated with their learning at this level. Attending classes as regular students or as teachers' assistants seemed to provide more opportunities for pedagogical knowledge building and updating. This was a common situation for au pair and teaching assistantship sojourners:

This experience helped me a lot to reflect upon my teaching. I had the chance to interact with students whose mother tongue was not English in the different classes I took. This helped to realize about the mistakes I was making as a teacher before the trip and I'm searching for strategies to improve my teaching. (27, Au, Int.)

In this piece of evidence, it is not the mentoring of someone who is part of the students' pedagogical context that triggers the participants' open attitude towards learning; rather it is the participant's active presence and engagement in courses with others that provided her valuable material for reflection through an assessment of her teacher profile.

Other participants' willingness to grow as prospective teachers was their impetus to become language trainers themselves:

In each class I attended I thought of myself as a teacher and I had even been able to be a volunteer ESL teacher in a North Carolina public school. This experience increased my knowledge about the use of new technologies in ESL teaching. (44, Au, Int.).

This excerpt also illustrates that usually opportunities were generated based on participants' agency. All the convoluted circumstances associated with traveling abroad programs' lack of structure at the pedagogical level stimulated participants to search for resources and spaces to learn as prospective teachers.

On the whole, while participation in teaching and learning experiences involved the total percentage of teaching assistantship participants, it only included 41% of prospective teachers in the au pair program. A sharp contrast emerges in relation to working abroad participants, since only 1 of them (11%) reported her involvement in any kind of pedagogical scenario; she commented: "In more than one occasion, I explained other students, who were originally from other countries like Russia and Turkey, language structures they didn't know or didn't use properly" (47, WA, Int.).

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

Concerning participants' self-assessment of their language learning as a result of their traveling abroad to the U. S., this study determined that, despite the initial challenges participants reported, the experience enhanced their speaking and listening skills. Student teachers developed abilities and acquired knowledge to interact orally in the U. S. context using English as an international language. Conversely, some participants did not perceive that their reading and writing abilities improved substantially. Nonetheless, a very small group claimed that polishing their academic writing, increasing their comprehension of various types of written texts, and reading more became the most noticeable advances they perceived. Student teachers' own agency to take advantage of job-related and living-context learning opportunities shaped their language learning. In this vein, confidence gain and strategies usage emerged as crucial factors to face favorable and adverse learning situations.

Bearing this first set of conclusions in mind, a suggestion for pre-service teacher education programs could be the integration of structured and sequential academic preparation into the study abroad experience. To begin with, a pre-sojourn course can generate self-reflective dynamics leading participants to increase their awareness of the type of conditions they are likely to encounter in host countries and options they might have at the institutional and personal level to boost their academic and pedagogical learning. Informing participants in pre-sojourn stages about related research and case studies, and employing this data for their critical assessment of their opportunities resonates as promising preparation activities. Likewise, prior to their trips, participants can be guided in their development of metacognitive strategies, including setting learning objectives and plans, and self-assessing their personal aims.

A post sojourn university program might also help students to cope with challenges they

might face as they readjust to their home country institution's academic demands. In the case of language skills, for instance, we have perceived in our institution that oftentimes, upon their return to their home university's English classes, prospective teachers face difficulties to write academic papers; they seem to have more limitations than students who have not stopped their studies in the program. Not surprisingly, this emerges as a limitation considering that usually writing practice is not emphasized during their sojourn and they report they do not perceive substantial gains. Consequently, pre-sojourn programs can provide for ways in which student teachers can keep their academic writing while they are abroad.

A second set of conclusions starts from the fact that in most cases participants' traveling abroad programs were not focused on their pedagogical preparation as future teachers, their learning concerning teaching became a serendipitous enterprise. A common self-perception among participants was that by increasing their knowledge of English their teaching profile became stronger. Other student teachers who reported pedagogical growth indicated that because of their sojourn, they became acquainted with new methodological strategies. Likewise, they perceived they had developed more social skills, resourcefulness, and confidence. The cultural dimension of participants' teaching practices was also regarded as potentially influenced by their experience abroad. Not only did these prospective teachers become more knowledgeable about the U. S. education system, but also identified their sojourn as an opportunity to guide their students in increasing their awareness of cultural patterns and intercultural critical perspectives. Student teachers' pedagogical learning was mediated by their informal and formal conversations with people in the education field and their participation in pedagogical practices, and was fueled by their own initiative to search for enrichment opportunities.

At an institutional level, universities have a pivotal role to play in designing suitable cur-

riculum-integrated travelling abroad programs. To this end, universities can partner or establish relations with similar foreign institutions to learn from their experience and to structure meaningful plans when organizing, implementing, and monitoring students' sojourns. These actions can create the environment for student teachers' experiences to become substantial, curriculum-oriented, and lasting gains.

Akin to results other research has yielded (Allen, 2010; Cherednichenko, 2009; Freed, 1998), findings in this study should provide a warning to the Colombian educational community against the widespread belief in travelling abroad experiences as straightforward purveyors of substantial improvements in language and pedagogical skills. Several actions, as the ones discussed above, can be taken by Colombian universities to guarantee that student teachers' learning in these experiences is not based on fortuitous circumstances which are mainly byproducts of their international sojourns.

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Footnotes

1. In this study, we characterize study abroad programs as short or long-term based on our adaptation of Engle and Engle's (2003) classification system. Accordingly, we will call a program from 3 to 23 weeks a short-term program. A long-term program lasts six months or more. This means that the program lasting more than one year will be part of the latter category.
2. Through this manuscript, numbers identify the participants; the abbreviations following the numbers refer to the program participants enrolled in: Au Pair (AU), Working Abroad (WA), and Teacher Assistantship (TA). Regarding data collection instruments, Int. stands for interview and S. for surveys. Participants' original testimonies in Spanish have been translated into English by the researchers keeping faithful to the original ideas.

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Appendix A: Online Survey

Trayectoria Personal

1. ¿En qué rango de edad se encontraba usted en el momento del viaje?
 16 a 20
 20 a 25
 25 a 30
 Más de 30
2. Registre el año de inicio y finalización de su experiencia en el exterior.
3. Indique el último semestre académico de su carrera que cursó previo al viaje.
4. ¿En cuál de los siguientes programas de residencia o estudios fuera del país ha participado usted?
 Au Pair
 Teaching Assistanship
 Work USA
 Otro Cual? _____
5. ¿Durante cuánto tiempo permaneció en dicho programa?
 1 a 3 meses
 3 a 6 meses
 6 meses a 1 año
 1 a 2 años
 más de dos años
6. ¿De qué forma la interacción con las personas de esta comunidad contribuyó o no con el propósito que usted tenía al viajar?

Formación Docente

7. ¿Notó usted que esta experiencia afectó sus habilidades como docente/ futuro profesor?
8. Si fue de esta forma, ¿ha aplicado o pensado aplicar algunas experiencias de las que vivió en su viaje en su labor pedagógica? Explique.

Uso de la Lengua Extranjera

9. Teniendo en cuenta las expectativas que Usted tenía antes del viaje en cuanto a su desarrollo de competencia comunicativa, organice los siguientes aspectos por orden de importancia, siendo 1 el más bajo y 6 el más alto.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Escritura						
Vocabulario						
Gramática en uso						
Comprensión Oral						
Producción Oral						
Otro						

10. Con referencia a las posibles limitaciones a nivel comunicativo que usted enfrentó a lo largo de la experiencia, organice los siguientes aspectos de mayor (6) a menor (1).

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Escritura						
Vocabulario						
Gramática en uso						
Comprensión Oral						
Producción Oral						
Otro						

11. ¿Cómo se evidenciaron las 3 limitaciones que usted jerarquizó con valor más alto?
12. En referencia a cómo su experiencia fuera del país se vio reflejada en su competencia comunicativa, organice los siguientes aspectos por orden de mayor (6) a menor (1) importancia. [Marque cada número solamente una vez].

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Escritura						
Vocabulario						
Gramática en uso						
Comprensión Oral						
Producción Oral						
Otro						

13. ¿Cómo se evidenció el desarrollo de competencia en las 3 opciones a las cuales usted les dio el más alto valor?

