

The Role of Language Learning Experiences in Shaping English Teacher Identities: A Case
Study from a Critical Language Awareness Approach

Ana Maria Ruiz Gomez

A thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Education

University of Washington

2023

Committee:

Dafney Blanca Dabach

Lakeya Omogun

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Education

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Ana Maria Ruiz Gomez

University of Washington

Abstract

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Ana Maria Ruiz Gomez

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Dafney Blanca Dabach

College of Education

Research on English teaching and learning acknowledges that teachers' pedagogical practices are strongly influenced by their teachers' identities. Yet, little emphasis is given to exploring the factors that contribute to identity construction. This study aims to understand the role language learning experiences have in shaping the identities of four Colombian English teachers. Through the adoption of a critical language awareness framework (Fairclough, 2015; Norton 2020), this study also seeks to investigate power systems embedded in participants' learning trajectories and the impact they have on their identities. Through a linguistic autobiography, a self-portrait and two individual interviews, this report explores answers to the critical questions: a) how have the life-long language learning experiences of participants shaped their teaching beliefs and teachers' identity? b) What kind of power dynamics can be identified in those language learning experiences? and c) how do participants describe them? This study may contribute to advocating for spaces of discussion and reflection around language teacher's identities in the curriculum of teachers' preparation as well as in professional development programs.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my dear colleagues and participants in this study: Verónica, Hada, Carlos and Simon. I deeply appreciate the room they made in their busy language teachers' schedules to reflect on these important topics. Their engagement, willingness, and commitment to share their stories and reflections made this research study possible.

I am very grateful to my thesis advisor Professor Dafney Blanca Dabach, as well as thesis committee member Professor Lakeya Omogun for their invaluable support and guidance throughout this process. Their work as educators and as researchers in the education field. Their wise advice, kind and encouraging words and examples as educators and researchers inspired me to follow their path.

Teaching Spanish during my time at UW taught me so much about being a language teacher. My most sincere admiration and gratitude to Professor Ana Fernández Dobao and Professor Angélica Amezcua for providing me with this opportunity. To my colleagues and dear friends, Diana and Melisa, thank you so much for all the emotional support and encouragement you gave me throughout these two years of infinitive personal and professional growth.

My family in Colombia has always been my biggest inspiration to pursue my professional goals. I am working hard to make them feel proud and create the path that leads us all to a better life. Lastly, my unconditional partner, the love of my life, and future husband, Ángel, thanks for believing in my capabilities and empowering me to believe in myself. Thanks for celebrating my accomplishments and cheering me up in my breakdowns. I wouldn't be finishing this master's without his unlimited support, patience, and love.

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Introduction, Purpose & Positionality

Weeks after drafting my research proposal, I was still asking myself about the reasons that led me to investigate language learning experiences and teachers' identities from a critical language awareness perspective. More specifically, I wondered how these topics have become remarkably meaningful for me during my master's program and how inquiring about them would allow me to grow as a language teacher. Finding the answers to those questions has not been an easy task at all, mostly because the process of recalling my own experiences as a student has brought painful memories and unforeseen realizations about how power dynamics impacted my access to education. For many years, I blamed my background and culture for not having prepared me for the educational challenges I had to face on my path to become a language teacher. It took me many years to realize that who I was and where I come from were not the problems, but the system which does not create spaces in academia for people like me, people who struggle with the feeling of not belonging, for individuals who see themselves as impostors.

The reflections I did on my educational trajectory allowed me to see instances where power played a role in the opportunities I had to access education. Nonetheless, I still did not understand how all these experiences connected with my present research interests and myself as a language educator. Working on this study brought me all these hurtful memories that were constantly present and did not go away for a while. Yet, I did not know how to articulate them into the work I was doing. When I started reading papers and research on language and power, I initially found many scholars from privileged backgrounds and social groups working with these topics. Their ideas and explanations about how power operates in the naturalization of language ideologies that discriminate against people from minoritized backgrounds resonated in my mind. I may not be a scholar who has investigated a lot about language and power, but I have

experienced the effects of oppressive power in real life. There, I found myself empowered to give voice to people from non-privileged contexts who have experienced oppressive power dynamics throughout their schooling. There I was, a mestiza Colombian woman, first generation student from a low-socio economic background pursuing a master's degree at a university in the United States eager to inquire about power dynamics in language learning processes. The fact I have constantly felt vulnerable, powerless, and excluded from many educational contexts due to my background made the most valid reason to inquire about these topics. However, recognizing myself as a victim of power dynamics throughout my educational journey has also allowed me to see the privilege I have now as a language educator. I now feel encouraged to use this modest amount of power to question language ideologies and foster changes in education through my classroom practices. Acknowledging my dual positionality within and relationship to power systems in language teaching and learning is vital for the purpose of this study.

While developing critical awareness about my role as a language teacher, I have learned that teaching languages involves much more than simply instructing students on how to use the language appropriately. I have realized the commitment language teachers have when not only teaching a communication system made of symbols or characters but the meaning they have for the cultures and communities who use them. My commitment towards a critical language and teaching approach also aims to question language ideologies which racialize bodies and position them as deficient speakers because of their skin color, nationality, gender, or foreign accent. I myself have felt judged by white listeners for the way I speak my second language, English. Judgments on my way of speaking have made me feel unconfident with my linguistic skills and reluctant to participate in interaction in a foreign language. This is an example of how power operates behind the language, limiting people's opportunities to engage in communication.

Many stories and experiences like the ones I have described in this paper have shaped my linguistic identity and made me who I am as a language teacher. Reflecting on the role these experiences have in my identity constructions has given me insights to understand many of my teaching beliefs, my relationship with power and my language ideologies. Along with these ideas, this work will attempt to help other language teachers with backgrounds similar to mine to develop awareness about how their identities have been shaped by their educational journeys. In addition, throughout this work I hope to gain a better understanding about how power dynamics in language teaching and learning may impact teachers' beliefs about how a language should be taught.

Background

English teachers' identities have been a topic of increasing interest in the research and education fields. Studies in the area emphasize who teachers are, on the one hand, and how they perceive themselves in their roles as educators, on the other, both impact their pedagogical practices and in consequence students, parents, and school communities. (Varghese et al., 2016). Due to the dynamic, fluid, multifaceted and changing nature of identities (Aneja, 2016; Varghese et al 2016; Cepeda & Holguín, 2019) several internal and external factors are found to intervene in the construction and shaping of an individual identity. Among the studies conducted on English teachers' identities, post-structural approaches have emphasized the need to move beyond the dichotomous notion of native and nonnative speakers in understanding language teachers' identity construction (Ellis 2016, Aneja 2016, Lee & Canagarajah 2019). Along these lines, Ellis (2016) claims that teachers' previous experiences learning and using languages are more powerful contributors to identity formation than pre-established nativeness and non-nativeness categories. In this sense, to understand how English educators' identities are

constructed, Ellis proposes the adoption of the concept of *languageled lives* which she describes as “the language-learning and language-using experiences that inform their identities and positioning as teachers of English” (p. 599). In addition, Ellis suggests embracing a holistic framework that allows us to consider English teachers’ whole linguistic repertoire rather than focusing only on English-related experiences. In light of this, all the formal and informal language learning experiences English teachers go through are believed to have an impact in the way their identities are shaped, and teaching beliefs are forged. It is under this assumption that all this research study will inquire into participants’ previous language learning journeys.

In line with the previous ideas, the purpose of this research study is to understand the role that language learning experiences have in shaping the identities of four Colombian English teachers in Medellin, the second largest city in this country. Through narratives of their language lived experiences, I intend to gain insights about how these teachers’ language learning experiences have shaped their teacher identity. In addition, this study seeks to investigate power dynamics that have played a role in the participants’ processes of learning languages and the extent these power systems have influenced their language ideologies and beliefs. The present study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How have the formal and informal life-long language learning experiences of four in-service English teachers in Medellín, Colombia shaped their teaching beliefs and teachers’ identity construction?
2. What kind of power dynamics, if any, can be identified in those language learning experiences?
3. If power dynamics are visible in participants’ language learning experiences, how do participants describe them?

Theoretical Framework

My conceptualization of this work is based on Critical Language Awareness theories (CLA) that seek to unpack the relationships between language, ideology, and power. These theories understand linguistic practices as socially constructed rather than as naturalized and fixed systems. CLA recognizes the main role individuals and communities have in determining how languages and their speakers are perceived in a larger society. In the words of Clark et al. (1990), linguistic practices are framed by and simultaneously frame the social interactions and power dynamics in diverse contexts. As languages cannot be separated from their speakers and the social context in which they are used (Norton, 2010), power dynamics are sometimes used to racialize and discriminate certain linguistic practices while legitimizing others (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Through discourses of appropriateness, minoritized people's linguistic practices come to be excluded from formal settings such as schools while the languages of the people in power are presented as required skills to succeed in life. Therefore, it is through the legitimization of certain languages and varieties as "standard" that the status quo continues to reproduce language hegemonies in society as explained by Freire: "the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated" (Freire, 1970, p. 60).

CLA is a pedagogical application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). When defining discourse, we adopt Fairclough's definition: "language as social practice determined by social structures" (pp51). CDA raises awareness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others who are in positions of power. Fairclough (2014) explains that being critical goes beyond identifying the inequalities reproduced by the system, but it challenges people to look for explanations and connections with other social structures. Fairclough's conceptualization of power makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the

relationship between language and power as he introduces two different kinds of power systems: power in discourse and power behind discourse. On the one hand, power in discourse is defined as unequal encounters when one or more participants exert power over the rest. This kind of power takes place in interactions where “powerful participants [are] controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants” (Fairclough, 2014, pp75-76). Some examples of power in discourse are interactions between a policeman and a witness where one of the participants has a clear control over the content of the interaction, the subject, and the relationship. Beyond that however, power behind discourse involves the whole system which reproduces power through language ideologies disguised as common sense. An example Fairclough utilizes to explain this kind of power is the standardization process where a particular language variety comes to be denominated as the standard or designated national language. It is therefore through the legitimization and reproduction of language ideologies that power behind the language occurs.

In the language and teaching field, critical language awareness seeks to question traditional mindsets that simplify language as grammar and vocabulary teaching and normalize the reproduction of dominant practices and, in consequence, the status quo (Clark et al., 1990) Since the final goal of critical language awareness is to empower people to question the reproduction of dominant discourses, language teachers are called to develop consciousness about the language ideologies they are perpetuating when teaching languages in an uncritical way. Only in this way can teachers help students to denaturalize discourses that legitimize language ideologies and work together to disrupt language appropriateness theories (Flores and Rosa, 2015). Raising awareness about the relationships between language and power may also allow teachers to work towards more emancipatory practices in language teaching and learning

(Shepard-Carey & Gopalakrishnan, 2023). The adoption of critical language awareness as my theoretical framework will help me to better understand how power dynamics have operated in the language learning experiences of participants and how these experiences have shaped their identities and teaching beliefs.

Literature Review

Some authors in the TESOL field have shown interest in uncovering the connections between English teachers' language learning experiences and their teaching beliefs and identities. Ellis (2016) investigated the linguistic identities of English teachers from seven different countries. Through in-depth interviews and language biographies, Ellis found out that all her participants had gone through rich language learning experiences in both circumstantial and elective contexts. These rich linguistic experiences shaped their identities and consequently their practices as language educators. Ellis highlights that even the so-called monolingual English teachers (English teachers whose first language is English) possessed meaningful experiences learning foreign languages that enabled them to put themselves into their students' shoes and better support their learning. These results challenge ideas that label all L1 English educators as monolingual teachers. Instead, it is the approaches and methodologies used in English classrooms that force a monolingual framework which leaves behind learners' and teachers' other languages. As a conclusion, Ellis advocates for the recognition of teachers' whole linguistic identities as a powerful pedagogical tool.

In a more local setting, Cepeda & Holguín (2019) carried out a research study in a public university in Tunja, Colombia. These scholars collected narratives of 13 pre-service English teachers with the aim to find the contributions of learning experiences in their identity

construction. Results showed that student-teachers actively engaged in the process of constructing and reconstructing their teaching identities by making meaning of their learning experiences. In addition, experiences navigating their teaching programs made their motivation to become teachers increase and decrease according to the situations they faced as learners. The authors concluded by remarking the need for more research about pre-service teachers' identities that allow them to explore the different factors that contribute to their identity construction and how the teaching training program influences this process per se.

In line with these findings, a more recent study conducted by Buendía-Areas (2020) about the factors shaping eight preservice teachers' professional identities revealed that the intersection between past experiences and experiences during the teaching program shaped student-teachers' identities. This suggests that although the experiences that future teachers bring with them to the teacher's education programs are of a great value in their formation, identity is constantly reconstructed by the new educational experiences they are exposed to during their teaching training. In contrast to Buendía-Areas' findings, Castañeda et al. (2022) identified that the teachers' identities of their two participants were mostly shaped by classroom experiences rather than by teachers' training programs. In addition, these participants perceive teaching professional education primarily as an instrument to obtain better job opportunities. Nonetheless, it is important to mention that participants in this study were two in-service English teachers who had plenty of teaching experience before beginning their training programs. As the authors mention, in this particular setting, despite lacking professional training, these two teachers were able to build a teacher identity based on their empirical negotiations and interactions with their teaching contexts. In this respect, this study contributes to visualizing how individuals who learned to be teachers in the process of doing it rather than in a university setting negotiated their

teaching identities. These two teachers' journeys capture the experiences of many other teachers in some rural and disadvantaged areas in Colombia when they first become English teachers and then receive professional training.

To summarize, research on English teachers' identities in Colombia have mainly emphasized on pre-service teachers' educational experiences during their teaching preparation programs and how these experiences shape their professional identities. Nonetheless, the formal and informal experiences students bring with them before entering teaching programs are not explored in detail. In the same way, not many studies show interest in the life-long language learning experiences of English teachers from a critical perspective. That is to say that studies on the area do not usually make connections between power dynamics present in teachers' educational journeys and teachers' identities. Therefore, this study seeks to critically analyze how the language learning experiences of English teachers have shaped how they see themselves as teachers and their role as language educators.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design given that I am attempting to gain a better understanding of a social phenomenon in which contextual conditions play a significant role in shaping an individual's experiences (Yin, 2017). Considering that participants' narratives are seen as powerful instruments to understand the meaning and impact of their experiences in their teacher's identities, this study also adopted some features of a narrative inquiry approach (Merriam, 2009). As a result of this mixed method approach, data analysis will consist of two main parts: the construction of participants' narrative accounts followed by a thematic analysis of power dynamics identified in the four stories.

To recruit participants in this study, I utilized convenience sampling: I reached out to English teachers who graduated from the same foreign language teaching bachelor's program I graduated from. The rationale behind this choice was guided by my eagerness to work with teachers with similar backgrounds and experiences to mine. This way, I could be more familiar with both the context in which they learned their languages and the teaching preparation they went through. The main criteria for selecting possible candidates were their current teaching jobs and years of teaching experience. I looked for in-service English teachers in Medellin, Colombia that have at least four years of teaching experience in either public or private schools. Four of the target candidates met these criteria and agreed to participate in this study. To answer my research questions, I collected information about my participants' life-long language learning experiences through one linguistic autobiography, two individual interviews and one self-portrait.

Data Collection

As a first step in gathering data, participants wrote a linguistic autobiography in which they were asked to reflect on their most meaningful language learning experiences. To facilitate this written process, they were given seven semi-structured questions that aimed at guiding their reflections (See Appendix A). Participants completed this task at their own time and pace and sent the compositions through email once they were ready. These autobiographical compositions served as a source of information about participants' backgrounds, perceptions about their identities and significant language learning experiences. After having identified salient aspects in the participants' stories, individual interviews were conducted. The purpose of these interviews was to delve deeper into certain aspects that seemed relevant to each participant's learning journey. The first individual interview included three major parts: part A which consisted of questions related to learning experiences, part B which included questions about identity and part

C which was about individual questions that emerged from the autobiographies (See Appendix B). The purpose of the second interview was to allow participants to reflect more on their English teacher identities and make connections with their experiences. This interview included a self-portrait activity which I used as an elicitation technique to help participants to talk about their identity, followed by nine semi-structured questions (See Appendix C). Given the fact that the participants and I were located in two different countries, interviews were conducted through Zoom video calls.

Table 1

Participants' Language and Teaching Background

Participants	Verónica	Hada	Carlos	Simón
Languages they can communicate in.	Spanish, English, French, Portuguese	Spanish, English, French	Spanish, English, French	Spanish, English, French
Language or languages they teach	English	English, French	English, French	English
Years of formal and informal teaching experience	5 years	12 years	8 years	7 years
When and where they started learning these languages	Spanish: home, school, and community. English: In public school. French and Portuguese: At the university level.	Spanish: home, school, and community. English: At home, early childhood. French: At the university level.	Spanish: home, school, and community. English: In public school French: At the university level.	Spanish: home, school, and community. English: In public school while also attending a private English academy since he was 12 years old. French: At the university level.

Data Analysis

Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed in detail. To answer my research question one, I wrote short narratives of the participants' language learning experiences. These stories were constructed through a process of coding and theme identification. First, I read transcriptions multiple times and manually identified all language learning experiences participants talked about during the interviews. Then, I coded these experiences and found emerging categories. Later, I created a graphic organizer per participant that made the process of creating the stories easier. I made sure to include all the emerging themes in participants' stories. Lastly, I triangulated participants' experiences with their self-portrait and the reflections they made on identity during the second interview. Each participant's narrative account will be showcased in the result session.

To answer my research questions two and three, I re-read participants' narratives aiming to find ways in which power systems and language ideologies have a role on their learning journeys. Although participants' stories proved to be different from each other, certain power dynamics were identified among many of them. A thematic analysis approach allowed me to create and explain in detail three emerging categories.

Limitations

While working on this research I realized how challenging reflecting on our own linguistic and teachers' identities is. For most participants, this study happened to be the first opportunity they had to think about how they see themselves in their role as language educators. Although I spent careful time planning the activities and questions participants were provided with during the interviews, the little time frame they had to make these reflections and come up

with answers may have simplified or minimized the complexity of such a challenging and demanding task. In a similar way, although the self-portrait activity was enlightening when understanding the connection between identity and language learning experiences, most of the participants expressed their struggles to capture themselves as teachers through a visual representation. Due to the restricted amount of time allotted for this research study, it was impossible to meet again with participants after a few days to ask if the drawings still represented themselves as teachers. I suggest future researchers working with teachers' identity to supply participants with enough support, time and resources while inquiring about their identities. Activities that target active reflection and personal introspection such as teachers' journals and individual written reflections may be helpful instruments that support participants' process of making sense of who they are as language teachers.

Another challenge I encountered while working on this research was finding appropriate ways to elicit conversations about power systems in participants' language learning experiences. Since power usually hides behind the naturalization of language ideologies as common sense, identifying connections between language and power may require extra effort and time. Perhaps the adoption of group techniques to gather data such as focus groups would have allowed for more meaningful discussions around the way power operated into participants' language learning experiences. In addition, collective storytelling and reflections on the motivations and obstacles participants experienced in their journeys may have enabled participants to compare their experiences and think about the factors that made them to be similar or different from each other. Future studies on the area should consider collaboration and dialogue among participants as a useful component in data gathering when investigating power systems in their language learning experiences.

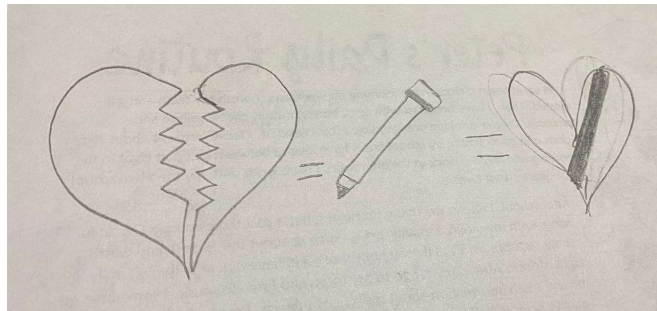
Finally, the fact interviews were conducted online instead of in-person may have impacted the amount and quality of interaction and dialogue we had in our conversations. Participants' busy schedules together with time differences between Colombia and Seattle contributed to limit the opportunities and the time allotted to hold discussions about such important topics: language learning experiences, identity, and power.

Findings

The session that follows will briefly narrate participant's language learning journeys while aiming to make connections between these stories and their teacher's identity.

Narrative Account # 1: A Safe Classroom that Heals Torn Hearts

Verónica's Self-Portrait



Since her childhood, Verónica dreamed about learning English and visiting the United States. She and her father shared the dream of being able to communicate with the foreign missionaries that came to their community to teach them about their culture and religion. Although the missionaries came from various countries from around the world, English was the language they all had in common. For Verónica, learning English meant the opportunity to access information she didn't have in her mother tongue and access the culture she was interested in. These two were her biggest motivations when choosing to enroll in a foreign language teaching bachelor's degree.

Verónica has gone through various challenges while learning all three of her foreign languages: English, French and Portuguese. Learning French and English while also studying to become a language teacher was one of the most significant challenges she recalls. Before being admitted into the teaching program, Veronica had taken mandatory English classes in both elementary and high school; she had never studied French before. Although she was a motivated English learner in school, the English classes she took there, mostly under the grammar translation approach, did not prepare her to transition to English classes at the university level. While she had to translate short dialogues from Spanish to English in her public school and memorize lists of vocabulary, she was required to communicate and interact by only using the target language in her classes at the university. This mismatch between language teaching approaches made Verónica feel misplaced. Verónica felt she was behind her university classmates whose language skills were good enough to allow them to engage in class interactions without big problems. In contrast, every time Verónica attempted to participate in class activities, she felt embarrassed about her linguistic skills, judged, and compared with more proficient peers who successfully transmitted the message they wanted to. As a result of these first experiences in the university, Verónica developed a lack of confidence in herself which eventually led her to believe she was the worst student in her classes. The feeling of inferiority was not helpful when trying to communicate in English since the fear of making mistakes and being judged made her feel reluctant to speak in class. She continued to feel unsafe in her English classes until she had the opportunity to travel to an English-speaking country. The experience of living in the United States allowed her to meet people who made her feel safe, confident in herself and eager to speak in the target language. She thinks she was able to improve her

English a lot during this time thanks to the plentiful opportunities she had to use the target language in an understanding environment free of judgment. She recalls also feeling safe and confident in language courses she took at the university after she returned from her trip. Verónica acknowledges that feeling safe has always been a big motivator for her to engage in meaningful interactions in the target language. A safe environment has also always allowed her to demonstrate her real language skills and proficiency when she was not concerned about making mistakes and being judged. She verbalizes this feeling as follows:

En el momento que yo me siento vulnerable o en el momento que pierdo esa confianza, pierdo todo conocimiento. En cambio, cuando estoy con personas que me hacen sentir segura y eso he encontrado en el Colombo. Yo creo que las jefas son hermosas, te dan esa esa seguridad. Es donde uno, ahí es donde uno le pierde totalmente el miedo y empieza a hablar y empieza de verdad lo que vos sabes (Interview 2, February 10th, 2023, lines 390-395).

At the moment when I feel vulnerable or when I lose that trust in myself, I lose all the ability [in the language]. On the other hand, when I am with people that make me feel safe, and that is what I have found in el Colombo. I believe my bosses are such nice people, they give you that confidence. There, it is when you completely lose fear, begin to speak and you are able to show everything you know.

Verónica sees herself as a passionate English teacher who works hard to create a safe environment for her students and enhance meaningful opportunities to use the target language. Verónica's teachers' beliefs are strongly connected with her language learning experiences. She believes the best way to support her students' learning processes is to create a safe environment in which language learners can bring out everything they already know: *"Yo creo que la conexión de seguridad con otra lengua es (-) O sea, si vos no te sentís seguro no vas a soltar, no vas a soltar ese (-) todo ese conocimiento que ya has adquirido"* [I believe feeling confident in a language is (-) I mean if you don't feel safe, you are not going to come out of your shell, you are not going to demonstrate that (-) knowledge

that you already have] (Interview 2, February 10th, 2023, lines 395-397). In her self-portrait, Verónica drew three elements which are all connected in a sequential line: a torn heart which represents the way she and her students sometimes feel before the class, a pen which symbolizes the teaching itself, and finally a mending heart, which stands for the healing work the teaching has done (See Verónica's portrait). Verónica explains that the classroom becomes a refuge for those who suffer or live in a cruel world, including herself: a place where they can feel brave, inspired, and encouraged to be a better version of themselves. The classroom is the place where Verónica feels safer, so she wants her students to feel the same way:

Entonces yo creo que lo más importante en el aula de clase, no sé si estoy respondiendo la pregunta, es que los niños encuentren una conexión con su maestro más que todo personal, no que me aprendan a querer si me quieren genial, rico, pero de que lleguen a un lugar diferente a lo que han estado, porque no sabemos cuál es la realidad es de ellos (Interview 2, February 10th, lines 149-152).

So, I believe the most important thing to do in the classroom, I do not know if I am answering your question, is that children find a connection with their teacher, a personal connection. Not that they learn to love me, if they do, great, but that they feel they get into a different place than they have been because we do not know what their realities are.

Verónica also believes that providing her students with meaningful opportunities to use the target language is more beneficial than giving them a list of vocabulary to memorize:

Entonces, yo creo que la mejor forma [de ayudarlos a aprender] es poniéndolos a que eso lo van a utilizar en la vida real, ya dejando listas afuera, dejando (-) Osea las reglas son necesarias, pero uno cuando está hablando lo que necesita es quitarle el miedo. Y eso es lo más duro (Interview 2, February 10th, lines 328-331).

I think the best way [to help them to learn] is by putting them to practice the language in real life and leaving the list of vocabulary out. I mean, rules are

necessary, but when you are speaking what you need is to take away the fear. And that's the hardest thing to achieve.

Verónica relies on her own experiences when she explains that memorization of vocabulary is not helpful when communicating in a target language. The list of vocabulary she learned in school did not help her when she was asked to participate in real life conversations. She understands that leaving behind the fear of speaking in a foreign language would allow her students to take risks, try out the language and show what they already know as she explains earlier. Verónica's journey as a language learner makes an important part of who Verónica is as a teacher and how she understands and deals with the challenges her students encounter while learning English.

Narrative Account 2: The Story of a Fairy that Brings Enjoyment to the Classroom

Hada's Self-Portrait



Since Hada was a child, her mother, who was an English teacher for most of her life, exposed her to English through daily and fun activities such as movies, books, and games. At an early age, Hada would take informal English classes with the children of her mom's friends. Most of these classes incorporated activities such as coloring, painting, reading aloud and singing. She recalls enjoying this time a lot which led her to associate the English language with

enjoyment. This positive association with the language remained throughout elementary and high school English classes when Hada always felt confident with her linguistic skills and was able to help her classmates. These positive English learning experiences motivated Hada to look for opportunities to learn more about English-speaking cultures outside of the classroom. As a teenager, most of Hada's interests were related to the English language world: the music she listened to, the literature she read, and the people she admired were mostly from this world. Due to this big influence of the English language in her life, there was a time when Hada remembers she looked down on her mother tongue. For a while, she felt more comfortable expressing herself in English than in her first language. When she was sixteen, she had the opportunity to travel to the United States with a group of young people from various cities from her own country. Curiously, this experience abroad allowed her to connect more with her roots and her mother tongue. This trip also reinforced Hada's confidence in her English skills as she was able to successfully communicate with native English speakers. After finishing high school, Hada decided to study English in a more conscious and purposeful way. That is why she started a foreign language teaching bachelor's program at the university. The language teaching preparation program she enrolled in included two languages: English and French. Learning French in a formal context and at an adult age was a completely new experience for Hada. She recalls the complex and contradictory feelings she went through while learning French. During this time, her French teachers played a major role in the emotional bonds she had with this language. Many times, she felt frustrated and overwhelmed with the kind of activities and assignments she was asked to do at the university. She felt many of the assignments were disconnected from her world and had an unnecessarily high level of difficulty. Due to these experiences, she lost motivation and came to feel incapable of learning French. Nonetheless,

many other times, Hada felt motivated and empowered to learn French thanks to teachers who were passionate for the language and showed her how fun and useful learning French could be. The contrast between the different experiences she had while learning French at the university made her reflect about the kind of language teacher she wanted to be.

Hada, whose name in Spanish translates to “Fairy”, is an English and French teacher who uses her creativity to engage her students and create a positive connection with the target language. Hada sees herself as a creative, approachable, reliable, and fun language teacher. Her experience learning English at a young age and in a more natural way taught her that learning a language can be an enjoyable, memorable, and fun experience. She acknowledges that the positive experiences she had while learning English evolved into a personal interest and curiosity that motivated her to keep learning. Her mom was the person who planted the seed which would grow and become a big motivation to keep learning the language throughout her life. Hada’s language learning journey also showed her how frustrating learning a foreign language can be when teachers fail to make meaningful connections between students’ interests and the target language. Hada’s language learning experiences were key when negotiating her teaching identity and teaching principles:

Yo como profesora de idiomas, entre mis propósitos no está que mis estudiantes se frustren y sientan que nunca van a aprender. O sea, yo antes quiero que ellos aprendan y antes quiero demostrarles que pueden lograr cosas y (-) que no es imposible. (Interview 1, January 16th, 2023, lines 232-235).

As a language teacher, my purpose is not to frustrate my students and make them feel that they will never learn. I mean, I’d rather they learn, and I want to show them that they can achieve their goals and that [learning a language] is not impossible.

Hada tries to approach her language classes from the students’ enjoyment so they can establish a positive meaningful connection with the target language that motivates them to

eagerly seek learning opportunities outside the classroom. Hada strongly believes that learning a language requires a person's willingness and desire to learn. That is why she believes one of her main roles as a language teacher is to create a meaningful and positive relationship between students and the foreign language:

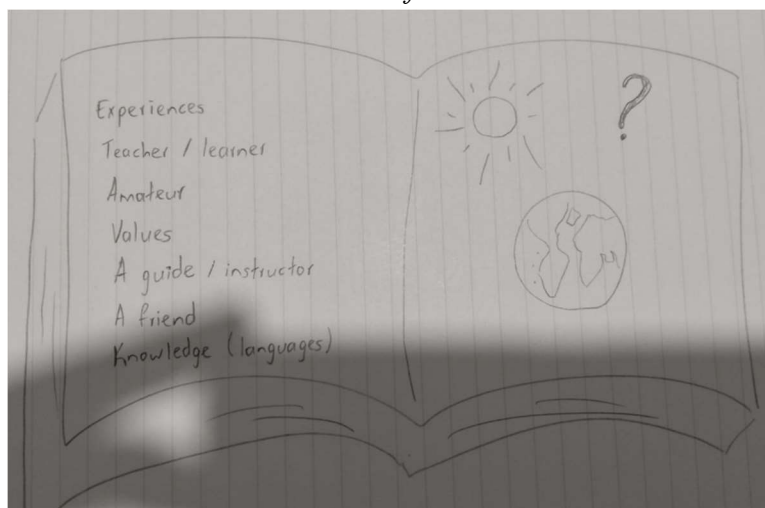
Más que necesitarlo después es como ayudarles a ver que es algo bueno para que cuando lo necesiten de verdad o cuando tengan que acercarse a eso lo puedan hacer de una buena forma, pues como una forma agradable porque entre mis creencias está eso como que finalmente, para lograr aprender bien un idioma, es uno el que debe querer hacerlo. (Interview 2, February 13th, 2023, lines 72-76)

More than needing [the language] later, it's about how to help them see it's a good thing so that when they really need it or when they have to do it, they can do it in a good way, in a pleasant way, because for me, I believe that at the end of the day to succeed at learning a language well, you have to want to do it.

She is confident that approaching language teaching from students' personal interests is the best way to encourage their lifelong learning.

Narrative Account # 3: An Open Teacher Who Works Towards a Critical Intercultural Teaching Approach

Carlos's Self-Portrait



When Carlos was younger, he would help his siblings to do homework and understand complex school topics. His family promptly noticed he was talented at teaching and encouraged him to pursue this profession. Carlos did not dislike teaching at all. He was good with numbers and used to tutor his classmates in math and physics, so he thought he would be a good math teacher.

When Carlos was in tenth grade, he met a British English teacher who believed he had abilities to learn languages and encouraged him to work harder to improve his English skills. Not only would this teacher motivate Carlos to become a better learner, but he would also prepare extra activities and materials in the target language that helped him to achieve this goal. Due to the close relationship with this teacher, Carlos decided to adopt the phonological and linguistic features of the British English variety. Likewise, he developed an interest in the culture of Great Britain that would last long after finishing high school, although he has not ever traveled there. This experience inspired Carlos to continue expanding his knowledge of the English language and culture at the university level while learning to be a language teacher.

At the university, Carlos felt his background and previous experiences helped him to quickly catch up with the English classes. Nonetheless, he did not feel the same way in his French courses. He had never studied or been exposed to French before, so he was unable to understand much of his teacher's explanations in French. Carlos also felt he lacked strategies to study a language from the very beginning on his own. He wanted to improve but he did not know how to do so. During the first weeks of the semester, he felt frustrated and sorrowful in all his French classes. This difficult time made Carlos' motivation decrease for a while and jeopardized his continuity in the bachelor's program. Fortunately, he was persistent enough to overcome this frustration and keep trying to learn French. Eventually, Carlos started to feel better as his

knowledge of and exposure to the French language increased. Nowadays, Carlos loves teaching both of his world languages: English and French. He is aware of the multiple benefits of being able to communicate in these languages such as becoming more open-minded and critical, getting to know different cultures and perspectives, and dismantling certain ideas he had about language teaching.

Carlos is an open-minded teacher who likes to show himself as a whole: as a professional as well as a human being. He is convinced that showing himself as an open book, as he did in his self-portrait, is the best way to build student-teacher rapport. In his own words: “*Me gusta que me conozcan no solo como en mi parte profesional, sino también como en la parte personal que podemos generar ese acercamiento, estudiante instructor*” [I like to be known not only by my professional side, but also by my personal side, so we can create that student-teacher rapport] (Interview 2, February 10th, 2023, lines 74-75). He believes connecting with his students is important since it fosters students' motivation and engagement in class. Carlos's relationships with his language teachers have been a determining factor in his success learning languages. Having a close relationship with his English teacher in high school inspired him to become an English teacher himself. Failing to connect with a teacher has resulted in loss of motivation in learning a language. Carlos sees himself as “*soy como ese docente apasionado que busca fomentar la culturalidad en los estudiantes o el conocimiento de culturas del mundo la percepción del mundo a través del target language, cualquiera que sea, si inglés o francés*” [I am that passionate teacher that seeks to foster interculturality or the knowledge of other cultures around the world] (Interview 1, January 20th, 2013, lines 377- 379). He believes that culture provides individuals with lenses through which they see and interpret the world. Learning a language allows access to people's culture through their way of speaking. Carlos is conscious of

the close relationship between language and culture and tries to expose his students to opportunities to learn about cultures as they work on the improvement of their linguistic skills. Carlos wants his students to be open minded, respectful, and accepting of cultural differences since he believes this is one of the most meaningful assets of learning languages:

Lo más enriquecedor para mí de haber aprendido una lengua es haber podido perder ese velo que le da a uno la cultura que uno cree que el mundo es así, como uno lo ve, pero entonces uno viene a conocer otros (-) matices si y otras formas de ver la vida a través de una lengua tan sencillo como eso (Interview 1, January 20th, 2023, lines 373-376).

The most enriching thing for me about having learned a language is having been able to lose that veil that your culture gives you. You believe that the world is like that, as you see it, but then you come to know other nuances and other ways of seeing life through a language, it is as simple as that.

Learning about other cultures has helped Carlos to develop awareness about his own bias regarding language teaching:

He dejado muchos prejuicios que antes podía tener, por ejemplo, con aquello de los idiomas que tenía, en que para ser un buen profe entonces tenía que tener el super acento native like o que tenía que tener mmm como esos estándares, pues que exigen, como en algunas instituciones. (Interview 2, February 10th, 2023, lines 137-140).

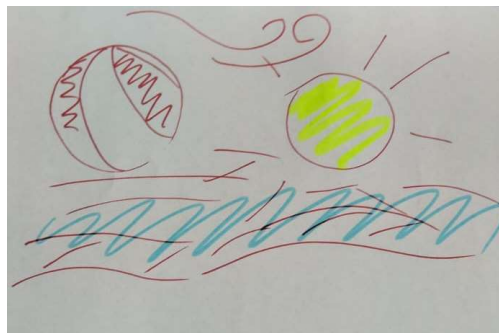
I have left behind many prejudices I had before, for example, related to languages, I used to think that to be a good teacher you needed to have like the super native-like accent or that you needed to have like those standards that are required in some institutions.

Carlos now recognizes that there is not a single English variety and tries to validate and honor the linguistic practices of those groups who are not visible when teaching hegemonic languages such as English and French. As a result of these reflections on language varieties legitimacy, Carlos consciously decided to leave behind his British accent to demonstrate to his students they do not need to sound like a native speaker to make themselves understood. Carlos's language teacher identity draws from a wealth of experiences he had gone through as a language

learner as well as an educator. Nonetheless, Carlos acknowledges that his way through the university forged a critical perspective which is very characteristic of his language teaching approach. Many of his teaching beliefs have been changing over time thanks to this critical approach he has embraced. He hopes to expand this view as he pursues a master's degree in the same university where he did his bachelor's.

Narrative Account # 4: The Story of a Teacher Committed to Social Transformation

Simon's, Self-Portrait



Encouraged by his parents, Simon started to take private English classes when he was in his early teens. Although at the beginning he was reluctant about this decision, his parents convinced him this was a great investment in his future. These private English classes were very beneficial for Simon as they provided him with plenty of opportunities to be exposed to and practice the target language in meaningful classroom interactions. Unlike the mandatory English classes Simon was taking in public school, instruction in the private language academy was given mostly in the target language and used the communicative approach.

One of Simon's biggest motivations to learn English was his interest in certain cultural elements of the United States. The first contact he had with this language and culture was through the media. The representation of US culture on TV had fed Simon's curiosity to learn English since he was a child. The food, the music, and famous holidays such as Christmas elicited his interest in understanding the language. Since his early teens, Simon has felt attracted

to English-language music. His eagerness to understand what the song's lyrics talked about became another motivation to study English.

As Simon started exploring and learning more about the US culture, his interest in Afro American culture and Black people's struggles increased. Not only did he find similarities between his skin color and the skin color of this population, but he felt connected to this culture in many several ways. This new motivation led him to inquire about the history, issues of discrimination, and ways of resistance of this community. He now listened to hip hop and rap music which reflected African American's experiences and was interested in news and reports which talked about these topics.

When Simon finished high school, he decided to pursue a bachelor's degree in language teaching. The program he registered in required learners to study two languages: English and French. Simon knew his English level was already advanced, so he thought he would have enough time and motivation to invest in his French courses. Although initially Simon was motivated to learn French, he eventually lost motivation as he failed to make a meaningful connection with French culture. For graduation purposes, Simon took all the mandatory French courses his bachelor's required; nonetheless, he ended up always choosing English classes every time he was allowed to. He did his student teaching in English and became an English teacher. He says he is still able to communicate in French, although he does not have many opportunities to practice it. Nowadays, Simon believes that being able to connect with the culture or cultures behind the language you are aiming to speak is key when learning a language. Unlike his experience learning English, he believes his context and close environment did not motivate him to learn French. Simon felt a desire to use English to access TV programs, music, and other areas, but with French this was not the case:

Desde los programas de televisión, desde la comida, la música, el entretenimiento, deportes. Entonces es mucho más fácil mantenerse en contacto con el inglés que con el francés. Entonces, quizás la motivación no por el francés no fue disparada. No, no, no fue explotada. O no fue bien influenciada por el contexto. (Interview 1, February 12th, 2023, lines 345-349).

From TV shows, food, music, entertainment, and sports. So, it is much easier to stay in contact with English than with French. So, maybe the motivation to learn French was not triggered. It was not maximized. Or it wasn't influenced by the context.

Two main components that describe Simon's pedagogical principles are the importance of a comfortable learning environment for students' learning and the adoption of a socio-critical approach in language teaching. Simon sees himself as a relaxed and calm teacher who provides his students with autonomy in their learning processes. He is always attentive to learners' needs and ready to provide support when needed. He believes making mistakes is part of the learning process, so he works hard to make his students feel comfortable trying out language and taking risks that help them to learn. Reflecting on his language learning journey, Simon noticed that most of his language teachers were very supportive and understanding when giving feedback. They always highlighted that communication was more important than accuracy. Feeling comfortable and encouraged to use the language for communicative purposes without the fear of making mistakes helped Simon to make significant progress in his linguistic skills. Consequently, to maximize his students' opportunities to learn English, Simon wants them to feel comfortable and relaxed in classes, as if they were at the beach, as he drew in his self-portrait: *"Más que divertida es como buscar que el estudiante se sienta cómodo, se sienta tranquilo, no sienta la presión que genera el aula de clase"* [More than fun [classes], it is like looking for the student to feel comfortable, feel calm, do not feel the pressure that the classroom creates] (Interview 2, February 24, 2023, lines 136-137).

At the same time, Simon claims to be a supporter of the socio-critical approach in language teaching. He understands education as a transformative tool and his role as a teacher as a leader of that transformation. He explains that classrooms are the best scenarios to promote critical reflection and social transformation since people from multiple backgrounds and diverse communities gather to learn from each other.

Si no estás aprovechando ese espacio con jóvenes, con personas de diferentes grupos sociales para generar una transformación, generar un impacto, estamos perdiendo el tiempo. O sea, yo creo que nosotros como docentes tenemos una responsabilidad social, el hecho es entender el poder que tenemos de influencia, ¿cierto? Y cómo la queremos utilizar. (Interview 1, February 12th, 2023, lines 272- 276)

If you are not taking advantage of the space you have with young people, with people from different social backgrounds to generate transformation, to create an impact, you are wasting your time. I mean, I believe, we teachers, have a social commitment, the point is to understand the power of influence we have. Right? And how we want to use it.

Simon seeks to generate a social impact in the classroom through the discussion of contemporary controversial topics that affect students. He believes it is important to make connections between the class content and students' realities to create curiosity and motivation. Simon remembers that his favorite classes at the university were the ones in which teachers made connections between the class topics and students' realities:

Algo que yo notaba mucho ahora que él trataba de relacionar las actividades con nuestra vida diaria, entonces las temáticas que se desarrollaban los hacía quizás replicar o relacionarla más con nuestras realidades. Entonces eso genera una conexión directa con el tema y genera intriga, genera interés. O sea, como que las cosas se hablan como verdaderamente son, más no tanto desde el libro, ¿cierto? (Interview 2, February 24, 2023, lines 123-127).

Something that I noticed is that he [the teacher] tried to connect class activities with our daily lives, so the topics that were treated [in class] he made them related more with our realities. So, this creates a direct connection with the topic, and creates intrigue, creates

interest. Huh? I mean, like things are spoken as they really are, but not so much from the textbook, right?

Although his cultural interest was initially focused on US culture, it has now expanded to other countries where English is widely spoken. Simon combines his commitment towards social transformation with his interests in culture. Recently, Simon and his students watched a documentary about a case of racism and discrimination in London. This authentic material helped Simon to trigger a critical conversation among students concerning issues of racism, which has always been a main topic of concern for him.

Simon commented that before his participation in this project he had never thought about the way his learning experiences and background impacted the decisions he makes in the classroom.

Discussion

The four previous stories suggest that there are direct connections between participants' language learning trajectories and how each of them sees his/her role as a language educator. The self-portraits were added to each narrative as they contribute to capture participants' reflections of their teacher's identity. Most of the participants acknowledge the meaningful contribution their time in their undergraduate program had in their construction of an identity as language educators. These results support previous local studies on English teachers' identity which emphasize the role teacher's preparation programs have in the construction of identities (Cepeda & Holguín, 2019; Buendía-Áreas, 2020). Nonetheless, although the program in which these teachers obtained their training and certification was the same, the different challenges they all went through while becoming language users and learners made their stories very different from each other. This demonstrated the significant impact language learning experiences had in

shaping participants' identities. The following section will showcase power dynamics embedded in participants' language learning experiences.

Plurilingual Identities that Challenge the Concept of “Nonnative” English Teachers

While all four participants' first language was Spanish, their identities today are closely connected to more than one language. The concepts of “native” and “nonnative” language speakers are socially constructed categories that simplify the complex, dynamic and ever-changing nature of language teachers' identity (Aneja, 2016; Ellis, 2016; Varghese et al., 2016; Lee & Canagarajah, 2019). The adoption of this binary framework not only leaves out of the conversation multiple elements that play a more important role in the construction of teachers' identities, but it also simplifies individuals' affiliation to a social group. While “native” English speakers' attachment to an English-speaking community and culture is never put into question, the “nonnative” speakers are excluded from both of them. Poststructural approaches aim to disrupt the imaginary boundaries created by this dichotomy while emphasizing the agency individuals have in negotiating their identities and the influence that context and communities exert on them (Aneja, 2016). This idea highlights the active role individuals have in building a sense of belonging and an identity connection in relationship with the experiences they go through. Ellis' work (2016) demonstrated that “native” English speakers are not necessarily monolingual and that their linguistic identities are strongly influenced by their whole linguistic repertoire and experiences as language users and learners. Ellis demonstrated that despite being called “monolingual”, her participants' linguistic identities were very rich and integrated all the interactions with other cultures and languages. In the same way, finding in this study suggests that “non native” English teachers may develop a strong identity connection with the English language and cultures which creates a sense of belonging to a community despite not being

considered members of the same (Rampton, 1990). In fact, this phenomenon occurs very often in places where more than one language and culture coexist. Individuals may feel they belong to several communities and cultures although they do entirely fit into any of them: between two cultures as Anzaldúa (1987) reframes it.

Like in most of the countries in Latin America, Spanish has long been the only recognized official language in Colombia. This situation has displaced the linguistic practices of local indigenous communities to the edge of extinction. Although none of the participants mentioned having a close connection with an indigenous community, it is important for this study to acknowledge the multiethnicity and multiculturalism of the country while recognizing that the Spanish language has exerted colonial hegemony over the local indigenous languages in the country. As a result, colonization has forced ancestral communities to abandon their ways of living and to assimilate to the practices of the dominant culture and language of the country. In Colombia, not only does colonization require local communities to learn the dominant language, Spanish, but globalization and capitalism are now forcing young people to learn English as a foreign language to meet graduation requirements at the university level (Usma et al., 2018). In other words, language policies and regulations in the country reproduce language hegemonies while failing to support local languages.

The close contact with Anglo-American language and culture due to discourses of globalization has allowed participants in this study to build meaningful identity connections and in some cases a feeling of affiliation to certain groups and communities. Simon's and Hada's stories illustrate two cases of plurilingual identities that transgress pre-established binary categories. Since Simon learned about African American culture, he felt connected and identified with its people's struggles and fights. This identification resulted in an increased motivation to

learn more about African American history and culture. Simon's sense of belonging to this community led him to embrace a commitment towards questioning racism issues affecting the local group he felt connected to. This important part of Simon's identity is taken to the classroom when he brings up conversations about racism and encourages learners to think critically about the reasons people discriminate against people of color. Simon embraces a socio-critical teaching approach that empowers students to criticize what is wrong in society and make changes in it.

In a similar way, Hada feels her identity has been closely connected to US culture and the English language as long as she remembers. Although she is proud of her Colombian roots and is happy to share her culture when she travels abroad, she acknowledges that most of her interests and passions are in her second language, English. Early in her life, Hada built a positive relationship with the English language which led her to invest a considerable amount of time in learning more about the language and culture. Hada has created an emotional connection with this language which is associated with enjoyment and joy. She tries to help her students to make this positive connection and integrate the English language to their lives in a natural way, by exploring what they like and are interested in. The two last examples demonstrate that linguistic identities go far beyond pre-established categories which impose belonging or not belonging relationships to a specific community or group. While negotiating their linguistic and teachers' identities, these four teachers transcended imaginary borders that dictate how "nonnative" speakers' identities are supposed to be.

The Power Behind the Different Sources of Motivations to Learn and Teach English

Participants exercised their agency when negotiating and making sense of who they are in relation to the languages they speak. Yet, the contexts in which they learned their languages and the reasons that drove these decisions intersected with language ideologies that were reproduced

through systemic power. While narrating their language learning experiences, participants engaged in an active reflection and analysis of the motivations that drove their decisions to learn and teach English in their country. Different types of motivations coming from external sources as well as participants' inner desire to learn the language were brought to this conversation. The decision of dividing participants' motivations into two categories for the analysis session came from the fact that participants were able to make different connections with power systems in each of them. While they were able to identify and talk about the systemic power in the external forces that led them to become language teachers, it became harder to recognize the influence of power in the personal connections they developed with the language and culture thanks to the exposure and access they had to both. The paragraphs that follow extend the analysis of both types of motivation and elaborate on participants' perceptions about power.

External Sources that Have a Role in Participants' Motivations

External sources that led participants to choose to learn and teach English in Colombia were mediated by globalization and competitiveness discourses which show standard English language as a synonym of prosperity, success, and accomplishment (Fairclough, 2014). Three of the four participants in this study were encouraged by their parents to learn English. Two of them took extra-curricular classes early in their lives which represented an economic and time investment for their families. When Simon was asked about the circumstances or reasons that led him to choose to study English, he explained:

Por ejemplo, mi papá, siempre, yo me acuerdo de que muy pequeño, yo no quería estudiar inglés, pero él me decía estudia inglés, que es muy importante, estudia que es muy importante. Yo decía, no que pereza. Yo quiero estudiar sistemas, yo quiero estudiar otra cosa que me guste. Pues estaba muy pequeño. Tenía 12 años más o menos. Hasta que un momento me convenció y yo creo que ha sido una excelente, una excelente decisión. (Interview 1, lines 317-321).

For example, my dad, I remember since I was a child, I did not want to study English, but he would tell me “Study English, this is very important, study English it is very important” And I would tell him what a drag. I want to learn computer systems. I wanted to study other things I liked. I was very young, around 12 years old. Until he convinced me, and I believe this has been a great, great decision.

When extending on the previous answer, Simon affirmed that even though his father was monolingual, he understood how useful it would be if his son learned English. English was the language associated with success and economic growth in the country; the language that the Colombian government and the ministry of education were promoting and investing money in. Therefore, the implicit message Simon’s family received was that learning English would provide Simon with more chances to access better employment opportunities and support their family in the future. In a similar way, in her narrative, Hada elaborates on the privilege she had when being exposed to English as a child through games, songs, and fun group activities. She explains this privilege resulted in a facility to learn the language when she finally made the conscious decision to do so. It is worth emphasizing that the fact Hada’s mother invested time and effort in immersing her two little daughters into this language says a lot about what she believes were important skills to develop since childhood. Especially in privileged contexts, parents are each day making a more significant investment in educating their kids in acquiring skills and knowledge in music, painting, sports, and languages. Analyzing and questioning who gets to decide what funds of knowledge are considered worth learning and cultivating in future generations is essential when inquiring about the influence of power in education.

Participants are aware of how the language learning and teaching policies in their country have framed the decisions they have made on their professional journeys. While English is a mandatory language that students must take from elementary school to the university level, very few public institutions offer French as a foreign language. Similarly, private educational

institutions prioritize English teaching and learning while reproducing discourses of competitive citizens who contribute to the economic growth of the country. Carlos reflected about the disparities in the job opportunities he has had as an English and French teacher: *“pues mira, tan sencillo como esto para uno o encontrar un empleo digamos que encuentras 10 vacantes para ser docente de inglés, pero 1 para ser docente de francés”* [As simple as this, for you to find a job, let's say you find 10 openings to be an English teacher, but 1 to be a French teacher] (Carlos, interview 1, lines 516-518). Realizations like the previous one have led participants to make important choices based on the needs of their context. Carlos explained the reasoning behind a crucial decision he made recently about his professional future:

En nuestro contexto, aprender inglés está de moda y es una necesidad. Hoy en día hay personas que dicen que el que no sabe inglés es analfabeta y no sé hasta qué punto esté yo, de acuerdo, pero algo hay de razón ahí. Mientras que el francés no tiene esa influencia en nuestro contexto. He optado por estudiar mi maestría en inglés debido a estas mismas circunstancias. Yo no digo que el inglés sea mejor que el francés. Son idiomas y a mí me gustan todos y yo quisiera aprender muchos, pero me fui por el inglés debido a esto. (Interview 1, lines 518-521)

In our context, learning English is fashionable and it is also a need. Nowadays, there are people who claim that the person who does not know English is illiterate. I do not know to what extent I agree with this, but there is something true in this. While French does not have that influence in our context. I have chosen to pursue a master's degree in English due to these circumstances. I do not believe English is better than French. They are both languages, I like them both, and I would like to learn many other languages. Nonetheless, I chose English because of this situation.

Although Carlos perceives all his languages as equally important, he is aware and elaborate on the privileged status and the benefits being able to speak English represent in his context. This creates a tension between Carlos's beliefs and what his context values as important and worth learning. This tension causes him to make decisions in the classroom as well as in his professional life, based on what he believes is best for him and his students in terms of the realities they face.

It is striking that in the context of describing the economic benefits of knowing English, Carlos refers to a common belief that not speaking English is tantamount to “illiteracy.” To paraphrase Carlos then, it is possible to believe that not knowing English is equated with lacking culture, being uncultivated, as well as limiting access to professional opportunities. The traditional conceptualization of literacy understood as simply reading and writing has worked as a powerful tool that legitimizes the practices of the people in power while discriminating against the practices and the sources of knowledge of underrepresented communities (Willis 1997). Failing to problematize these discourses and the impact they have in a community result in the reproduction of power dynamics that oppress and exclude vulnerable populations. A critical analysis of the implications of considering English language as a literacy skill in the so-called “underdeveloped” countries such as Colombia guides us to the questions of who is given access to learn this skill and for what purposes. In the Colombian educational system, English classes are mandatory from second to eleventh grade. Yet, the conditions and resources to learn this language in a formal setting are not adequately arranged. The few hours of language exposure, lack of trained teachers and the adoption of archaic and dysfunctional pedagogical approaches makes learning English a difficult goal to achieve for someone that has only access to public education (Usma, 2015). Ultimately, the people who can afford private English classes and can pay for occasional vacation trips to English-speaking countries are the ones who benefit from the privileges of speaking English. Once more, education ended up reproducing inequality while serving the interest of the people in power.

Discourses that see language teaching and learning from an instrumental and utilitarian perspective leave behind cognitive and cultural gains when able to speak in more than one

language, gains which Carlos in the above quote was attuned to. While benefiting the economic interest of the government (Usma, 2015), this ideology gives the message that a language is only worth learning if there are economic benefits in play. Around 65 indigenous languages are spoken in Colombia, yet none of them is taught in schools because they do not represent an economic gain for the country. Fairclough (2014) notes that the idea of the English language as a passport for economic wellness is reinforced by the media which usually showcases the values, ideologies, and ways of living of the people in power, making them appealing and desirable for those who are not in that circle. Three of participants described in their narratives how appealing American pop culture has always been for them and how they increased their desire to communicate in English and travel to the United States one day. This shows how hegemonic the representation of US customs and lifestyles is despite Spanish being the locally dominant language. Growing up in a country where English learning is perceived as an asset has made participants and their families associate the English language with an important opportunity to increase their outcomes and access opportunities monolingual or bilingual or multilingual people who do not speak English don't have.

Inner Motivations which Intersected with Systemic Power

Participants' internal motivations to learn English were guided by the desire to communicate with foreign people, to be able to understand content that was in the English language or access the culture through the language. Although, on the surface, internal motivations seem to come from individual choices and particular connections with a language, the context and the situations that allowed this interest to develop may hide power systems. In other words, although participants may have experienced an internal desire to learn English to access a culture they feel they identify with, the fact that they had had access to that culture

through media, music or TV programs reflects someone's else's choices, as suggested in the previous section. This is why finding the connections between their intrinsic desire to learn English and high-level power systems represented a bigger challenge for participants.

The influence of the United States culture in Colombia has allowed participants to feel more familiar with the language and made meaningful connections with their lives. Simon remembers the Christmas movies he watched as a child where there was snow, a chimney and presents around the tree. Years later, Simon felt attracted by the English-language songs he listened to on the radio, followed by his interest and identification with African American culture which continues to be a big referent in Simon's identity. All through his life, Simon has been attracted to different features of US culture. Having the exposure and access to this culture allowed him to develop this strong connection.

When discussing factors that influenced her decision to study English, Verónica explained that her father wanted her to be able to communicate with missionaries that came to their community to teach their religious traditions. For Verónica and her family, the English language was the tool that would allow them to access a piece of information they did not have access to in their mother tongue. Her desire to be the bridge between their family and foreign people's knowledge was what motivated Verónica to learn English in the first instance. Nonetheless, the analysis of these interactions reveals several sources of power. The fact that English is considered as the “universal language” which people all around the world are able to communicate in is a language ideology which comes to be assumed as a common sense (Faicluogh, 2014). The fact that Verónica learned English because that was the only way to access that information, and not the foreign people had to learn the local language, reflects power.

Hada critically reflects about the way capitalism and cultural hegemony had an important role in her motivation to learn English and have access to the content she was interested in:

El inglés está en todas partes, ¿cierto? entonces claro, el contenido que yo empecé a consumir como entretenimiento estaba en inglés, entonces, evidentemente en mi deseo por disfrutarlo yo dije, quiero aprender inglés para poder entender esto de una, verme el programa de una vez en inglés, de entender los chistes, lo que fuera entonces y porque ¿cómo llegó eso en inglés? Hasta acá, pues Estados Unidos, ¡el capitalismo, Ana!
(Interview 1, lines 536-541)

English is everywhere, right? So the content that I began to consume as entertainment was in English, so, obviously in my desire to enjoy it I said, I want to learn English to be able to understand this content, watch the program on my own in English, to understand the jokes, whatever it was, but how was it that it [the content] all came in English? well The United States and capitalism, Ana!

The previous comment is the only moment in which a participant explicitly connected her internal motivations to learn English with a high-level power relationship. This comment reflects the reference to the intersection between both types of motivation while highlighting how they are connected. All participants highlighted the power dynamics in the external sources that had a role in their choices to study English. Only one of them made explicit the role of power in her inner desire to learn it. It is also important to mention that participants' motivations to learn their languages have also been dynamic, fluid and changing. That means that they are not exclusively either external or internal motivation. They also intersect and change according to participants' experiences and several other factors.

English Language and Cultural Hegemony over French

Critical language awareness makes the point that teaching the grammar and the correct use of a language is insufficient if there is not space to critically reflect about why that language is being learned and who makes that decision (Fairclough, 2014). A salient category that emerged from participants' narratives was the English hegemony over French in language

teaching and learning courses in Colombia. Although all participants studied and obtained a certification to teach English and French, the amount of exposure they had in both languages, the language policies in the country, and the employment opportunities they have access to let them develop a preference for the English language. When reflecting on the reasons for this preference, a theme that emerged was how easy participants were able to integrate and make English a part of their daily lives. The early exposure they had to some elements of the culture such as music, TV programs and elements of pop culture facilitated this process. On the other hand, integrating French in their lives while also making connections with the culture have represented a challenge for all participants. Simon talks about this contrast:

Culturalmente hablando, o sea, es un país que lo tenemos acá cerquita y la influencia cultural que ha tenido Estados Unidos en nuestro país es muy grande. Desde los programas de televisión, desde la comida, la música, el entretenimiento, deportes. Entonces es mucho más fácil mantenerse en contacto con el inglés que con el francés. Entonces, quizás la motivación por el francés no fue, no fue disparada. No, no, no fue explotada. O no fue bien influenciada por el contexto. (Interview 1, lines 344-349).

Talking about the culture, I mean it is a country that is near to us and the cultural influence that the United States has had in our country is very big. From TV shows, food, music, entertainment, and sports. So, it is much easier to stay in contact with English than with French. So, maybe the motivation to learn French was not triggered. It was not maximized. Or it wasn't influenced by the context.

Hada explains that the fact that most of the information she was interested in was in English, increased her desire to learn this language. She also recognizes that most of the information in the world is in English, so this creates the need to learn the language to not only access entertaining content, but any other type of information:

Cada vez es más rápido y más notorio, pues como se ha ido apoderando de todo y es que es todo, o sea, no solo digamos en cuanto a negocios, sino por ejemplo investigación. Es que solo la Internet, o sea, todo el mundo gira alrededor de la Internet y no me acuerdo el porcentaje, pero la Internet está principalmente en inglés. ¿Cierto? entonces, para vos

acceder a contenido de lo que sea, de entretenimiento, ocio o ciencia, investigación, está en inglés. Entonces pues el inglés está en todas partes, entonces claro, tal vez no aprendí conscientemente porque dije, quiero aprenderlo, pero qué es lo que está alrededor. Es todo el entorno, el que me obligó a hacerlo. Pues no, no me obligó, me llevó a hacerlo ¿cierto? Y que hubiera tenido los medios para hacerlo también viene de ahí. (Interview 1, lines 543-551)

Each time it is becoming faster and more noticeable, you know how it [English] has been taking over everything, and I mean everything. That is, not only in terms of business, but for example in research. Only the Internet, that is, the whole world uses the Internet, and I do not remember the percentage, but the Internet is mainly in English. Right? so for you to access content of whatever, entertainment, leisure or science or research, everything is in English, so English is everywhere. So, maybe I didn't learn it consciously because I thought I wanted to learn it, but what's around. It's the whole environment, the one that forced me to do it, well, no, it didn't, it led me to do it, right? And the fact that I had the means to do so also comes from there.

Hada has attempted to integrate French language to her life in a natural way and make connections between her interests and the language, as she did with English. Nonetheless, the lack of available content in French has made it harder to achieve this goal. She explains: “*el francés no está en todas partes como el inglés, entonces no era tan fácil como (-) como encontrar ese concepto, entretenimiento, esas cosas en francés*” [The French language is not everywhere like English, so it wasn't that easy like, like to find that concept, entertainment, these things in French] (Interview 1, lines 560-562). Failing to find materials and content in French related to her likes, has reduced Hada's opportunities to practice the language in a consistent and meaningful way. As a result, Hada feels the level and confidence she has achieved in both languages is disproportional. While English makes an important part of her identity, French is a language she enjoys teaching but has not made a significant connection with it. She is motivated to keep improving and teaching French. Nonetheless, she recognizes that some limitations in her context have had a role in the failure to integrate French in her life in a meaningful way.

Verónica affirms that being able to speak English has given her access to a lot of information she didn't have before. For instance, she is glad she is now able to read content in the original language as she believes translations sometimes fail to capture the intended meaning and the authors' purpose. Most of what she reads, listens to and watches is in the English language. While Verónica perceives her ability to speak English as an asset which has brought several benefits to her academic, personal, and professional life, she expresses her failure to find an immediate application of the French language in her daily life. While discussing what knowing a language meant to her, Verónica said the following about her third language: "*pero el francés, la verdad, no me ha servido para nada. No, no, aquí en Colombia no. Y yo sé que si voy a Francia, puedo hablar perfectamente inglés y me puedo comunicar*" [French, to be honest, is useless. No, not here in Colombia, no. And I know that if I go to France, I could easily speak in English and communicate with people] (Interview 1, lines 88-92).

Being incapable of seeing the immediate profits of communicating in French has made Verónica lose motivation to keep practicing her third language. She believes being able to communicate in English is helpful when communicating with foreign people even if they are not from an English-speaking country. In her English classes, Verónica tries to show her students the multiple advantages of being able to speak in English. She recognizes the benefits she has had because of her English language, and she tries to call student's attention by using these privileges.

In Colombia, English language hegemony devalues the teaching and learning of other local and foreign languages. The fact that English is being perceived as a universal language which allows communication between people from several parts of the world creates the idea that there is no need to learn other languages for communication purposes. In the case of these

participants, their motivation to learn French was not triggered by the context since they had access to much information through the English language which has always had a strong influence in their country. They acknowledge the role their context and external sources had in eliciting a need, desire, and motivation to learn English. When teaching English, these four educators make use of the same discourses they were exposed to increase students' motivation and engagement in class. Overall, participants believe their students will have more opportunities to succeed in their future projects if they learn English. Through their life stories, they share their testimonies about how being able to speak English has given advantages over monolingual as well as bilingual people who do not speak English such as indigenous people who speak their local language and Spanish. Participants are aware of how capitalism has given the English language the power to transform lives. All participants explicitly talked about the English language and culture hegemony in Colombia. Yet, they continue to motivate their students to learn this language because they want them to succeed in their future projects, to have access to employment opportunities and to be competitive in the job market. This paradox represents the struggles of many people dealing with systemic power and its reproduction. We identify power systems that are reproducing inequalities and injustice, but still find ourselves making our lives and ourselves on their terms.

Conclusions

This study showed how relevant language learning experiences and educational trajectories are in shaping the identity of language teachers. While narrating their most meaningful learning experiences, participants in this study were able to see connections between their educational journeys and their teaching philosophy. These realizations may help these educators to become more conscious about the reproduction of language

ideologies and be more intentional with the choices they make in the classroom. This study also showed how language learning experiences allowed these teachers to develop plurilingual and pluricultural identities. The identity connections participants made with certain features of the English language and culture allowed them to create a connection with both that transcended imaginary borders between social groups and cultures.

In terms of power dynamics embedded in participants' stories, results suggest that both external and internal sources of motivation to learn and teach English intersected with power behind the language. The fact that English is presented as a passport that gives access to a better life contributed a lot to develop an instrumental motivation to learn and teach the language. Although participants were able to identify and explicitly talk about power in the external sources that led them to learn and teach English, most of them did not recognize the way power operated into the personal connections they developed with the language and culture. Additionally, results suggest that Anglo-American language and culture hegemony contributes to devaluing the learning and teaching of local and foreign languages which are not perceived as economically beneficial. This instrumental view of language learning makes people believe a language is worth learning only if there are external compensations and rewards. Such is the case of English teaching and learning in Colombia.

Lastly, although participants were able to elaborate on and criticize power systems embedded in language teaching and learning processes, unconsciously they continued to reproduce the discourses that led them to become English learners. This tension illustrates language teachers' struggles to resist and disrupt power dynamics embedded in language ideologies. Failing to provide students from low-socio economic backgrounds and underrepresented communities with the tools they may need in the future, such as learning

English, may imply helping to reproduce inequality. Yet, giving learners resources to acquire English without questioning why that language is being learned and who makes this decision contributes to perpetuating the status quo. When reflecting on this paradox that we all language teachers encounter, the questions that come to my mind are: How can we teach hegemonic languages in a culturally responsive way? How can we honor local indigenous languages while teaching colonial languages such as Spanish, English, French? How can we provide our students with the skills they need to succeed in their future goals while also helping to develop awareness about language hegemony? I invite language educators to explore answers to these questions as we embrace a critical language approach in language teaching.

Implications

As a language educator myself investigating the linguistic and teachers' identities of language educators, this study has directly impacted my own practices as I now understand where some of my teaching beliefs and language ideologies come from. In a small scale, this study may also plant the seed that allows other language teachers to develop awareness about how their identities are influenced by the way they learned their languages and their relationship with power. Perhaps these reflections lead to realizations about how power operates in language teaching and learning processes and how this translates into classroom practices. Most importantly, I hope this study inspires language educators to adopt a critical language awareness approach in their language classes that allow them to problematize based-appropriate discourses which de-legitimize the linguistic practices of underrepresented communities (Flores & Rosa, 2015). A first step in developing a critical awareness approach in language teaching is acknowledging that languages are not neutral

and fixed tools of communication, but socially constructed. Consequently, there is not a proper or improper way to speak a language, but several ways to do this. Standard varieties should no longer be the only referent when learning a language and other varieties may also occupy a place in the classroom.

On a large scale, this study may contribute to advocating for spaces of discussion and analysis about teacher's identities in the curriculum of teaching preparation programs. Although there has been an increasing interest in researching English teachers' identities, there is still a disconnection between these studies and the syllabus of teaching programs. If language teachers' identities are proved to have an impact in pedagogical practices, students and communities (Varghese et al., 2016), educational institutions should include content and resources that help educators to reflect on how they see their roles as teachers and how this impacts their practices. This study showed that reflecting about identity and power is a complex and demanding process. This is why educational institutions should provide guidance, support and most importantly, allocated time in the curriculum to hold these important conversations.

This study also contributes to identifying the way Colombian language policies are contributing to reproduce language hegemony and hierarchization. While widely advertising and promoting English teaching and learning in the country, these policies disregard and exclude local indigenous languages from the conversation. Policy makers base their choices of what languages to teach in schools on the monetary benefits this language may represent to the country. This reaffirms that languages such as English and French continue to be seen as assets while minoritized languages are the default. To this reality, we language educators are called to foster critical conversations in the classrooms that lead students to problematize

language ideologies perceived as common sense. While also helping students to acquire skills and mastery in the target language, we educators may contribute to make them more conscious about the reproduction of power through the language.

Lastly, this study did not intend to measure the extent to which participation in this study impacted participants' pedagogical practices, that is, how reflections about their identity and power dynamics influenced their practices after the study. Future research on the area may invite participants to continue their reflections on how inquiring about their identities may influence their practices in the classroom.

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Appendix A
Linguistic autobiography, written prompt (English version)

Write a linguistic autobiography that summarizes your main experiences learning your languages. The questions that follow may guide you in the process of writing. Feel free to add any other meaningful experience related to your language learning trajectory.

Guiding questions

- 1- How many languages are you able to communicate in?
- 2- How was the process of learning these languages?
- 3- How old were you when you started learning these languages?
- 4- What circumstances or factors led you to learn these languages instead of others?
- 5- What challenges have you encountered while learning these languages?
- 6- In which situations and circumstances do you currently use your languages?
7. In what ways are the languages you speak related to your identity?

Appendix B

Interview protocol # 1 (English version)

Opening script:

Thank you very much again for agreeing to participate in this research project. As you know, I am conducting a research study to better understand the way language learning experiences contribute to the construction and shaping of English teachers' identities. This interview is divided into four different sections. I will briefly explain each of them as we start working on the interview. Please let me know if you have questions. I will be happy to answer questions at any time during the interview. Let's get started.

Part A: Language learning experiences

1. How would define or describe a language?
2. In your opinion, what does it mean to be able to speak and communicate in a language?
3. Why did you decide to become a language teacher? or What circumstances brought you to become a language teacher?
4. Can you please describe how English classes at school were? and how English classes at the university were?
5. Do you remember a language class you liked a lot either in school or at the university? Can you describe how that class was?
6. Do you remember a language class that you feel did not help you to make progress in your learning process? Can you describe how that class was?

Parte B: language teacher identity

7. How would you describe yourself as a language teacher?
8. What main characteristics define your teaching style?
9. How do you believe a language should be taught and learned
10. What teaching strategies have worked in your classroom?
11. What do you think the characteristics of a good language teacher are?
12. Why is it important to have these characteristics?
13. Can you think about meaningful experiences that have forged your identity as a language

teacher?

Parte C: critical reflection of language learning experiences (power dynamics)

14. In your particular case, were there any factors or circumstances that affected in a positive or negative way your language learning processes?

16. When you compare your language learning experiences with other people here in Colombia. What similarities and differences can you identify? Do you think there is something that makes your language learning different from the experiences other people your age in Colombia have?

17. Thinking about your motivations to learn languages, can you identify circumstances or factors that had a role in your decision to study your languages?

18. Thinking about your motivations to teach languages, can you identify circumstances or factors that had a role in your decision to study your languages?

Parte D: Autobiographies follow up questions (Hada's follow up questions)

19. In your linguistic autobiography you shared there was a time in your teens that you did not feel comfortable using your mother tongue and you rather wanted to use English. Can you tell me more about this period? What did "this kind of disdain" towards your mother tongue look like?

20. Can you tell me more about the interchange program you participated in in 2011? How old were you when you traveled to the United States? How long did you stay there?

21. How did you feel interacting with this new culture and using the English language in the United States?

22. How traveling to the United States allows you to connect more with your Spanish language and culture?

Appendix C

Interview protocol # 2 (English version)

Opening script:

Thank you very much again for agreeing to participate in this research project. As you know, I am conducting a research study to better understand the way language learning experiences contribute to the construction and shaping of English teachers' identities. In our previous meeting, we held a conversation about your meaningful language learning experiences, your identity as an English teacher and the connections between these two. Today, we will continue to reflect about your identity as well as the experiences that were significant in the shaping of that identity. We will do this through a self-portrait. A self-portrait is one of the most common art-based techniques to collect data that allows participants to express themselves through art and creativity.

It is important to emphasize that the visual representation resulting from this activity will not be analyzed based on how perfect or beautiful it is, but on the meaning it conveys. It will serve as a guide to talk about your teaching identity and the construction of this identity.

Self-Portrait Activity Instructions

- Draw a visual that represents who you are or how you see yourself as an English teacher.
- While working on this visual, think about how you would represent on paper the relationship you have with your teaching subject (English).
- You will have around 15 minutes to work on this visual. Let me know if you need more time or finish earlier.
- When you are finished, please take a screenshot or a photo of your visual and upload it to the following Google docs.

Leading questions to talk about the visual

A) Explaining the visual

1. Can you tell me what your visual represents?
2. What does each element on it represent? How do they connect to each other?
3. What does this visual tell people about your English teacher identity?

B) Describing how the process was

4. How was the process of capturing your teaching identity through a visual?
5. Did you encounter any challenges or dilemmas while working on this visual?
6. Is there any tension in your identity as an English teacher that you did not manage to capture in your visual?

C) Meaningful experiences in identity construction

7. How did you come to be the English teacher you just drew? What meaningful experiences bring you to become the teacher you describe?
8. How would you describe the relationship you have with your teaching subject (English)?
9. Any final comments about your drawing?