

## Shaping Better Futures: Inside-Out Colombian English Language Teachers' Gaps and Practices

Trazando mejores futuros: una mirada de adentro hacia afuera de las necesidades y prácticas de los docentes de inglés en Colombia

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This exploratory qualitative study reports gaps in the preservice teacher education and professional development of 15 English language teachers in a Colombian public university regarding their teaching knowledge and practice. Grounded theory was used to examine the data collected via focus groups and questionnaires, which were validated and triangulated. Findings reveal several teacher deficiencies, classified into three axes: language proficiency, teaching awareness, and teacher challenges. These tensions unveil imbalances between theory and practice, inefficient mentoring during the practicum stage, lack of classroom management skills for efficient teaching, and the need to revitalize and endorse information and communications technology education and use in the new classroom era. The article also offers a discussion on reconceptualizing teacher education.


*Keywords:* English language teaching, professional development, teacher awareness, teacher education


Este estudio cualitativo-exploratorio reporta los hallazgos sobre las brechas existentes en la formación docente y el desarrollo profesional de quince profesores de inglés en una universidad pública colombiana. Se usó la teoría fundamentada para analizar, triangular y validar los datos recolectados mediante un grupo focal y un cuestionario. Los resultados muestran marcadas deficiencias docentes, clasificadas en tres ejes: dominio del idioma, conciencia docente y desafíos docentes. Estas tensiones revelan desequilibrios entre teoría y práctica, ineficiente mentoría durante la práctica docente, la falta de habilidades de manejo del aula, y una necesidad de la revitalización y apropiación de las tecnologías de la información y las comunicaciones en el aula de clase contemporánea. Se ofrece además una discusión para reconceptualizar la formación docente.

*Palabras clave:* conciencia docente, desarrollo profesional, enseñanza del inglés, formación docente

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## Introduction

English teaching institutions often struggle to ensure their students' expected English proficiency levels when they complete their degree programs. Literature reveals that factors such as social contexts, language, and culture—among others—are closely associated with this situation. It is widely known that English programs and higher education institutions instill diverse roles in English language teachers, such as facilitators, managers, and evaluators (Archana & Rani, 2017), to cope with the barriers that negatively influence students' learning process. Therefore, it is paramount that institutions prepare competent teachers who have the training, knowledge, and expertise required to teach the target language. This cannot be successfully attained if preservice English language teachers do not receive solid pedagogical foundations during their teaching education phase. The teaching practicum is especially relevant for them to be exposed to controlled and guided teaching practices. After graduation, teachers face an additional hurdle: a lack of opportunities for continuing professional development to keep up to date with educational trends and to meet the current challenges of a globalized society (Wong & Dubey-Jhaveri, 2015).

This manuscript summarizes the findings of a large-scale qualitative study that explored the perceptions of English language teachers who belonged to an English program in a Colombian public university regarding their teaching knowledge and practice and the appropriate use of the technological resources at their disposal. We hypothesize that the displayed teaching gaps are associated with a faulty preservice teacher education that hinders the enactment of the participants' teaching persona and, therefore, their own students' learning processes. The study aims to broaden the scope of studies that explore phenomena associated with the fosterage of strategic teaching and learning practices in the

English language classroom, guided by the research question: What challenges hinder efficient language teaching practices in a group of Colombian English language teachers?

## Theoretical Considerations

### Teacher Education

According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (n.d.), teacher education refers to the formal training provided to pre- or in-service teachers designed to equip them with the knowledge, attitude, behavior, and skills required for teaching at a specific level. Very often, the concept of teacher education is used interchangeably with that of professional development. For the OECD (2009), effective professional development is continuing; includes training, practice, and feedback; and provides adequate time and follow-up support. Professional development facilitates how teachers share their expertise and experience more systematically. However, it is necessary to point out that while teacher education implies formal learning (e.g., pursuing undergraduate or postgraduate studies), professional development is not restricted to formal endeavors, it includes individual or autonomous efforts (e.g., attending seminars, reading books, and researching).

Although teacher education has been technically classified into different models, it addresses specific components. These comprise subject knowledge (which includes cultural knowledge); pedagogical knowledge (e.g., knowledge about classroom management and language methods); and contextual knowledge, which refers to students' academic needs (Karakaş & Yavuz, 2018). Nonetheless, learning how to teach is not just absorbing theory. It is a process that links *thought* with *activity* in a given context by mapping out actions to be exercised under specific circumstances. Therefore, teacher education is most effective when teachers can collaborate with peers, experiment with teaching, know the students' learning expectations, make decisions and

take risks, and even reflect on the content they have to teach (Jiménez Raya, 2009).

Conversely, as Yates and Muchisky (2003) argue, the lack of accompaniment during their learning process prevents future teachers from becoming fully competent professionals. Omaggio and Shinall (1987) also contend that, although most teacher qualification programs must comply with language policies, it is paramount for those in charge of educating teachers to raise their awareness about the future challenges that could be experienced in school contexts.

On another note, Farrell (2019) brings into consideration two “inconvenient truths” (as he calls them) in teacher education. The first one illustrates the disjuncture between what teachers learn in a course and what they experience in a classroom. He indicates that this occurs because the teacher education courses are based on tradition rather than on the needs of future teachers. The second inconvenient truth corresponds to the nonexistent guidance to newly qualified teachers. Farrell mentions that some novice teachers experience great difficulties when, on their first day of work, they face the same challenges as their experienced coworkers. This usually leaves them helpless and brings severe classroom management limitations to the fore. Furthermore, Farrell highlights the limited contact between teacher education programs and their graduate students. In other words, during the first years of work, most novice teachers do not feel prepared to deal with real classroom situations, increasing hours of unpaid work, school trips, marking, large-size classes, and so on, a common situation in schools and universities worldwide.

In Colombia, Cabeza et al. (2018) draw attention to the teaching education circumstances in the country. They mention that most teacher education programs do not place an emphasis either on teaching practice or on pedagogical research. As a result, most elementary and high school teachers lack the practical and theoretical foundations to become professionally

competent. In that sense, improving educational standards is crucial; well-qualified teachers imply optimal student progress.

In a similar view, Viáfara González (2007) points out the importance of providing powerful tools that enrich the pedagogical and professional competences of preservice teachers. One such tool is reflection, which allows preservice teachers to make informed decisions about their practice.

### Delving Into Teachers' Knowledge

Although the concept of teacher knowledge has been long studied, proposals like Shulman's (1987) are somehow restrictive. His typology includes seven types of teacher knowledge: content knowledge; general pedagogical knowledge; curriculum knowledge; pedagogical content knowledge; knowledge of learners; knowledge of educational contexts; and knowledge of educational aims, purposes, and values. However, we believe it is time to recognize that teachers should not be seen as individuals who merely possess pedagogical, theoretical, and context knowledge. In addition, teachers' diverse backgrounds and copious life experiences should be considered, as these shape their identities and philosophies of teaching. Thus, teachers can better comprehend their teaching as a situated practice within their educational contexts.

In language learning, progress has been made over the last decades as conceptions have moved from a merely instrumental view of language to a focus on sociocultural perspectives that allow for the construction of new knowledge (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Freeman & Richards, 2008). Furthermore, there has been a reconceptualization of the role of the language, the language users, and how teachers' agency leads to professional confidence to produce positive outcomes (Freeman, 2018). No longer should ELT teachers' classroom performance be measured in terms of their mastery of specific language or teaching skills; instead, the outcomes in English language teacher

education can be depicted in terms of the teachers' confidence to use those language/skills in practice.

Our perspective to conceive a knowledge base in language teacher education aligns well with Freeman (2018) and also incorporates Blömeke and Delaney's (2012) view, fusing the twofold nature of teachers' professional competence (cognitive abilities and affective-motivational characteristics). We agree with such a transformative way of knowledge-base generation, which can be achieved "through changes in the field of knowledge and through the changes driven by the work that knowledge supports" (Freeman, 2018, p. 5). We also advocate for acknowledging the teachers' teaching identities and paths, highlighting the value of pedagogical knowledge in teacher education. Two definitions will be used in the context of this study:

1. Pedagogical knowledge alludes to the knowledge of theories of learning, general principles and approaches to instruction and assessment, as well as planning aspects such as lesson structure, classroom organization and management, student motivation, and other knowledge of learners (e.g., Shulman, 1987; Grossman & Richert, 1988).
2. Pedagogical content knowledge embodies the knowledge of teaching and learning specific to a topic and grade level (Gess-Newsome, 2015).

In light of these considerations, we believe that for the context of English language educators, the concept of teacher education has to go beyond knowledge, strategies, and tactics to embody a well-rounded construct that addresses the fusion of pedagogical knowledge (with a dual focus on the teacher and the learner dimensions), pedagogical content knowledge (including the specificities of second and foreign language learning), and the intersections with the teaching context and culture. Teacher education shall surpass the normative nature that has long ruled its action and should allow for the strengthening

of teachers' capacities to learn and fuse personal, academic, and professional knowledge. It is essential to understand that teacher education is a context-dependent construct that evolves with geopolitical and social transformations and with the needs of the target communities of learners and teachers.

## Method

This study followed an exploratory qualitative methodology framed upon an interpretative paradigm. The participants in this study were 15 English language teachers from a public university in Colombia. Their ages range from 23 to 50 years old. They all hold bachelor's degrees in Modern Languages, and two have postgraduate studies. Fourteen participants graduated from the same university and bachelor's program. Furthermore, the significant variation, according to age and professional teaching experience, gave us a broader perspective on teaching concepts and stances.

The study revolves around the University's English extension program, which consists of eight levels, each with 80 hours of face-to-face instruction. Each level is addressed to a particular population: children (Levels 1–2) to adults (Levels 6–8). By the end of the program, students are expected to acquire a B1 English level of proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

Due to unfavorable results in the English-level achievement of the graduate students, the coordination of the program decided to take further action. As a result, class observations and follow-up sessions were held with some of the teachers in the program. In the findings of this pilot phase, it was possible to diagnose some existing difficulties for these teachers. Consequently, it seemed reasonable to inquire about why students do not reach the English level they are supposed to and determine any possible correlations among the teachers' identified difficulties.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Two instruments were used for data collection: a questionnaire and a focus group. The questionnaire had five sections that inquired about the participants' professional development and the methodologies in language education, mainly regarding the use of 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills. The focus group was developed to obtain in-depth responses. The grounded theory approach was used to perform a comparative analysis of collected data and the construction of a theory based on those data. We triangulated the data and implemented face and content validity measures.

### Findings and Discussion

#### Inside Out: Personal and Context-Based Hurdles for Teachers

The central inquiry leading this study lies in teachers' difficulties regarding the lack of language

proficiency, practice-based challenges, and teacher awareness. Table 1 summarizes the categories and subcategories that we identified.

#### Language Proficiency

Bearing in mind that the common denominator among the participating teachers is their profession as English language teachers, it was found that one feature of their performance that seems to worry everyone is language proficiency. In agreement with Murdoch (1994), the most valued aspect of a non-native English speaker teacher is high *proficiency in the target language*. Hence, based on the results found, we argue that this area demands further development not only because proficiency is associated with the command and mastery of the language but also because it relates to the teachers' "pedagogical and methodological preparation, experience, philosophy of teaching

**Table 1.** Categories and Subcategories of the Study

Core category	Categories	Subcategories
Inside out: Personal and context-based hurdles for teachers	Language proficiency	Proficiency in the target language
	Practice-based challenges	The gap between theory and practice
		Inefficient mentoring experiences
		Classroom management
		Technology-assisted learning scenarios: A road not paved yet
Language teacher awareness	Language learning: A call to teach	
	Language teachers' cultural awareness	
	Teachers' role in promoting learners' self-awareness	

and social commitment” (Cárdenas Ramos & Chaves Varón, 2013, p. 329).

When asked about their perceived proficiency in teaching English, the participants acknowledged diverse sources to support their answer, including assessing their proficiency through international exams (TOEFL, IELTS) and their experience and practice speaking English. Nonetheless, it is not just a matter of having language skills since most reported difficulties are associated with language use and endorsement of academic language. His language command is also connected to the teachers’ confidence in the classroom and the learners. In other words, an inefficient command of the language, be it English in this case, “can affect the self-esteem and professional status of the teacher and interfere with simple teaching procedures. It can keep the teacher from fulfilling the pedagogical requirements of a more communicative approach to language teaching” (Ghasemband & Hashim, 2013, p. 891).

During the focus group, the participating teachers mentioned that nowadays, there are colleagues who are still not language proficient, and even so, they manage to graduate from their bachelor’s programs and get a job. Their inquisitorial claim suggests the imbalances between successful development in the classroom and poor language proficiency. Similarly, Cuesta Medina et al. (2019) report that it is pivotal for teachers to be aware of the pitfalls in the language. They can use appropriate learning strategies to monitor language learning or other professional development opportunities.

The participants of this study visualize the strengthening of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) as a professional obligation because it empowers teachers and learners to access knowledge in numerous scenarios (Teng Fatt, 1991). Thus, it is essential to pinpoint how some strategies teachers implement might be favorable when they consistently work to improve their language skills. For instance, it is recom-

mended to spend some time in an English-speaking country, establish more straightforward plans such as always using English (Cárdenas Ramos & Chaves Varón, 2013), and utilize diverse sources of input in the form of mass media, music, video, podcasting, and movie streaming services.

Based on the previous assertions, we argue that teachers cannot focus only on achieving their target language level performance but “what the act of language teaching entails” (Cuesta Medina et al., 2019, p. 46). Furthermore, their mission is to find strategies that help them tackle their difficulties. They have a myriad of options ahead to overcome their language pitfalls and understand the dynamic nature of the English language by taking advantage of the opportunities that are made available through publishing companies, private and governmental organizations, and local Secretaries and Ministries of Education while being able to make decisions to accommodate both formal and informal learning scenarios.

#### **Practice-Based Challenges**

**Gap Between Theory and Practice.** The gap between theory and practice was identified when teachers experienced a vast difference between the knowledge they acquired during their university teacher education and the reality they faced in the classroom. They talked about the teaching pedagogies they received as learners since those were not as simple to implement as they seemed. When they started their teaching practicum, some teachers felt that the teaching knowledge imparted at university was inappropriate for facing real-life classroom challenges. Findings revealed that most participants experienced frustration during their practicum experience because they faced two significant challenges: teaching and learning to teach, a trend documented by Hudson et al. (2008).

The world the participants had built around effective teaching and learning practices conflicted



with the teaching reality they were exposed to. Hence, our findings match previous studies (Anderson, 2004) in that the participants, during their practicum, were not prepared. During the teaching practicum, teachers experimented with different challenges, like classroom management issues, and they realized they required more than applying learned theories to take control of the class and construct compelling teaching experiences. In this sense, it is paramount to consider that observing sessions and reading about teaching is not enough for preservice teachers; they should be allowed to practice the theory they learn before entering the practicum stage (Calderhead, 1988).

In like manner, Fajardo Castañeda and Miranda Montenegro (2015) imply that during the teaching practicum, the knowledge that preservice teachers gain when faced with the complexities of actual classroom practices lets them reinforce and enhance their positive attitudes, motivation, and engagement toward the teaching profession. Finally, a noticeable gap shown by teachers was related to the traditional methodologies used by their mentors, which they echoed in their classrooms. At the beginning of their teaching practice, their classes emphasized learning grammatical structures and isolated vocabulary lists. At times, this focus lasted long until they realized the emphasis should be on communication. However, they recognized that it was a long route of discoveries dictated by the whole teaching experience rather than by the learning they had formerly acquired. Findings in Liu's (2005) study reveal that novice teachers tend to adopt and follow their teachers' strategies and methods when they were school and university learners.

**Inefficient Mentoring Experiences.** Mentoring, viewed as a reciprocal learning exchange between a mentor and a mentee, fosters self-development and helps mentees build on their autonomy and agency, alleviating self-doubt and feelings of anxiety about meeting teaching expectations, especially in situations where mentees are new to the teaching profession

(Cuesta Medina, 2022). Hence, mentoring suggests the existence of a scaffolded partnership environment.

When examining the participants' past mentoring experiences, more issues associated with their practicum (during undergraduate education) were considered. At that time, each participant's experience was shaped by the particularities of their practicum: the school context in which they had to teach; the assigned practicum supervisor; and the monitoring, support, and encouragement received by their mentors (i.e., the head teachers at the schools). The one common point was that all the participants had high school teachers as mentors during their practicum.

For instance, Teacher 3 argued that his mentor was conscious of his needs and helped him to handle and surpass specific situations that occurred in the classroom. This is precisely what Wang and Odell (2007) emphasize about the role of mentors. They are in charge of helping mentees to succeed in the possible pitfalls that can overshadow their skills and overall performance. Mentors also help build attitudes toward the teaching world, reinforcing the teachers' identity as educators.

Unfortunately, not all participants' experiences were as satisfactory as that of Teacher 3. Most teachers complained about the poor feedback they received from their mentors. For example, Teacher 11 said he just received one short observation about his performance in the classroom, which, consequently, was not enough to answer his teaching concerns.

On the other hand, Teacher 14 mentioned that her mentor sporadically visited the school to observe her classes. She indicated that the classroom head teacher was the one who supported her in some specific instances. In Colombian practicum scenarios, mentors are generally assigned by the universities/programs where students pursue their degrees; however, in some instances, schools (or institutions) where students attend their practicum also assign their mentors, establishing a dual formative mentorship scheme.

A more critical case was exposed by Teacher 4, who expressed her impotence in handling discipline issues in the group under her charge. She notes: “I couldn’t tolerate this situation anymore; [I felt that] I was wrong about choosing my career.” Reflecting upon this, she alluded that this frustrating experience was mainly due to her mentor’s lack of guidance and neglect. Hence, we assert that going through the practicum without proper scaffolding from a committed, effective, and competent mentor can significantly affect preservice teachers’ perceptions and attitudes, leading them toward negative perceptions and judgments of their professional lives (Maphalala, 2013).

Teachers generally wished to have mentors who helped them improve and reflect on their teaching practices. They also would have liked to receive sufficient training concerning the possible populations and contexts assigned to them in their practicum. Accordingly, they recommended that teaching programs be more selective and careful when choosing mentors for preservice teachers since, as they consider, this role cannot be assumed just by a good teacher but by a capable professional with the training required to teach, guide, monitor, and encourage their mentees’ teaching experiences (Orland, 2001).

**Classroom Management.** Classroom management has been “a pebble in teachers’ shoes,” as it represents a constant and significant challenge for teachers (Sánchez Solarte, 2019). The participants in our study are no exception; they have also experienced classroom management difficulties as one of the significant challenges in their careers.

Therefore, it is vital to understand what classroom management implies. Several authors agree that classroom management skills represent an effective learning environment (Çakmak, 2019; Marashi & Assgar, 2019; Şanlı, 2019). Through classroom management, teachers tailor the space and conditions in the classroom, monitoring the students’ behavior

and encouraging them to get involved in the classroom activities (Baş, 2019), as well as negotiating classroom rules with the students (Şanlı, 2019).

In addition to the existing gaps between theory and practice and our participants’ inefficient mentoring practices, findings revealed other issues that affected their classroom management skills during their practicum. These were classroom size, poor teaching experience in classroom management skills, lesson planning, and teacher’s additional roles.

The participants started having difficulties when they were aware of the large class sizes. As Teacher 4 said, “I wondered how I was going to manage such large groups: They included 40 to 45 children.” This evidences that large classroom sizes represent, from the start, one of the most common struggles for novice teachers (Sánchez Solarte, 2019) in their new teaching context. This situation, however, seems to contradict what Teacher 11 asserted: “[Prior to the practicum] we did exercises based on possible situations we could face in the classroom.” However, it is worth noting that no participant mentioned receiving explicit instruction on handling class size from their mentors.

Notably, the previous situation validates the notion that Simonsen et al. (2019) predicted regarding how unlikely it is for teachers to enter the teaching field with suitable classroom management preparation, eventually leading preservice teachers to frustration. Teaching skills improve with time and experience, so novice teachers should be given all the assistance they need before starting their careers. They are expected to be fully prepared to face classroom realities once they start formal teaching. For instance, Teacher 4 endorsed this idea concerning the lack of preparation, which symbolized her teaching experience. In her opinion, she would have liked to have more time in the practicum to do some research and to receive more guidance about all possible situations within the classroom; thus, she would have been better prepared to address difficult situations more successfully.



Additionally, participants mentioned the poor feedback from their teacher mentors regarding their classroom management skills; thus, they remained unsure if they were doing the right thing. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to recognize that the lack of knowledge about multifaceted aspects of classroom management (Baş, 2019) hinders the teacher's performance. In other words, we believe mentors are responsible for advising preservice teachers during the practicum, clearly indicating the multiple roles they are expected to perform within the classroom so that a lack of awareness in certain classroom matters does not hamper their work. In this sense, mentors also must instruct future teachers on handling the most common classroom situations.

Sánchez Solarte (2019) considers planning as one of classroom management's three principal dimensions. She explains that overpreparing is strongly suggested for novice and in-service teachers. This planning should include a clear goal meeting students' needs, specific roles, materials, equipment, how learners will interact, and which routines will be established (Collier-Meek et al., 2019). Following these routines avoids chaotic classrooms and thus creates a safe environment for learners, with effective time management. Furthermore, Sánchez Solarte (2019) suggests not to overreact or take things personally in situations like the one mentioned by Teacher 8: "My lesson plan never turned out the way I expected." This perfectly illustrates the sense of frustration that teachers might experiment when things turn out to be the opposite of what they had planned in the first place. However, it is necessary to understand that such things might happen, and it is okay as this allows teachers to improve their skills. The point here is not to overreact, take it personally, or lose sight of what came out correctly.

The last issue the teachers addressed was the teacher's additional roles in the classroom. The main concern was about parenting. Teacher 9 said:

Honestly, I was never explained about parent management. I think it is essential to be taught how to deal with parents, how to set boundaries, because, sometimes, as they might look older, they think they can treat you with no respect.

In this regard, Ming-tak (2008) underlines parents' important role in the student's educational process. She sees the need to create good relationships with parents and invites teachers to give in, work with parents concerning similar goals, and share the responsibility for their children's learning. In the teaching practicum or the core curriculum, attention is rarely placed on parenting management.

**Technology-Assisted Learning Scenarios: A Road Not Paved Yet.** In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in second/foreign language teaching and learning scenarios is becoming crucial to grow and develop (Alkamel & Chouthaiwale, 2018), and everyday new and more robust technologies are built. Such fast technological emergence suggests a proper alignment to educational needs and contexts is nurtured. As some participants argued, the lack of knowledge and training regarding the use of ICT in the classroom is locking the path towards a broader vision of new tendencies in language education. To illustrate, the context in which the participating teachers work is equipped with several resources to implement ICT in the classroom. Besides the regular board, the teachers have a permanent internet connection, a projector, and a speaker in the classroom. There are also computer rooms, among other digital resources. However, all these technological resources are useless, considering that some teachers do not know how to take maximum advantage of these technological aids. So, they continue using traditional teaching methods where learning experiences for students may not be compelling (Arias Soto et al., 2011).

One of the questionnaire items referred to using ICT as a tool for teaching English. In this regard, some teachers argued their use of technology, referring to

the mandatory educational platform that enables them to share content and assess students. Conversely, many classes are based on the textbook assigned according to students' English level. When asked about using other educative webpages or technological resources for learning languages, most teachers limited their answers to some webpages to play games to learn vocabulary and others to listen to music. One participant (pursuing a master's degree in ICT) gave comprehensive, appropriate, and relevant information about ICT use in the classroom. Reflecting on this issue, teachers showed they were aware of the meaningfulness and usefulness of ICT for learning languages. Although they are doing their best to learn how to include ICT in their teaching scenarios, its application remains a source of tension for them (Bouziane, 2013). Notwithstanding, teachers report inadequacies in having vast knowledge about platforms for the educational delivery of courses and lessons, and many reported a lack of instructional design of activities for online/blended environments and content curation of tools and other sources.

#### **Language Teacher Awareness**

Drawing on the seminal work of Wright and Bolitho (1993), we argue that language awareness is an essential component of teacher education, as this allows teachers to gradually find a natural connection between their knowledge of the language and their teaching practices. This enables teachers to broaden their comprehension of language phenomena and the dimensions through which they will be studied, learned, and taught.

Most of the interviewed teachers coincided in their assumptions about their own experiences as learners and teachers. They reflected upon the vital role they play in students' learning and upon their own personal and professional growth. The discussion around this category allowed us to identify some concerns mentioned below.

**Language Learning: A Call to Teach.** When discussing the reasons to be an English language teacher, participants mentioned language learning as one of their most significant personal interests and the idea of becoming teachers to help others by sharing and transmitting their knowledge about the language. Some participants mentioned that their call to teach originated from their experience as language learners. Some others referred their call to teach to their family's teaching background, to which they were exposed since childhood. Notwithstanding the reasons behind the teachers' calling, this involves, as Palmer (1983) argues, the teachers' ability to identify and to be aware of their weaknesses and strengths framed within the more general understanding of who they are as persons, what they value, and their perceived place in the world. This consideration emphasizes the teachers' abilities to self-monitor and understand their inner world regarding thoughts, emotions, behavior, and personality.

Hence, we assert that participants know their role as teachers since they were committed to achieving effective student learning results. With this in mind, it is fundamental to identify one's calling to teach and be aware of the inner self (Kung, 2013). Said otherwise, participants acknowledge the role they play in their specific work environment. In this sense, they are led by the internal conscious identity that links their love for teaching with their personal and professional values, beliefs, goals, and motivations.

**Language Teachers' Cultural Awareness.** When asked about the reason for pursuing a career in language teaching, some teachers argued that their initial interest in studying languages was to learn about culture, education, and society; and, from a more psychological point of view, to understand people's perceptions about the world. Indeed, culture is critical in learning languages; they both are intricately connected and lose their significance if separated: "A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of language" (Brown, 1981, p. 171). Consequently, when a

learner acquires a new language, they also acquire the culture of that language.

In the same line of thought, when referring to the development of 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills, teachers mentioned their commitment to teaching some cultural concerns. For instance, critical thinking skills are promoted in their classrooms when the lesson focuses on analyzing and comparing students' cultural backgrounds and those in which English is the official language. However, the need to continuously and systematically frame the lessons to align these goals to the expected competences and actions remains on the ground since the journey to embrace cross-cultural connections that lead to more solid policies and pedagogies towards multiculturalism is still under development.

**Teachers' Role to Promote Learners' Self-Awareness.** To approach this idea, teachers were asked to reflect upon the ideal profile for an English language teacher. Among their thoughts and the characteristics mentioned, they emphasized the importance of fostering learners' self-awareness in the classroom. They also alluded to the integration and promotion of meaningful learning among students, mainly when linking the class content with their personal lives (background, feelings, experiences, and memories). "One shall trust in students' own capacities and be able to learn about their realities" (Teacher 3). Through their reflection, it was possible to note that these teachers' thoughts revolved around the importance of helping learners become aware of their learning styles and preferences, as well as their weaknesses and strengths regarding language learning.

## Conclusion

Our findings can serve as a departure point for tertiary-level institutions and faculty to endorse responsibilities for the growth of the teachers taking their programs and for teachers to transform and build new learning and teaching experiences based on their paths and the context in which they are immersed.

In this study, we value how teachers' former learning experiences affect their practice. We believe that, although there is a constant urge for some teachers to improve their practice, not everyone recognizes the gaps to fill, be they due to their lack of experience and systematicity in self- and co-assessment processes, to insufficient exposure to such strategies (or systems) in their institutions, or to the discrepancy between theory and practice in real teaching contexts. The more aware and engaged teaching staff are of the importance of these inside-out practices, the more likely they will be to design compelling learning experiences. Nevertheless, the growth and effectiveness of teacher education programs depend on the long-lasting investment and actions of teacher educators and the educational systems granting their support. These must be well-defined and monitored and endure over time to ensure sustainability.

In addition, this study unveiled a common instrumentalization of language teacher education that focuses on language issues rather than on an integrative way of understanding, using, teaching, and learning the language. Therefore, the study also calls for quality assurance plans that enact change through assessment, monitoring, and support systems that promote strategic plans to overcome difficulties.

Literacy skills shall be a constant among teacher education programs. Hence, teachers and learners develop the confidence to create different communication forms and build specific learning scenarios that let them grow personally and professionally. At the same time, they engage in new modes of meaning-making, collaborating, and learning *with* and *from* others. Co-constructing with peers and mentors implies demystifying existing mentoring structures that exert unidirectional power actions that have mainly relied on the instructors, and instead, bridge existing gaps and trace connections with others around the globe and with new sources and ways to use and represent knowledge, especially when changes in the field of

language education have taken place due to the world geopolitics transitions. Policy-making shall support the endorsement of mentoring schemes in educational institutions, highlighting teachers' impact and gradual scaffolding as they learn to develop their confidence and agency in their personal and professional domains. Inter-institutional synergies can also be generated, building support ecosystems that help communities embrace collegial work and growth.

All in all, this signifies a fundamental action in the present times, in which the confinement caused by COVID-19 posed many challenges but also helped open many doors for optimizing remote teaching, learning, and the combination of blended and online systems. We should be aware of new, enhanced, unconventional learning scenarios where teachers and learners co-exist and co-design, calling for more accessible, more equitable ways to access education.

### Further Research

Having identified the purpose of this study, we recommend concentrating on finding the existing correlations between the factors that hinder and boost efficient language teaching. In that sense, it would be enriching to turn this research study into a longitudinal one since the generalizability of the results would be limited. This change of direction could provide a closer approach to teachers' performance in managing and overcoming their difficulties. Another line of research could inquire about the differences between teachers working in public or private educational settings. Having information in this regard could illustrate the possible performance gaps that might exist among public and private university teachers (if any) and shed light on the curriculum reforms to be made in the teacher education programs, with a particular focus on the design and delivery of practicum courses and other core formative spaces across the curriculum. Lastly, further research should consider inquiring a bigger group of teachers nationwide (or globally) about

the aspects they wish to be included in their teacher education programs so that there is an extended baseline to determine and follow up on the factors that boost efficient teaching (and therefore learning), as well as to help redefine teacher education practices.

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