# An exploratory study of recent trends in ELT Master's programs: Insights from stakeholders[1]

Un Estudio Exploratorio de las recientes tendencias en el Programa de Maestría de Enseñanza de Inglés

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## Abstract

This article reports on a mixed-methods research study in five English Language Teaching Master's programs in Colombia. The purpose was to identify trends in research techniques, curricular and pedagogical interventions that MA candidates and alumni dealt with in their theses. This study identified prevalent research methods, techniques, and instruments. The data collection methods included documentary analysis, four focus groups with students, four informal talks with the faculty, four interviews with the coordinators of the programs, and surveys with graduate students, professors, thesis advisors and administrators of these programs. Results suggest preference for action research on issues of language skills, curriculum design, cognitive and affective factors. Pedagogical innovations dealt with ICT, ELT methods, and language learning strategies. Another result indicates that program participants considered the master's programs as the most enriching professional development opportunity they have had. This study makes a call to local and national governments to continue funding continued graduate education and to make it a policy independent of partisan agendas.

**Keywords:** English language teaching, research, masters, Teacher qualification, professional training.

## Resumen

Este artículo reporta un estudio de métodos mixtos en cinco programas de maestría en enseñanza del inglés en Colombia. El propósito del proyecto fue identificar tendencias en los métodos de investigación y en las estrategias de intervención que los candidatos y exalumnos de programas de maestría abordaron en sus proyectos de investigación. Este estudio identificó los métodos, técnicas e instrumentos de investigación prevalentes. Los métodos de recolección de datos incluyeron análisis documental, grupos focales, charlas informales, entrevistas y encuestas a estudiantes, profesores, asesores de tesis y administradores de estos programas. Los resultados indican que en la mayoría de los programas el objeto de estudio elegido por el cuerpo estudiantil de MA tiene que ver con las habilidades de lenguaje, la motivación y el diseño curricular. Los resultados sugieren que los programas aplican la investigación cualitativa, especialmente la investigación-acción. El estudio también encontró que estos se concentraban en preguntas sobre factores afectivos, habilidades lingüísticas y desarrollo profesional. Otro resultado indicó que los estudiantes y exalumnos describieron su participación en el programa de MA como la oportunidad de desarrollo profesional más enriquecedora en su experiencia académica. Este estudio hace un llamado al gobierno local y nacional para continuar invirtiendo en educación superior continuada al nivel de postgrado para convertirla en una iniciativa educativa con independencia de presiones políticas.

**Palabras clave:** la enseñanza del inglés, investigación, maestrías, cualificación docente, desarrollo profesional

nglish Language Teaching (ELT) Master's in Colombia arose from the needs of the educational sector to respond to the demands of social and economic development. This explains why from 2000 to 2016 the number of ELT Masters increased from two to 14 (Viáfara & Largo, 2018). For these authors, "MA graduates and candidates asserted that increasing of conceptual frameworks supported different features of their practices as they gained clarity about the teaching and learning processes and re-shaped their pedagogical actions" (p. 110). Our study is an exploration of the research work done at this level to contribute to the understanding of the developments in ELT in Colombia and advocates for backing graduate programs.

The Colombian government has recognized that the country requires "to develop the capacity of its citizens to be fluent in at least one foreign language" (MEN, 2005, para. 1); moreover, the results have shown that high school and undergraduate students still present deficiencies in English language proficiency after several years of exposure to it in classrooms. Accordingly, this mixed-methods study was intended to determine what candidates and graduates have been researching about to change this situation, considering that no valid or systematic information is available about the findings and the impact of such projects in their corresponding settings. This paper reports on the research topics and designs and the most impacted areas informed by candidates and alumni from five ELT Master's programs in Colombia.

# Literature review

In this section, we made three assumptions: a) MA programs represent one of the most important sources of professional development (Villegas-Reimers, 2003; Truscott de Mejía, 2016; Viáfara & Largo, 2018; Buendía & Macías, 2019), b) reflection is a sine qua non condition in continued teacher education (Hernández, 2015; Viáfara & Largo, 2018; Nuñez & Tellez, 2015), and c) curriculum design and implementation is the materialization of teaching initiatives and skills that translate in enhanced teaching practices (Graves, 2000; Nunan,1999).

## Master's programs and professional development (PD)

When pursuing teaching education programs, different authors have suggested different types and models. De Lella (as cited in Fandiño-Parra, 2017) mentions that the different models articulate viewpoints on education, teaching, learning and teacher training while describing the strategies and interactions that affect them. He believes that these models coincide and complement each other. They include the tasks and obligations assigned to the teacher. The author refers to four models in teacher training:

(1) The Practical-artisan model which sees the teaching process as the transmission of professional knowledge throughout a process of adaptation; this model takes into consideration concepts, habits, values and practices; (2) the Academic model which includes the competencies needed to teach the subject matter focusing on the discipline itself; (3) the Technical-efficientist model that addresses teaching through speeches and practices, following an established curriculum to accomplish some objectives and to assess the students' performance; and finally, (4) the Hermeneutic-reflective model that assumes teaching in a socio-political context in which the teacher takes into account specific circumstances related to real life situations in order to reflect, analyze and transform or improve the reality.

On the other hand, Acosta et al. (as cited in Fandiño-Parra, 2017) sustains that Teacher Professional Development Programs can be placed in three basic models considering an epistemological and methodological basis; first, the positivist, behaviorist and orthodox model according to which the teacher acts as an instructor, he implements different techniques and strategies, refers to a variety of methodologies and pedagogical issues. Second, the humanist, constructivist and existentialist model that conceives the teacher a counselor that refers to different procedures, activities and tools to guide the students in their learning, taking into account their feelings and thoughts from a psychological point of view. Third, the integral and dialogic model that approaches the teaching from a psycho-pedagogical perspective to a cognitive, socio-affective, and communicative orientation in the teaching-learning process in which both teachers and students work cooperatively towards the achievement of goals.

Teacher education at the graduate level is considered one of the most important achievements in the professional development (PD) of EFL teachers around the world. According to Villegas-Reimers (2003); "PD, in a broad sense, refers to the development of a person in his or her professional role" (p. 11). This has become a concern for EFL teachers who have seen the necessity to improve and reflect on their knowledge and practices. As Pettis (1997) points out, "development of teaching competence is our professional responsibility, and we can undertake a wide range of activities in fulfillment of this obligation" (p. 70). These activities integrate principles, knowledge, and skills. Not only teachers but also the different educational entities are aware of the value of seeing English teachers as professionals. For Ur (2002), "thriving English teachers' organizations now exist in most countries, as do journals and regular seminars and conferences; professional bodies have set up courses and tests to accredit teachers" (p. 392), in other words, graduate studies have become part of the EFL culture because teachers are now more aware of their importance of preparation to respond to the needs of their schools. Nowadays, educational communities offer resources to boost English language teaching, for example, "there are courses to take, journals to read, colleagues to talk with and observe, classroom research to conduct, textbooks to review, and workshops to attend" (Crandall as cited in Pettis, 2002, p. 70).

In addition, Masters in ELT have been recognized as an important PD resource (Stapleton & Shao, 2018; Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2014; Folse & Brummett, 2006). This is also highlighted by Truscott de Mejía (2016), who examined teacher education for EFL teachers in bilingual contexts in Colombia and discussed how PD is a way to empower teachers to face their classroom challenges. Her article cites a case study by Guzmán et al. (as cited in De Mejía, 2016), with four teachers in two cities in Colombia and found that Master's programs develop empowering attitudes among teachers who become more aware of the contributions they can make in their settings through their initiative of sharing teaching experiences, materials or activities for their lessons, along with their interest in curriculum issues that they can intervene or change to meet the needs and expectations of their students and fellow teachers. On this subject, Truscott de Mejía describes these attitudes as "commitment, enthusiasm, reflection and respect for students and colleagues" (p. 27).

PD in Colombia is also discussed by Buendía and Macías (2019) who conducted a literature review on 25 empirical studies with in-service teachers. PD was characterized keeping in mind that their definition of the term comprised "all types of professional learning undertaken by in-service English language teachers beyond the point of initial formal teacher preparation" (p. 90). The study revealed that PD focused on "language proficiency, research skills and reflective practice, teachers' beliefs and identities, an integrated approach to teacher professional development, pedagogical skills, teaching approaches, and emerging technologies" (p. 91). This means that various areas in EFL teaching have been addressed; the authors concluded that PD has evolved to more critical models "in which basic aspects such as the design criteria for PD programs, teachers' roles, and teachers' ways of learning, have been redefined" (p. 99). They tend to recommend a bottom-up approach in planning and implementing a PD program to integrate teachers' needs, styles, and expectations. This perspective is consistent with Giraldo (2014) who identified three main areas impacted by PD: teachers' performance, teachers' awareness of their own teaching and classroom performance, and positive view of PD as a reason for improvement. Along these lines, Cuesta et al. (2019) conducted a study with 23 EFL teachers enrolled in an ELT Master's program to explore the teaching practices. These authors point how PD has "evolved from being merely involved in courses or programs provided by experts with no further or systematic follow-up, reflection, and intervention phases, to being provided within the teachers' own educational contexts" (p. 43), that is, PD started to take into account teachers' reality in its design and implementation and recognized a more active role in the attempt to change practices with more informed strategies.

## The role of reflection in teachers' practice

Reflection, as part of the skills teachers need to develop in their practice, has arisen as an important aspect in teacher education research (Cuesta et al., 2019; Hernández,

2015). A recent survey by Viáfara and Largo (2018) with 80 MA candidates and graduates from five universities collected their perceptions on the impact of such experience on their teaching. Findings suggested that the master's significantly contributed to the improvement of teaching, attributable to reflection processes while in action, which led to a better understanding of their settings, innovation in the lesson design, and acquisition of research skills. They identified limitations due to the lack of time, space, resources, and support from administrators or co-workers. These authors suggest that programs "need to create and strengthen alliances with the participants' working institutions" because "these associations can become avenues to bridge gaps between traditional and innovative plans and practices in both scenarios" (p. 116). The researchers also concluded that there is a need for the expansion of the programs' curricula "to go beyond teaching strategies and related research to include more issues regarding language education policy and program administration" (p. 117).

By the same token, Macias (2018) discusses the importance of reflection in ELT highlighting the fact that most teacher-education initiatives in several countries, focus either on disciplinary knowledge, or its pedagogical and methodological principles or on reflective research skills without "integrating all these aspects in their schemes for teachers' training and professional development" (p. 163). Therefore, there should be a balance "in order to provide teachers with opportunities for the training of discrete teaching classroom skills together with chances to develop high inference, reflective and reasoning skills derived from theoretical foundations and teachers' experiences" (p. 167). The balance helps teachers play a more active role with informed professional performance in teaching, supervision, mentoring, administration, and policy-making.

Regarding reflection in teacher education programs, Korthagen, Loughran, and Russell (as cited in Rideout & Koot, 2009) describe some principles that can be taken into account in order to promote reflection in the pre and in-service teachers; they are meaningful collaboration, supporting learning and teaching communities, the presence of cohort groups to support the teaching practice, and writing tasks and research. These principles help improve the teaching and learning practices by forming teaching communities which facilitate professional growth because by doing writing tasks and by conducting research, teachers develop self-reflection and therefore enhance their teaching practices.

Calderhead and Gates (as cited in Fandiño-Parra, 2011) highlight the importance of reflection in teacher education indicating that it involves teachers' values, attitudes, beliefs, and cognitive skills that are concretized in the building of knowledge represented in vocabulary to report and record the teaching practice, on the basis of theoretical foundations that are connected to experience and context. The same authors recommend varied actions to foster reflection in teaching education programs, for example, promoting analytical approaches towards teaching and learning, encouraging teachers to take responsibility and be autonomous in their own practice, enhancing educational theories, and developing principled basis for classwork.

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## The Role of Curriculum Design

As part of curriculum design and implementation, language teaching comprises different approaches that define the teaching practice; Barahona (2014) theorizes three main models: First, the craft model that sees teaching as doing and learning by imitating the teacher, that is, knowledge is acquired as a result of observation, instruction and practice; second, the applied science model in which teaching is carried out by thinking and doing and the learning to teach is the application of the theory learnt; finally, the reflective model that conceives teaching as knowing what do, so teachers learn to teach by reflecting on their own practice. Moreover, Barahona states that "EFL contexts seem to use more integrative models in which different types of knowledge is integrated through the curriculum" (p. 48); the author specifically refers to models intended to integrate theory and practice and transform teachers intellectually because these models promote reflection, social change, strategic thinking, and exploratory research.

Schools have implemented curriculum innovations which master's program graduates need to be aware of. Curriculum design has progressed and since needs vary, "when you design a course, you design it for a specific group of people, in a specific setting, for a specific amount of time; in short, for a specific context" (Graves, 2000, p.15). The same author claims that since there are several models of curriculum, designing courses must assume objectives based on the following aspects: defining content, people's needs, physical environment, nature of course and institution, time, and teaching tools. Likewise, contexts have a variety of features that allow teachers to start at any point and to reflect on the fact that there is no sequence in their accomplishment. This claim aligns with Nunan (1994) who states that curriculum development is cyclical and interactive for it begins with any element and changes through its development, depending on the needs and expectations of the stakeholders, their contexts, their proficiency level, their teaching-learning conditions, and most importantly, the communication purposes to be promoted.

An example of curriculum design and implementation in Colombia is the one proposed by the Ministry of Education (MEN, 2005, 2016b and 2016c) whose purpose is to set guidelines and standards to make citizens more competitive in the globalized world (Bonilla & Tejada, 2016). To operationalize the theory behind this curricular project, MEN (2006) define the term bilingualism as "the different degrees of fluency with which an individual is able to communicate in more than one language and culture. These degrees depend on the context with which each person copes" (p.5). However, this definition has been challenged because English is not necessarily "the only language that might open the doorway to success and economic empowerment" (Fandiño-Parra et al. as cited in Bonilla & Tejada, 2016, p. 189). Moreover, Valdés and Figueroa (1994) define bilingualism as "the condition of 'knowing' two languages rather than one. […] A strict interpretation of the expression would require that one

view of bilingualism as a condition in which there are two 'native' language systems in one individual" (p. 7); this implies that being bilingual makes a person function as a native speaker in both languages. The authors clarify that the knowing condition implies the presence of two languages no matter the degree of knowledge and also define bilingualism as "a common human condition in which an individual possesses more than one language competence" (p. 8). Gass and Selinker (2008) ratify this perspective and define as bilingual a person "whose language is in a steady state and who has learned and now knows two languages" (p. 25). The notions of bilingualism and curriculum design are and should continue being, problematized in teacher education as well as in the schools themselves.

## Methodology

The purpose of our study was to identify and describe trends in the research processes of five master's programs in Colombia. To accomplish this goal, a mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2009) helped us collect quantitative and qualitative data concurrently and then compare the data to determine if there is convergence, differences, or some combination. We engaged in data collection and analysis that intertwined qualitative and quantitative data to understand the issues addressed "to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic" (Morse as cited in Creswell & Plano, 2018, p. 68).

The participants were 28 professors, 79 students, 31 graduates, 12 advisors, and 5 administrators from five Master's in Colombia located in Barranquilla, Bogotá, and Manizales. They belonged to four universities, two private (Barranquilla and Bogotá) and two public (Bogotá and Manizales). They were chosen on a convenience sampling basis (Cozby, 2008) considering the following criteria: 1) Be available and have the consent of the program administration; 2) Be older than five years with the expectation of having already graduated more than one cohort and have on-going research projects; 3) the program was delivered fully in English; 4) Emphasize ELT in the curriculum, and 5) include a research component in the curricula. The participating programs are summarized in Table 1 below:

*Table 1.* Master's programs participating in the research study

| Master's program | Universities | Cities |
|---|---|---|
| Master's in English Language Teaching- Autonomous Learning Environments | University 1 | Bogota |
| Master's in English Language Teaching for Self-Directed Learning (online) | University 1 | Bogota |
| Master's in Applied Linguistics to English Language Teaching | University 2 | Bogota |
| Master's of English Language Teaching | University 3 | Barranquilla |
| Master's in English Didactics | University 4 | Manizales |

The participating universities focused on EFL teaching with a research orientation. The first university in Bogotá offers an MA in ELT emphasizing Autonomous Learning Environments and an M.A. in ELT emphasizing self-directed learning. The first program promotes reflection in practice and autonomous learning environments and is given on an on-site basis; it also offers an ICELT certificate issued by the University of Cambridge. The other is online in agreement with a U.S. university and shares the same principles concerning autonomy and reflective teaching with an additional graduate diploma in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). The second university in Bogotá offers an MA in applied linguistics to the teaching of English that proposes theories and methodologies to design curricula and materials to respond to the EFL teaching and learning needs in schools and universities. It also involves in-service language teachers in professional development and assists the Ministry of Education in policy-making decisions and adjustments. The third university in Barranquilla offers an MA in ELT whose objective is to instruct teachers in the research field to solve teaching-learning problems of their contexts. It follows a blended learning approach. The fourth university, in Manizales offers an MA in English didactics emphasizing critical and reflective pedagogy.

The data collection included documentary analysis with demographic (location, population, age, gender) and curriculum information of each program which was collected via the internet in the websites of the programs and complemented with interviews with administrators; the researchers carried out focus groups and informal talks with professors, research tutors, students and graduates to capture their views on their research experience; these focus groups were conducted in situ through face to face meetings arranged by the administrators according to the profile of the participants. All the participant master students and alumni took a survey (Appendix 1) about their research problems, data collection techniques, strategies of intervention,

research method, and their perceptions about the impact of their research projects on their settings and personal or professional life.  In interviews (Appendix 2), five administrators gave their perceptions of the research component of their programs and its impact on their contexts.

The information was analyzed on a grounded approach (Freeman, 2001) basis with inter-rater reliability procedures and data triangulation (Creswell, 2009).  Since surveys were completed both online (Quia©)  and pencil and paper, the researchers decided to upload all the survey answers to the Quia platform; for the other data collection techniques, audio-recordings were transcribed and protocols were completed while interacting with the participants. Once all the information was systematized, the three researchers coded independently the data from the surveys, the focus groups, the informal talks, and the interviews; then, as part of the triangulation process, raters agreed on the final codes that were identified in the three different views explored in the data collection (students and alumni, professors and research advisors, and administrators).

## Results and discussion

This section discusses the general findings obtained from the analysis that answered the following research questions: What type of research techniques, curricular and pedagogical interventions have been implemented in five master's programs (MP) in Colombia?  What are the main areas of reflection and intervention identified in the EFL teaching and learning processes researched by candidates in such settings? and Which are the main areas impacted by MP as professional development?

### Action Research Prevailed

Consistent with the principles stated by the Master's, the most common research methods corresponded to qualitative designs, being Action Research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1984) the most used (Figure 1). The majority of the participants, especially administrators, highlighted the benefits of Action Research in terms of flexibility to adapt instrumentation and processes to settings and the reflective component that encourages teachers to self-evaluate their practice.  In the second place, Case Studies (Creswell, 2009) appeared as common designs that helped participants focus on a very specific unit of research to draw conclusions about class phenomena.

Figure 1. Preferred Research Methods in Five Colombian ELT Master's Programs
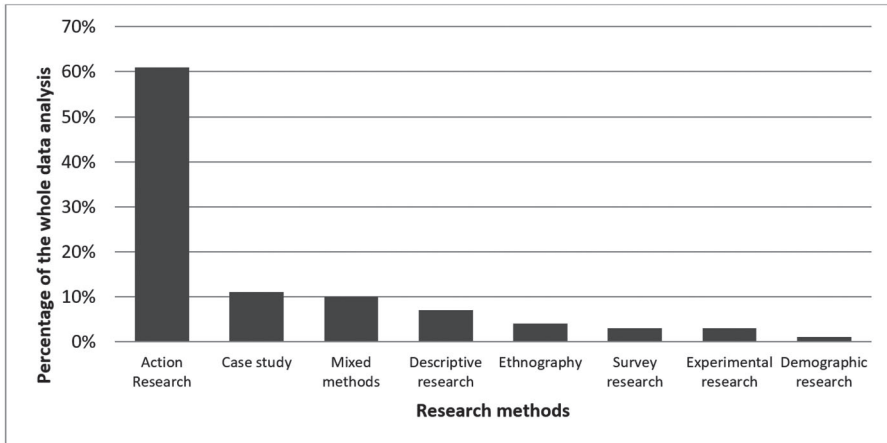


Respondents highlighted their interest in following up very specific learning situations considering that in most places, large classes make research challenging. Mixed methods arose as a current trend in which teachers had the opportunity to combine qualitative and quantitative techniques and instruments to foster validity and reliability in their studies; this method seems to be a trend since respondents referred to it as a practical way to combine varied techniques and instruments to enrich data collection and analysis. Less common methods were ethnography, descriptive research, survey research, and demographic research that were referred to as large studies that require longer periods of time and larger populations.

## Research work focused on the Four Skills and Motivation

As Figure 2 shows, the data analysis reported that participants' research work focused on the language skills and the learners' motivation towards the EFL learning process.

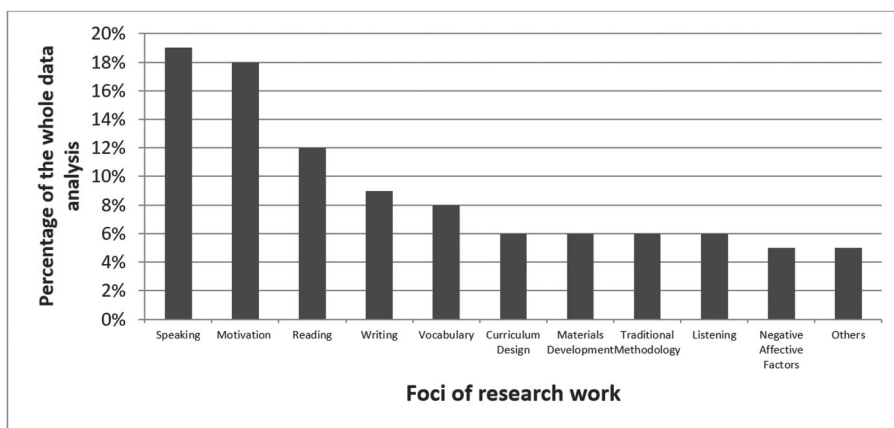*Figure 2.* Foci of Research Work in Five Colombian ELT MA Programs



Figure 2 shows that the learning of the speaking skill among the students that participated in the research projects carried out by the Master's candidates or graduates reported to be one the most problematic areas identified in the diagnostic stage of the research projects. Furthermore, as confirmed by Romaña (2015) and Hymes (1972) who discuss the challenges that most teachers face when dealing with the speaking skill, the respondents said that this weakness was represented by the students' reluctance to interact orally in spite of the authentic and meaningful input provided by teachers. The data showed that pronunciation, stress, and fluency were the weakest aspects identified in the learners' speaking performance that prevented them from smoothly expressing themselves orally. The lack of motivation of the sample populations of the research projects conducted by the participants in this study appeared as the second most common problem in the institutional contexts intervened by candidates and graduates in these Masters. This difficulty was referred to as lack of awareness of the importance of English for academic and social development since learners' expectations do not include English as an opportunity, and they did not find it meaningful in their lives. In accordance with Dornyei (1994), this factor was also related to low self-esteem, lack of enthusiasm, and reluctance to participate in the learning process, most of the time arguing that English is difficult or boring. Problems with motivation were also linked to other academic or administrative issues; for example, respondents argued that the poor language proficiency background negatively affected the learners' performance and consequently diminished their disposition to actively participate in pedagogical tasks. Additionally, the lack of resources, the limited time devoted to foreign language learning, and traditional teaching practices also reduced the learners' level of motivation since language learning turned monotonous and unattractive.

Reading and writing arose as the third most relevant trend in the research process; it was evident that in most schools these skills are not given much emphasis. The teacher-researchers said that most students referred to reading and writing as important skills; some of their testimonies stated that:

> Reading is an important skill that helps to develop the other language skills. Thus, students have improved their English and they will get better results in the Saber 11 test.
>
> (MA alumnus)

> Learning how to use the [reading] strategies allowed them to succeed in other subjects such as social studies, science and Spanish, where reading is important.
>
> (MA student)

> Writing is important because learners increased their confidence on writing; secondly, learners improved on the use of writing strategies, and third, the writing process approach also positively impacted learners' writing aspects of form.
>
> (MA alumnus)

This finding confirmed theories by Grabe (1995) and Richards and Renandya (2002) about the need to develop reading skills among learners with strategies to help them interact with the written text. According to some of the high school teachers' comments, weaknesses in this skill were due to the lack of reading preparation and practice in elementary school levels and to the curriculum gaps that did not consider reading relevant in the educational system. They also highlighted that these weaknesses in reading were also reflected in L1 performance which, in some way, explained the learners' reluctance towards reading and their lack of reading habits. Reading problems were also related to the lack of vocabulary and the absence of strategies or techniques to interpret the text which led to poor results in standardized tests, that is, learners were not able to go beyond literal reading failing to infer or argument the content of a written text. As of writing, respondents reported weaknesses stemming from the absence of a defined writing process approach (Polio, 2003; Harmer, 2011); reasons mentioned dealt with weaknesses related to the inability to follow instructions or to the absence of strategies or techniques to connect ideas in a written discourse with correct punctuation, cohesion, and coherence. L1 transfer was also one of the factors that affected this skill since learners tended to write in English with Spanish grammar and syntax; it was also noticed that learners only copied from a source without incorporating their own production or their opinions about their surrounding reality; the internet was also mentioned as a negative factor that limited the learners' creativity; additionally, writing was described as time-consuming turning it difficult for teachers to make it fit the curriculum demands in terms of time allotted for the English classes.

In the fourth place of the statistical analysis of the data shown in Figure 2 appeared vocabulary, curriculum design, materials development, and traditional methodology as areas of concern. Most participants explained that the lack of vocabulary determined to a significant extent the weaknesses in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, as discussed by Richards and Renandya (2002) and Hunt and Beglar (2002). Additionally, they suggested that vocabulary weaknesses stem from the lack of resources like visual aids, technological devices or didactic materials to enhance the learning and acquisition of new lexicon; the lack of vocabulary was also mentioned to explain the limitations learners displayed when trying to express themselves for which they always used basic sentences with only a few words or expressions. In the same token, problems with curriculum design were also mentioned because respondents perceived that the lack of organized curricula in their working places made teaching and learning difficult, due to the fact that the absence of clear goals, content, and evaluation criteria along with the lack of enforcement of educational policies about bilingualism represented a problematic factor in their teaching practice as suggested by Graves (2010). Consistent with Richards and Schmidt (2010), the data also reported problems with Materials Development linked to Traditional Methodology; according to most of the respondents, the lack of resources forced teachers to work under the Grammar-Translation Method as the easiest way to have the students rehearse language forms. This weakness represented a factor affecting negatively the learning environment making it turn boring, monotonous, and unpleasant; respondents also stated that this lack of resources made teachers spend valuable time in designing their own materials preventing them from working on more relevant aspects of the teaching practice like curriculum, evaluation or planning.

Although at a lower level in the fifth place of the data analysis, listening and affective factors were also identified as trendy issues in the researched settings; the data showed that listening was probably the least practiced skill because of the high levels of anxiety and frustration that it generated among learners. It was found that teachers preferred traditional classes with written exercises not to make learners feel frustrated or complain about their failure to comprehend spoken language, ratifying what was theorized by Nunan (2002). Additionally, respondents mentioned that there was a need to take advantage of modern media (music, the internet, television, movies) to involve learners in listening tasks to help them improve their language competence. As of negative affective factors, teachers, students and alumni mentioned lack of confidence, anxiety, fear to speak, low self-esteem, and failure to risk-taking as the most common indicators of negative feelings and emotional distress that learners experienced when not able to perform appropriately in L2. Findings confirm what Brown (2004) mentions about the importance of providing learners with a smooth learning atmosphere when learning a language. Participants stated that much needed to be done about the affective domain in language learning, especially to provide learners with enough confidence to trust their own learning and interact with teachers and peers to overcome their language difficulties.

## Project Implementation concentrated on ICT, Language Learning Strategies and Methods

The findings of this study show that every program comprised a variety of strategies of intervention to respond to the trends described above. Figure 3 shows that one of the most common ones was the implementation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) corresponding to 18% of the whole data analysis. This finding aligns with Davies' (2006) statement that maintained that with the use of ICT researchers intended to impact language skills and even the affective domain, due to the attractive features for new generations. This type of interventions included the use of computers, pedagogical software, online tools, and even cell phones, as proposed by Hollenbeck and Hollenbeck (2004).

*Figure 3.* Pedagogical Interventions in Five ELT MA Programs in Colombia
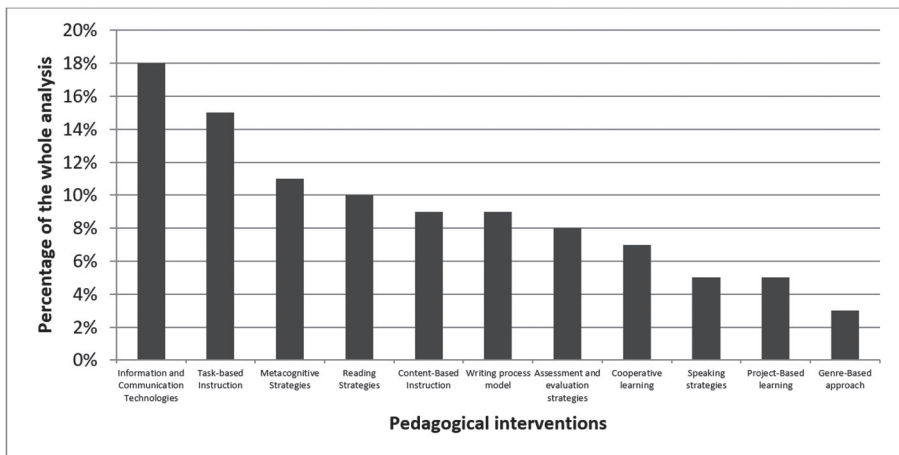


Equally important, Figure 3 shows that the use of teaching approaches was common to all programs in the search for variety in the implementation of tasks and for autonomy, collaboration, teamwork or cooperation; the most used approaches mentioned by the respondents were Task-based Instruction (Nunan, 1999), metacognitive strategies, reading strategies, Content-Based Instruction, the writing process model, Cooperative Learning (Nunan, 1999), and Project-Based Learning (Coombee et al., 2013).

Concerning content in class, it was also common to find approaches intended to adapt the lessons to the contextual needs of the learners, so Content-Based and Theme-Based approaches (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Richards & Renandya, 2002) were frequently mentioned as the strategies of intervention to improve language skills, especially reading. Genre-Based was one of the most used approaches in one of the

programs where the focus was on language use and content, probably because genre was a line of research.

## Pedagogical Interventions Addressed Affective and Cognitive Factors.

The findings of this study coming from the statistical analysis showed that as a result of the interventions, affective factors prevailed, especially the development of affective factors with 14% of the data analysis as shown in Figure 4 which was related to the reduction of reluctance to learn, and the increase of learning awareness. Most respondents claimed that their findings referred to the affective domain and they displayed high levels of satisfaction having changed the learners' attitudes towards the L2 learning process. Candidates and graduates reported that students became motivated to learn and advance in their language proficiency. On the other hand, improvement in language skills was also reported, namely speaking with 11%, reading with 9%, writing with 7%, and listening 4% of the whole data analysis concerning the most impacted areas in project implementation. This improvement was described as better performance in language tasks such as oral presentations, role-plays, paragraph composition, reading and listening comprehension activities, and standard tests.

*Figure 4.* Most Impacted Areas in Project Implementation
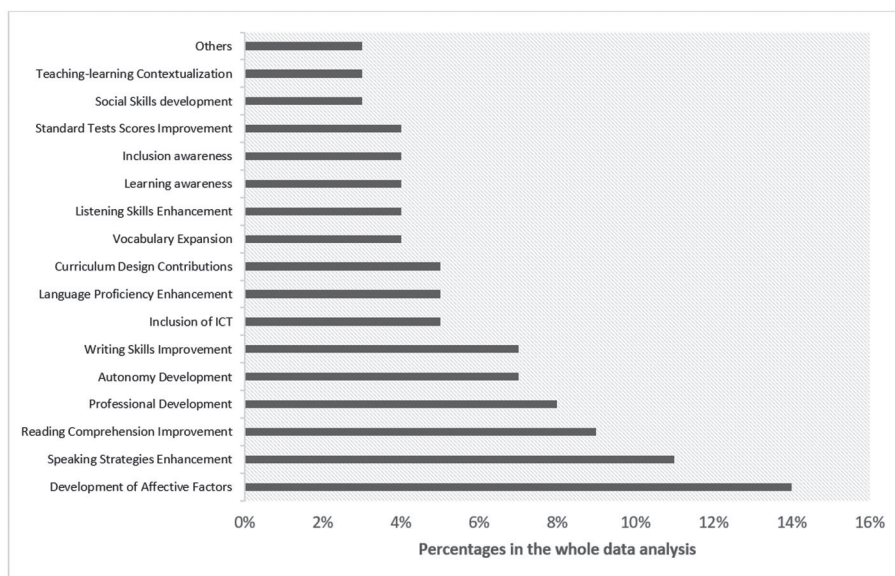
Master's candidates and alumni reported that their students obtained better results in their learning goals attributable to the pedagogical innovations they proposed. These areas also showed positive changes in autonomy development, inclusion of special needs students, social skills development, and language contextualization. Additionally, the researchers found that school curricula are influenced by the suggested curricula of the Ministry of Education (2016b and 2016c).

## The MA contributed to professional growth

Finally, the respondents emphasized on their own professional development which was characterized as one of the most important contributions of the Master's; in fact, they perceived it as their most enriching professional development opportunity. Moreover, the participants agreed that being part of such experience represented professional growth that translated in critical and reflective teaching skills, confirming what is discussed by Fandiño-Parra (2011), Macías (2018), Cuesta et al. (2019), Hernández (2015), Viáfara and Largo (2018), and Rideout and Koot (2009) who highlight the importance of reflection in such professional growth process; they also explained that this process involves the theory and practice they obtained in the implementation of their research projects with which they became more critical of their own practice and got to reflect on their own teaching to make informed decisions in the teaching-learning process. Figure 5 summarizes the features of this characterization.

*Figure 5.* Contributions of ELT Master's Programs as professional Development
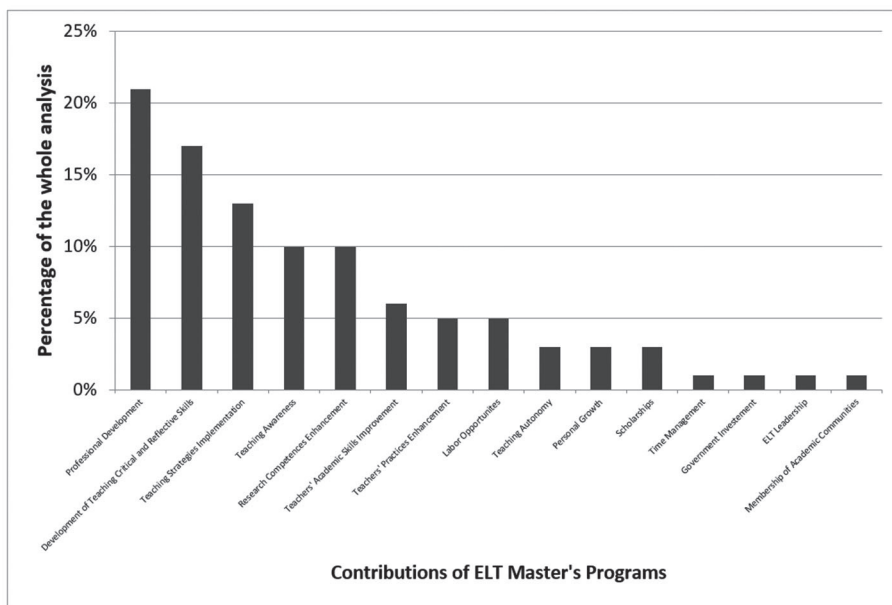


According to the analysis of the responses displayed in Figure 5, the research process and the whole master's made them grow professionally, become more reflective and more aware of their own teaching practice. Their preparation at the graduate level helped them implement better strategies according to the students' needs and also represented progress in their academic background, because they reported having studied multiple theories in EFL to be able to design their lessons and provide their learners with improved learning experiences. Respondents explained that their participation in the master's also made them grow as researchers since they incorporated research procedures according to the method of their choice. They claimed they became more aware of the importance of data collection and analysis in their reflective practice.

Concerning their professional and personal profiles, we found that the participants reported that their research experience in the programs helped them get better jobs or promotions, apply to scholarships, gain academic recognition, become leaders in their settings, and most importantly, become better human beings, sensitive to their classroom expectations and social needs. This finding is relevant since there is a need for teachers to gain awareness of the necessity of educating our children to be good citizens, as directed by national policies in this matter (MEN, 2005, 2016b and 2016c). Accordingly, regional and local authorities should allocate appropriate funds to support the continued preparation of teacher-researchers.

# Conclusions

The five MA programs were found to be research-oriented in which the "focus is on developing students' knowledge of and ability to carry out the research methodologies and methods appropriate to their discipline(s) or profession" (Walkington, 2015, p. 9). The research component of the masters equips graduate students with the capabilities needed to identify, understand and explain problematic areas in their settings and to come up with practical solutions to meet their learners' expectations, that is why we believe a research component should be part of teaching preparation programs at all levels (graduate and undergraduate).

The data suggest that speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary recognition are the most challenging aspects for language teachers and learners in Colombia because they imply not only language knowledge but also control of affective factors such as self-confidence and motivation. These challenges can be overcome with research designs aiming at specific needs; it is important that educational systems promote research projects to help teachers and learners achieve higher competences and standards; moreover, teachers need to be encouraged to develop soft skills among the students, such as problem-solving, creative thinking, teamwork, decision-making and communication skills, among others, to facilitate language learning.

Graduate program administrators should continue strengthening research to promote reflection and achieve changes in teaching practices around the country. Their agenda should imply the promotion of policies at the local, regional and national levels to improve conditions to conduct research. This involves constraints related to teaching, duty overload, size of classes, and even salary to motivate teachers to work at their full potential.

As for methodological issues, the data suggest that in-service teachers rely on multiple pedagogical and curricular possibilities for the planning and adaptation of their classes (Task-Based, ICT, Project-Based, and so on). On the other hand, national policies like the MEN (2016b and 2016c) suggested curricula influence the decisions of in-service teachers. Administrators and policymakers should continue to promote language policies all over the country and to incorporate to them contextual factors to make them more realistic and closer to the interests and expectations of the learners.

Limitations in the availability of didactic materials and technology in some cases translate in traditional teaching practices. Master's graduates and students have shown with their projects that creativity and resourcefulness can overcome these traditional practices to involve learners in meaningful tasks.

Curriculum design and development, including assessment and evaluation and professional development, correspond to one of the most important tools that teachers can use to innovate and update their contexts, so, masters' programs are expected to prepare teachers as curriculum developers and teacher educators to make them be part of educational changes at the local, regional and national level in order to make them match Kumaravadivelu's (2012) proposal about the need to educate teachers for a globalized world in which not only knowledge but also culture, identity, context and self-reflection make up a teaching professional.

Research at the master's level promotes changes and innovation concerning not only language skills but also culture in the classroom, cross-curriculum, classroom management, online teaching and learning, teaching special needs students, bilingualism, overall language learning, and social issues; the teacher-researchers in the five programs that participated in this study are good examples of contributors to social progress that policymakers need to continue to include in their action plans.

Although most research methods provide teachers with important tools to intervene and change their classrooms, Action Research represents the most valuable method for participants; in fact, it enabled them to reflect on their own practices and act to enhance them day after day.

To conclude, it can be stated that the master's programs represent one of the most enriching professional development opportunities for teachers; preparation at this level equips them with language tools, methodological and research resources and skills that translate into transformed practices and ways of thinking, that is why Colombian teacher education programs should strengthen the research component of their curricula in order to provide master's candidates with opportunities to investigate their settings and promote changes to respond realistically to learners' needs and expectations, for example, areas such as the language skills, motivation, the use of ICT and affective factors in language learning could continue to be explored.

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## Appendix 1. Survey to students and alumni

### Title of study, instructions and the first section about demographic information intentionally omitted

9.  II. About your Research Project design.  Please answer or mark the options that best apply to you. Indicate the topic of your Research Project:

☐ Affective factors in the EFL class
☐ Autonomy
☐ Bilingualism
☐ Content-Based Instruction
☐ Cross-curriculum
☐ Culture
☐ Curriculum Design
☐ English Learning Process
☐ Grammar
☐ Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the EFL class
☐ Listening
☐ Literacy
☐ Materials development
☐ Methodology
☐ Motivation
☐ Online Teaching / Learning
☐ Productive skills
☐ Reading
☐ Speaking
☐ Teacher Education / Professional Development
☐ Teaching Special Needs Students
☐ Testing / Evaluation / Assessment
☐ Vocabulary
☐ Writing
☐ Other

10.  If other research topics in the previous question, please elaborate here:

11. Check the context where you developed your research project:

☐ Public school
☐ Private school
☐ Public University
☐ Private University
☐ English Institute
☐ Other

12. If another context in the previous question, please elaborate here:


13. Check the method of your research design:

☐ Survey research
☐ Experimental research
☐ Quasi-experimental research
☐ Case Study
☐ Ethnography
☐ Action Research
☐ Mixed Methods
☐ Other


14. If another research method in the previous question, please elaborate here:


15. Indicate the sample population you worked with in the research project:

☐ Pre-school
☐ Elementary school
☐ High school
☐ College students
☐ Non-formal education students


16. Check the size range your sample population corresponds to:

☐ 1 to 5 participants
☐ 10 to 20 participants
☐ 20 to 30 participants
☐ 30 to 40 participants
☐ More than 40 participants

17. Choose the level of Proficiency of your sample population before project implementation:

☐ A-
☐ A1
☐ A2
☐ B1
☐ B2
☐ C1

18. Indicate the data collection techniques and instruments used in the research project implementation: (More than one option allowed)

☐ Anecdotal records
☐ Checklists
☐ Class reports
☐ Diaries / journals
☐ Documentary analysis
☐ Focus groups
☐ Interviews
☐ Language elicitation measures
☐ Life/career histories or narratives
☐ Maps and displays
☐ Observation forms
☐ Oral communication schemes
☐ Portfolios
☐ Self-assessment forms
☐ Stimulated recalls
☐ Surveys
☐ Transcriptions
☐ Video/audio recordings
☐ Other/s

19. If other instruments in the previous question, please list them here:

20. III. About your research project implementation and results

Please answer the following questions taking into consideration your research implementation and results.

Check the areas of improvement (problems) that you identified in the diagnostic stage of your study: (More than one option available)

☐ Affective Factors
☐ Cultural awareness
☐ Curriculum Design
☐ Discipline
☐ EFL Methodology
☐ Evaluation
☐ Grammar
☐ L2 Literacy
☐ Language Skills (listening)
☐ Language Skills (reading)
☐ Language Skills (speaking)
☐ Language Skills (writing)
☐ Motivation
☐ Resources and Materials
☐ Teaching Special needs students
☐ Vocabulary
☐ Other

21. If other areas of improvement or problems in the previous question, please elaborate here.

22. Please, describe in brief the technique, strategy or approach that you chose to intervene in the identified area of improvement

23. Please, describe in brief the most outstanding findings of your research project

24. Please, explain how your research project impacted your setting and contributed to the national goals established by the "Colombia Bilingüe" program.

25. Add any additional comments about your project implementation and results.

# Appendix 2. Interview to administrators

## Administrators/Directors Interview

Rationale intentionally omitted

**Guiding Questions:**

1. Which curriculum policies guide the research component in your ELT program?

2. What kind of methodology/method do you promote in the Master's'? Why?

3. As an administrator, what are your main concerns, about the master students and graduates' research experience in the program?

4. Which are the main areas of improvement (research problems) commonly identified by your students and alumni in the diagnostic stage of the research projects?

5. What type of research procedure (methods, techniques, and instruments) are being used or were used by the students and alumni to intervene in the areas of improvement?

6. How did your alumni's research projects' findings have an impact on the teaching context or the National Bilingual Program?