Pre-service Teachers´ Experiences in Constructing
and Redefining their Conceptions
of Language Teaching

**Experiências
de professores
em formação na
construção** e
redefinição de suas
concepções sobre o
ensino de línguas

**Experiencias de
profesores en formación
en la construcción** y
redefinición de sus
concepciones acerca de
la enseñanza de lenguas

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Abstract

Beginning teachers are often left on their own to endure life at school perhaps as a result of the assumption that learning to teach comes from the experience of teaching, or that the theoretical knowledge gained in teacher education programs is sufficient to deal with such an endeavor. This narrative study investigated student teachers' retrospective conceptions of English language teaching as they entered a teacher education program and as they completed their practicum at a public school, to better understand their process of learning to teach English. By analyzing participants' reported experiences, we identified a growing awareness of the contextual circumstances regarding students' needs and social realities which led to a confrontation of the theoretical insights' participants had gained through the teacher education program. Findings also revealed participants' overall dissatisfaction with the learning experiences during their English lessons in public schools and a rather positive view of their learning experiences in language institutes and in English vocational education and training courses.

Keywords
teacher education program; pre-service teachers of English; narrative inquiry; learning to teach

Resumo

Os professores iniciantes muitas vezes enfrentam sozinhos o cotidiano da escola, talvez, como resultado do pressuposto de que se aprende a ensinar por meio da experiência, ou que o conhecimento teórico adquirido nos programas de formação de professores é suficiente para enfrentar tal finalidade. Este estudo narrativo teve como objetivo pesquisar as concepções retrospectivas sobre o ensino de inglês de futuros professores quando entraram em um programa de formação de professores, e a revisão delas após a conclusão de seus estágios em uma escola pública, na tentativa de compreender melhor seu processo de aprender a ensinar inglês. Ao analisar as experiências relatadas pelos participantes, encontramos uma consciência cada vez maior sobre as circunstâncias contextuais em relação às necessidades dos alunos e às realidades sociais, o que levou a um confronto dos conhecimentos teóricos que os participantes obtiveram no programa formador de professores. Os achados também revelaram insatisfação por parte dos participantes em relação às suas experiências de aprendizagem durante as aulas de inglês nas escolas públicas, e uma visão um pouco mais positiva de suas experiências de aprendizagem em escolas de idiomas, além dos cursos de educação e formação profissional em inglês.

Palavras-chave
programa de formação de professores; professores de inglês em formação; pesquisa narrativa; aprender a ensinar

Resumen

Los docentes principiantes a menudo enfrentan solos la cotidianidad de la escuela, tal vez, como resultado del supuesto de que se aprende a enseñar por medio de la experiencia, o que el conocimiento teórico adquirido en los programas de formación docente es suficiente para hacer frente a tal propósito. Este estudio narrativo tuvo como objetivo investigar las concepciones retrospectivas de la enseñanza del inglés de futuros docentes cuando ingresaron a un programa formador de docentes, y la revisión de las mismas al completar sus períodos de práctica en una escuela pública, en un intento por entender mejor su proceso de aprender a enseñar inglés. Al analizar las experiencias reportadas por los participantes, encontramos una conciencia cada vez mayor sobre las circunstancias contextuales con respecto a las necesidades de los estudiantes y las realidades sociales, lo que llevó a una confrontación de los conocimientos teóricos que los participantes habían obtenido en el programa formador de docentes. Los hallazgos también revelaron insatisfacción por parte de los participantes respecto a sus experiencias de aprendizaje durante las clases de inglés en las escuelas públicas, y una mirada un tanto más positiva de sus experiencias de aprendizaje en los institutos de idiomas, además de los cursos de educación y formación profesional en inglés.

Palabras clave
programa de formación de docentes; profesores de inglés en formación; investigación narrativa; aprender a enseñar

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Introduction

Beginning teachers are often left on their own to endure life at school, perhaps as a result of the assumption that learning to teach will come from the experience of teaching, that is, from actually doing the job. However, Freeman (2016) suggests that "experience does not simply convert into pedagogical knowledge by itself, […] preparation, training, and on-the-job support all contribute to the process of locating and learning from experience" (p. 47). Richards & Lockhart (1994) also remind us that "experience alone is insufficient as the basis for [teacher] development […] [while] critical reflection can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching" (p. 4).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the students who enroll in English teacher education programs in Colombia appeared more interested in learning the language, with no initial commitment to become teachers. Interestingly, Barahona (2014) found the same phenomenon among pre-service EFL teachers in Chile. Thus, studying the transformations and changing perceptions as teacher learners move through a teacher education program becomes a valid alternative for research.

Barahona (2015) later suggests that to fully understand the nature of learning to teach English, "it is necessary to see how pre-service teachers traverse between the boundaries of the university and school context and vice versa" (p. 92). Therefore, understanding how language teachers learn to teach takes relevance for the curriculum design of language teacher education programs and for the professional development initiatives teachers are offered once they become in-service teachers. The research reported here seeks to better understand the usually tacit and unquestioned conceptions of language teaching that prospective teachers experience in their learning to teach English.

Conceptions of Language Teaching

Pratt (1992) defines conceptions as "specific meanings attached to phenomena which then mediate our response to situations involving those pheno-mena". The same author adds that "we view the world through the lenses of our conceptions, interpreting and acting in accordance with our understanding of the world" (p. 204). It follows that conceptions can be established consciously, often reveal our attitude and understanding about something while they serve to inform our actions and dispositions to the various aspects that constitute reality.

Lam & Kember (2006) see conceptions of teaching "as the beliefs about teaching that guide a teacher's perception of a situation and […] shape actions" (p. 694), while Pajares (1992) claims that conceptions shape teachers' judgments and affect the way they behave in the classroom setting. Directing the subject toward second language teaching, Freeman & Richards (1993) highlight that L2 teaching can be conceived in distinct ways depending on the nature of the work and the role of the teacher. They also argue that discussions about teaching should "shift from considerations of technique and procedure to examinations of the conceptions of teaching which underlie them" (p. 194).

To further illustrate, Zahorik (1986, as cited in Freeman & Richards, 1993) presents general conceptions of teaching into three categories: Science/research conceptions, theory/philosophy conceptions, and art/craft conceptions. Accordingly, scientifically based conceptions of teaching are "deeply rooted in a view of teaching as a process which generates learning as its product…, teaching is conceived as appropriate behavior and the role of the teacher is to act on principles and findings articulated by others" (p. 199). In contrast, theory/values-based conceptions of teaching emphasize "the rational and the interpersonal nature of teaching and learning [as] central; [while] effectiveness is measured in the reasoned exercise of belief rather than in the successful application of findings" (p. 205). Lastly, art/craft conceptions of teaching highlight a "set of personal skills which teachers apply in different ways according to the demands of specific situations" (p. 206) and contexts.

Within a teacher education perspective, Freeman & Richards (1993) equally perceive the three

previous conceptions of teaching as progressively developed throughout the teacher's trajectory and practice. For instance, scientifically and theory-/values-based conceptions are likely to be prescriptive and relevant for novice or prospective teachers "who lack the depth of classroom experience to pursue the improvisational forms of instruction found in the art/craft conceptions" (p. 211).

In the context of the present study, we adhere to a conception of language teaching that emphasizes a view or perception of teaching that shapes and affects teachers' judgements and behavior in the classroom. Such view is gradually refined and redefined in response to the circumstances related to their trajectories as learners of language teaching.

In reviewing the literature, we found a number of studies on language teachers' beliefs and conceptions of language teaching and learning, from various settings including the Latin American context.

Castellanos (2013) analyzed pre-service teachers' beliefs about teaching, aiming at South American TESOL contexts. The author maintains that teacher educators must be mindful of student teachers' entering beliefs about teaching and must consider the integration of such beliefs into the syllabi through course contents, reflection, and learning activities. By doing so, she adds, teacher educators "can assist student teachers in becoming aware of their entering beliefs about teaching and experiencing changes or turning points in them, so that explicit and more generative beliefs guide and inform the act of teaching" (p. 203).

A study by Díaz *et al.* (2015), aimed to identify the beliefs of a group of 16 secondary school teachers in Chile. It concluded that teachers' beliefs are entrenched in their "semantic memory as cognitive and affective constructs that hold different degrees of fixation depending on the professional, academic or personal experiences that shaped them" (p. 182). To illustrate, although participants believed that English teaching should follow the principles of communicative approaches, they realized that these often involve certain difficulties in some public schools. This led the authors to claim that "beliefs have internal levels of organization that are constantly affected by their school context and their learners' academic and social backgrounds" (p. 183).

In another study, with a focus on identifying English instructors' conceptions of teaching and how these differ based on the type of institution where they work, Canbay & Beceren (2012) found that, despite some common ideas, teachers do not share the same views of teaching and of the role of the teacher, whether they work at a state or a private university. For instance, some participants, regardless of the institution, viewed teaching as a teacher dominated process whereas others highlighted the importance of a student-centered approach. Similarly, some claimed that the teacher should take responsibility for the overall process, while others stated that the teacher should be a facilitator, initiator, and real model.

Pishghadam *et al.* (2009) relied on the use of metaphors to examine language teachers' beliefs and conceptions about teaching and learning in high schools and language institutes in Iran. Findings revealed that most of the metaphors generated by school teachers represented a view of teaching based on a *behaviorist/empiricist* approach that dominated the teaching process at schools. These teachers, add Pishghadam *et al.* (2009), "interpreted learning as making new associations and teaching as transmitting knowledge. Teachers are mostly seen as the only active person in the class, controlling everything until knowledge as a determined product is transmitted to the passive learner" (p. 18). In contrast, the metaphors of teachers from language institutes evidenced a prevalence of *cognitive/constructivist* ideas along with *situative* learning concepts in their views of teaching. These ideas and concepts

> […] involve more participation of the learners in class activities, closer relationship between teacher and learners, respecting individuals learning styles and creating a friendly atmosphere for learning [whereas] control over the learning process is shared between the teacher and learners. (Pishghadam *et al.,* 2009, p. 27*)*

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Simsek (2014) equally relied on metaphors to examine prospective English teachers' conceptions of language and teaching along with the development of their teaching beliefs over the practicum. Findings showed that despite participants' limited practical experience in language teaching, their initial metaphors were 50 % behaviorist, 45 % constructivist, and 5 % situative which disclosed a similar pattern to experienced teachers in earlier studies (Leavy *et al,* 2007; Martínez *et al,* 2001). Simsek (2014) highlighted that participants' "experiences and observations of the mentors at the practicum school led them to abandon the idea of an EFL teacher as an all-knowing authority delivering information, shaping and controlling learners" (p. 941).

The previous studies highlight the importance of doing research on teachers' beliefs and conceptions of teaching, to better understand the practice of English learning and teaching in local contexts. Interestingly, Barahona (2014) claims that "research on teachers' beliefs emerges as a way to illuminate how beliefs are socially formed and how they shape learning" (p. 116).

Teacher Learning in Language Teaching

We identified three approaches to teacher learning while consulting different sources. We must clarify that these approaches overlap, as learning to teach involves a multiplicity of factors which make it a long and complex process that starts before prospective teachers enroll in teacher education programs and continues into their years of professional teaching.

The first approach follows a behavioral orientation, supports the notion of teaching as transmission, and is based on the process-product paradigm (Doyle, 1977) in general education, which clearly implies a causal relationship between what teachers do and what students are able to accomplish at the end of an instructional sequence. This first approach also relies on the belief that content knowledge and teaching skills would be sufficient for teachers to convey the content to students. That is to say, second language teachers are supposed to have knowledge of the target language as well as of a series of methods and techniques to be able to teach. New teachers are considered to enter professional training tabula rasa, "with no prior knowledge of teaching or the teachers' role" (Freeman, 2002, p. 5), and are often perceived as doers and implementers of other people's ideas and thoughts, without much consideration for the physical and social contexts where learning would occur. This approach may be associated with the 'learn-then-apply' design, which explains how teachers are expected to construct subject knowledge early in their undergraduate programs, and then hone their knowledge in practice teaching (Freeman, 2016) while conceptualizing teachers as imitators of 'good' teaching behaviors.

The second approach to teacher learning moves from teachers' behaviors and actions to their thinking and past experiences. A common assumption here is that what teachers do in the language classroom originates in thoughts or mental acts and is equally shaped by teachers' experiences, some playing a more noticeable role than others. Duarte (1998) states that "to understand how teachers learn to teach and how they come to conceptualize what they do, we need to focus on the mental lives of teachers" (p. 618). It follows that concept such as teachers' beliefs (Pajares, 1992), decision making (Woods, 1996), hidden pedagogy, reflection, apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975; Moodie, 2016), and personal theories of learning play a more prominent role as teachers are encouraged to turn to their cognitions and reflect on how their prior learning experiences interact with their present ways of thinking about teaching.

This second approach considers that learning to teach is shaped by teachers' previous learning experiences as language learners and as learners of language teaching. For instance, Lin (2005) found that teachers' experiences as students before entering a teacher education program could impact their experiences in such a program and their actual teaching. Gutierrez (1996) identified the origins of four ESL student teachers' pre-training knowledge as connected to formal and informal language learning experiences, the way they were taught

during their schooling years, their fellow students, and other people they interacted with, including native speakers of the target language in different situations. Experiences as English learners have also constituted models of what not to do in teaching; an anti-apprenticeship of observation (Moodie, 2016).

The third approach stresses the role of the social and cultural context in shaping teacher learning and thinking. Learning to teach is a process embedded in the social, political, economic, and cultural circumstances of the contexts where teachers study, the contexts where they receive initial preparation and induction to teaching, and the contexts where they eventually teach and integrate professionally with colleagues. As part of a socially-situated view of learning to teach, Johnson & Freeman (2001) propose a framework for the knowledge-base of language teacher education based on three interrelated domains which describe the sociocultural environment where individuals learn to teach and carry out their work as teachers. The first domain refers to teachers as learners of teaching as opposed to learners of language. The second one seeks to integrate schools as the physical settings where teaching and learning occur, and schooling as "the socio-cultural processes of participation in schools, processes that gain value and meaning for participants through time" (Johnson & Freeman, 2001, p. 59). The third domain centers on the activity of teaching and learning as experienced by teachers and learners in classrooms. Freeman (2016) later incorporated many of the previous ideas in the concept of learning-in-place, or situated learning theory, which emphasizes elements such as learning by doing things in contexts, and knowing in situations.

This third approach to teacher learning also relies on a sociocultural perspective through which learning to teach becomes "a continual, mutually mediating process of appropriation and social action, where practitioners take on the cultural practices that are valued in the social situations of their development [...] and employ them in turn to shape that social situation" (Ellis *et al.*, 2010, p. 4). Johnson (2009a) argues that second language teacher edu-

cation programs are beginning to see language teaching as "a dialogic process of co-constructing knowledge that is situated in and emerges out of participation in particular sociocultural practices and contexts" (p. 21). In short, learning to teach, Johnson adds, is not seen as "the straightforward appropriation of skills from the outside in, but [as] the progressive movement from externally, socially mediated activity to internal control by individual teachers" (p. 2).

The first two approaches appear to be influenced by Eurocentric views that see teacher and language learning as conditioned —or regulated— by a universal culture. Consequently, prospective language teachers and learners continue to be guided by decontextualized ways of language teaching and learning. Dussel (1980) exemplifies this as

> [...] a professor of a dependent culture, to be able to teach in the university, is forced to go to the "center" to study mathematics with a professor in Paris. He will learn mathematics from the "center". Later, he will return to Catamarca, and realizes that the mathematics he learnt do not resolve the problems in Catamarca. (p. 131)

It seems unreasonable to continue advocating belief systems from the "perspective of Eurocentric modernity and [...] the existence of colonial attitudes and projects in the attempt at modernization" (Maldonado, 2011, p. 15), and in doing so, disregard the effects that sociocultural conditions of the 'other' context may have on the construction of teacher subjectivities (Quijano, 2000). It follows that the third approach acknowledges the relevance of sociocultural aspects in local contexts and supports teacher learning as informed by the social realities of the school context and of language learners.

After pondering on the three approaches previously addressed, we consider that teacher learning appears to reveal a particular trend in which teachers are expected to be cognitively, affectively, and socially engaged with no disregard for the impact of prior learning experiences. Some studies that have contributed to that trend include Barahona (2014), Tsang (2004), Childs (2011), and

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Kang & Cheng (2014). For example, Barahona (2014) found that teachers' beliefs are shaped and reshaped as teachers engage in the activity of learning to teach English: from their past experiences as language learners, to teacher learners in a university teacher education program, and then to their school-based actual teaching experiences. The study by Kang & Cheng (2014) seems to validate the view that many foreign language teachers are more inclined to practice what they have experienced as opposed to what they have studied in their training. These studies helped us to reaffirm a call for the inclusion of sociocultural components in the preparation of language teachers, so that they can build more context-informed conceptions of teaching from the perspective of their 'locatedness' (Pennycook, 2010).

This qualitative narrative inquiry sought to answer the following questions:

- What do student teachers' retrospective conceptions of English language teaching reveal about their learning to teach upon entering a teacher education program?

- What do student teachers' current conceptions of English language teaching disclose about their learning to teach while completing their final practicum in a public school setting?

Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted on the basis of retrospective narrative inquiry. In view of our intention to rely on the participants' distant and recent conceptions of language teaching, we advocated Clandinin & Connelly's (2000) view of narrative as "the best way of representing and understanding experience. Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it" (p. 18). The use of narratives allowed us to further explore the changes that participants experienced in learning to teach English as they completed a four-year English teacher education program.

Participants and Context

This study involved the participation of six student teachers —Ximena (XI), Andrea (AN), Diana (DI), Margarita (MA), Victoria (VI) and Luis (LU) (pseudonyms)—, enrolled in a four-year undergraduate English teacher education program at a public university in Colombia. Aged between 21 and 28, all participants were completing their second practicum period, in their final term, in either a primary or a secondary public school. We decided to use "open sampling" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to select the participants given the qualitative nature of the study. Thus, we made contact with potential participants via e-mail or phone, and provided them with a few initial details and, if they showed interest, e-mailed them a summarized description of the project along with a consent letter. Accordingly, participants were informed as to the purpose of the study, the procedures and time for data collection, the potential risks or discomfort, and the expected benefits for them and for the field of language teacher education.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over a six-month period and relied on two in-depth retrospective interviews (IT), samples of practicum journals (PJ) and lesson plans (LP), and a focus group interview (FGI). Although most of the data came from the interviews, the data gathered from the other sources served to further examine and contrast what the interviews had revealed.

In-depth retrospective interviews. The first interview focused on the participants' experiences with language teaching, particularly from their perspective as EFL learners in basic education and their initial enrolment in an English teacher education program. Then, the second interview elicited participants' views of language teaching as they went through a four-year teacher education program curriculum with emphasis on their practicum experience.

Practicum journals and lesson plans offered additional information of participants' recent

conceptions of language teaching as reflected on aspects such as learning goals, type of activities, assessment procedures, and materials and resources they considered throughout their practicum lessons. We conducted a careful analysis based on reading, comparing, and contrasting the contents of the learning journals and lesson plans facilitated by participants.

A focus group interview allowed us to further explore the participants' collective conceptions of language teaching across various settings, including their language learning experiences before joining an English teacher education program and their practicum experiences during it.

In response to another feature of narrative inquiry, we began to analyze the data as we collected the first piece of data. Similarly, we focused on thematic analysis rather than structural and dialogic/performance analysis (Riessman, 2008). Accordingly, we started by reading through the first interview transcript to identify themes and assign codes. Then, we followed a similar procedure with the remaining interviews, learning journals and lesson plans, and the focus group interview. We then read through all the pieces of data coded and tried to figure out what was at the core of the code to be able to establish thematic ideas or categorizations. In an attempt to value their experiences and viewpoints when referring to the conceptions, we interpreted their narratives interacting and sharing authority (Frisch, 2003) with the participants —we welcomed their own interpretations of their narratives.

Results

The participants' retrospective accounts of English language teaching upon entering a teacher education program revealed the themes of traditional teaching and contents, and contextual factors. In contrast, their current conceptions of English language teaching while completing their final practicum at a public primary or secondary school evidenced the themes of language teaching approachesand methods, awareness of the relevance of context, and confronting theoretical insights in situ. The previous conceptions are better interpreted in relation to the participants' contexts of learning, that is, although all of them attended public schools, most of them also attended local language institutes or took English vocational education and training courses during their last two years in high school.

Student Teachers' Conceptions of Language Teaching as They Entered a Teacher Education Program

Traditional Teaching and Contents

The participants' narratives revealed what they called a 'traditional' way of teaching: "it was just teaching grammar, completing exercises in a book, lots of translation and that was all" (FGI-DI-L119). Ximena emphasized 'traditional' teaching as, "teaching grammar rules, to know how to make sentences or exercises which were assigned by the teacher in the book" (IT1-XI). Other aspects that relate to traditional teaching involved looking up words in the dictionary, teaching isolated vocabulary, repetition drills, and translation. Margarita was often bored by her English class because "I knew it was all reduced to a dictionary and a short story, the same story that we worked on for the whole year" (IT1-MA-L422). Andrea claimed that "teaching English was just repeating; oftentimes [the teacher] was very emphatic with 'repeat after me' and if we didn't repeat, [...] he said that we wouldn't learn" (IT1-AN-L276).

The participants' also indicated that teaching relied on the use of songs, crossword puzzles, frequent tests on verbs in the past tense while the students were not exposed to speaking or listening activities. Contents appeared to be limited to "colors, animals, family members, occupations, among others" (ITI-DI) during primary and early high school. Luis also revealed that "the topics were the same since sixth grade, that is, the verb *to be,* the past, the past participle; and towards the end of eleventh grade, the future was briefly introduced" *(*IT1-LU-328).

It must be stated here that when students pass ninth grade in some public high schools in urban

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contexts, they get the chance to enroll in specific vocational education and training courses in various areas, including electronics, mechanics, English, and software programming. Interestingly, five out of six participants in the present study decided to enroll in English vocational education and training during their last two years of high school. This meant that they were exposed to more hours of English and had different experiences with English learning compared to their peers in the regular English language classrooms in the same public schools. Likewise, three out of six participants also enrolled in English courses at two local language institutes in the city. They did so for a couple of years while they were secondary school students.

English teaching at vocational education and training in high school, and at the local English language institutes often involved the discussion of interesting topics or ideas, an emphasis on language use and autonomous language learning, more intensive class work and homework, constant feedback, smaller group size, and larger availability of resources. As Luis pointed out, "in the language institute, we spoke English all the time. In high school, we didn't. In the language institute, we covered a topic in two weeks by far and then we moved on. In high school, we spent about two months on the same topic" (IT1-LU-L403). Ximena highlighted similar features of her learning experience at a language institute including smaller group size, personalized teaching, sufficient resources, and varied teaching and learning (FGI-XI-L130).

Contextual Factors

Factors here relate to a specific set of contextual circumstances that participants observed as students in primary and high school, and that seemingly affected the teaching of English before entering a university teacher education program. In this sense, the participants claimed that students' language level did not make possible the promotion of communicative practices. Margarita mentioned how her English teacher sometimes introduced activities that did not match students' English level, as these were clearly

beyond what they were able to do; "there was not a previously created level of English for those lessons she was delivering. She was teaching an English level that most of us were not able to respond to" (IT1-MA-L437). Victoria equally stated that one of her English teachers, "couldn't put us [to write] compositions or something like that, because our language level was not good enough for everyone to do the same activity" (IT1-VI-L386).

In reference to large classes, participants emphasized the large number of students, sometimes up to 52, in their classes. Pondering on how likely this can affect the teaching process, Margarita recalled that

> The large number of students in the classroom not only mortified the teacher because he had to manage many kids and check on their progress, but [it also affected] the students who had to struggle to get the teacher's attention. (IT1-MA-L668)

A third factor was related to the time that the school administration or the teachers devoted to preparing students for extracurricular activities. Victoria, for instance, made reference to the fact that "the teacher focused on that activity called 'it's magic', and so we did not have a proper class where one could say 'I learned a lot'" (IT1-VI-L410). Another activity was 'The English Day', which involved students rehearsing various activities including dancing, singing, or just acting out during most of their class time. Additionally, many class sessions were devoted to test preparation, as teachers designed the lessons to help students get a good score in the national Saber 11 test. "They prepared us for the Saber 11 test and so we had to do many practice drills to be able to take the test on a later date" (IT1-VI-L481), Victoria claimed.

Another relevant contextual factor revealed that many teachers in charge of teaching English, particularly in primary school, were not certified English teachers. The participants believe that this situation influenced the quality of language teaching at these early stages, which often led students to experience significant challenges later in high school. To illustrate, Victoria claimed that "there was no English teacher as such; the subject [of English] was taught

by a Spanish language teacher… and she obviously taught it in its most basic form" (IT1-VI-L178). Diana also admitted that "the teacher [of English in primary school] was a certified Math teacher who regularly decided to work on other subjects (e.g., math, Spanish, natural sciences) during the English lessons" (IT1-DI-L107).

A final factor considered by participants relates to a lack of materials and resources for teaching. Andrea lamented how they never had any books. She "remember[s] that the teacher brought the material and asked parents to pay 5,000 pesos so that he could order a set of photocopies of the materials for each student" (IT1-AN-L237). In contrast to the conditions in public schools, the participants who attended local language institutes and vocational education and training courses had access to a wider set of resources, including better-equipped classrooms, "there were three exclusive rooms for English vocational education and training, and these [rooms] had computers and projectors" (IT1-AN-L771). Diana also claimed that "in the room we had a television, so she [the teacher] used the television a lot, to show images and videos too. There were many speaking activities and a lot of interaction" (IT1-DI-L521).

Student Teachers' Conceptions of Language Teaching upon Completing a Second Practicum Period at a Public Primary or Secondary School

Language Teaching Approaches and Methods

The participants constantly referred to the language teaching approaches and methods that they observed in their classes with university professors, in the methods courses, and those enacted in their own teaching experiences. For instance, when asked about his English courses in the teacher education program, Luis stated that "[teachers] would do a lot of role plays and students had to recreate situations or skits, record videos doing recipes in English, among other things that compelled them to speak English" (IT2-LU-L196). He mentioned that during

their first semesters, the goal was to have students engage in communicative practices while relying on daily life situations.

Similarly, Ximena revealed a bit of her teaching approach when narrating how she prepared one of her practicum lessons:

> So, the first class, I remember that we saw the topic of food… so we made a hot dog. I told them to bring sausages and I brought the buns. We made them outside the classroom with the fourth-grade kids. They brought cheese and we grated it. I was showing them as I grated the cheese, then they tried it, *in English, of course. (*FGI-XI-L537)

Various participants highlighted features of communicative practices both in what they, as students, observed in the program courses, and in the way they intended to teach English during their practicums. They also tried their best to limit the use of their L1, Spanish. Diana refers to this as follows: "Well, the only thing I can emphasize is speaking always in English, instead of translating for the kids" (IT2-DI-L114). She later claimed that she only spoke in Spanish when discussing the classroom rules with her students or when her class was getting "out of control". Other than that, she always spoke English in her classes.

A trial-and-error perspective was similarly considered within their language teaching approach. Ximena mentioned that "I was never inclined to any method in particular, I used to say that we should wait till the teaching practicum and see what happens, you know, experiment" (IT2-XI-L496). This attitude shows a flexible approach, one that would welcome different methods, but that was funded in the opportunity to experiment. The participants also acknowledged trial and error as an opportunity to further develop their teaching, since "sometimes that conception of teaching evolves through errors, through trial and error" (FGI- AN-L27). After getting to know her practicum classroom, Andrea realized the need to reach out to a more appealing approach for the reality of her class. She commented: "No, [the students] wouldn't speak in English… so the

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communicative [approach] did not work. I had to eventually implement other [methods], a bit of this and another bit of that" (IT2-AN-L570).

As student teachers advanced through the program curriculum, they began to critically examine the teaching methods that their professors used, and reflected on the relevance of using them in their own future classes. To further illustrate, they questioned both the planning and the methodologies of several English courses in the program and observed that "these were just like a regular English class" (IT2-MA-L113) that did not prepare them to become English teachers. Margarita continued, "and that's what is wrong with the program, that is, if it is an English teacher education program, students should see [study] English but oriented to prospective English teachers, not as if they were regular English learners" (IT2-MA- L116). This led Margarita to feel discouraged about teaching during the undergraduate teacher education program, "I still did not see myself as a teacher, and some of the courses did not seem to help me with that" (IT2-MA-L130).

Awareness of the Relevance of Context

The participants similarly raised awareness of the relevance of the teaching context. We believe that this awareness occurred from enacting their teacher identities; when they were treated as teachers and were responsible for one or various courses in the practicum, they seized factors other than teaching approaches, that were equally essential for learning to take place. Student teachers recognized the need to know their students, their interests and needs, and to plan their classes accordingly. Margarita experienced this in her practicum, "the first aspect that I learned was the importance to know your students; and I do not mean to know only the names of your students" (PJ1-MA-L357). For her, knowing her students meant to interact with the "particular cases of the students" (PJ1-MA-L359) and to understand who needed her attention more.

Diana also acknowledged the importance of understanding students' social realities, as "many times, some students that you come across don't eat

well at home and have family issues" (FGI-DI-L232). In a related aspect, Ximena highlighted the importance of adapting to the context when planning and delivering her lessons, "there is a certain inequality, […] in terms of language levels, or skills or other aspects and one has to work on finding ways to balance things in class, and it is difficult" (FGI-XI-L167). She also perceived that, as there were not enough resources in the practicum site, "I, myself, had to figure out a way to implement what I had planned for the lesson" (FGI- XI-L169). In short, participants realized that planning and teaching required interacting with the students, knowing their realities and necessities while looking beyond the classroom and considering all their concerns, not simply the linguistic dimension of language teaching.

In this same respect, when asked about the challenges one must face to become a teacher, Diana responded,

> Basically, all the theories and methodologies that we study in the program, come from other countries, nothing to do with Colombia. I wonder why we don't take into account research studies that have been conducted here in Colombia and consider those strategies or ideas that have been suggested in our local context. (FGI-DI-L521)

As we discussed the value and need to consider the conditions of their teaching contexts, the participants were also critical about the teaching methodologies that they were taught in the teacher education program, as these did not often fit the conditions of their local contexts. For them, the conception of language teaching that emerged from the program coursework was being challenged by the circumstances of their local settings.

As prospective English language teachers in their final semester of the program, they were concerned about the way in which their teachers "constantly reminded [them] to speak in English to [their] students all the time" (IT2-XI-L608). As they positioned themselves as teachers in the practicum, they assessed that the previous assumption was not realistic, and it was more of an expectation imposed

by extraneous methodologies that did not always fit local students' characteristics. In sum, as participants began to teach through their practicums, they were able to critically evaluate the conception of teaching they had gained through the teacher education program vis-à-vis the affordances and constraints of their teaching settings.

Confronting Theoretical Insights in Situ

In the transition from a teacher education program coursework to the practicum 'reality', the participants struggled to leave behind their role as students and to assume their role as teachers. As they did so, they recognized that they were seemingly unable to comply with the expectation related to applying the theoretical insights gained through the program curriculum into the practical reality of school teaching.

> Having the role of a student for more than half a life and then suddenly changing it… to that of a teacher, is not easy. One no longer has that courage to walk into a classroom because [as a student] one goes to listen, but this time one has to stand there… as a teacher. (FGI-MA-L175)

Margarita also stated that "one acquires many more tools for teaching through experience, by becoming a teacher and by being exposed to it because… many of the methodologies that we learn [in the program] do not work in our classrooms" (FGI-MA-L99). She added that "unfortunately, the teacher education program does not prepare teachers for the real teaching job in the classroom, it exposes them, but it does not prepare them to do it well" (FGI- MA-L105).

Being a teacher through the practicums offered participants a different perspective of what language teaching entails. In this sense, Victoria stated that "[the English class] is structured. It's not just walking into a classroom just because…, it involves a process…, you have to consider the possible issues that you may need to confront in that context" (IT2-VI-L846). From her practicum experience, she began to think of teaching English as a structured process, one that also involved predicting what could happen

in class and what to expect. Andrea equally stressed the need "to prepare [one]self to be flexible. You never know what will happen or what will attract students' attention" (PJ1-AN-L38).

In contrast, Luis seemed to diverge from this structured view of language teaching and suggests that "there is no an established [standard] way on which one should teach. I think each one of us has a distinctive way of teaching" (FGI- LU- L31). Andrea, in a similar note, suggests that "the concept [of teaching] evolves through the practice that one experiences inside the classroom, with all the dilemmas that one can find in a lesson" (FGI-AN-L27). Boldly, they argued that the concept of language teaching is being constantly reshaped as prospective teachers confront the reality of teaching.

Discussion

Participants' views of language teaching prior to joining a teacher education program represented a blend of realities. It was clear that their experiences while attending public primary and secondary schools evidenced a traditional model of teaching, through which learners are often taught "grammar, lexis, and a collection of idiomatic phrases: their effective use for communicative purposes can be left for them to work out for themselves by reference to common sense and the experience they have of using their own language" (Widdowson, 1985, p. 159). That traditional view of teaching came to represent in the minds of most participant, a reality that did not seem to contribute to successful language teaching.

That same reality awareness may correspond to the perspective of teaching *about* (as opposed to teaching *in*) the target language where teachers, according to Freeman (2016), "may use the shared first language to teach, organize lessons, manage students, and so on… and the target language simply as the content of the lesson" (p. 181). The emphasis on traditional teaching and contents dominated by grammar and isolated vocabulary equally matches a behavioral view of language teaching or generation zero (Freeman, 2016) where language teachers adopt

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methods to help students acquire meta-knowledge about the language, and to assimilate contents in the form of basic structures and sentence patterns without leading students to use the language. The same traditional model of teaching is also in line with behavioristic principles as identified in previous studies (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2008; Pishghadam *et al.,* 2009), where knowledge of English is seen as a product or data to be transmitted, and learners as passive recipients, and where language teaching is conceived as a "repetitive, dull and unrewarding process, where the teacher implements classroom activities in a predictable manner and makes classroom proceedings routine" (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2008, p. 211).

The first reality check seemed to have been triggered by contextual factors (e.g., large class size, class time devoted to extracurricular activities, lack of materials and resources, lack of qualified English teachers in primary school, and students' low language level) that together did not often allow the inclusion of different teaching strategies, contents, and activities. In short, it appears that what hindered the use of other teaching methods (e.g., communicative language teaching) were for the most part contextual factors. In this sense, these findings serve to reaffirm the view that sees teacher preparation, along with tradition, learner attitudes, and the instructional environment as constraints in the implementation of communicative teaching (Savignon, 1991). This view similarly coincides with that of participants in Diaz *et al.* (2015) study, who realized that their internal beliefs and pre-determined teaching approaches are usually affected by the school context and students' social backgrounds.

A second reality check relates to the teaching experiences at language institutes and English vocational education and training courses that most participants were exposed to while they were high school students. This reality provided a brighter and more optimistic perspective of language teaching, as it allowed participants to see and value the relevance of communicative methodologies, to experience

more relevant and interesting activities and topics, additional resources, and an increased number of hours of instruction.

Some participants revealed their concern not to turn into a traditional English teacher such as those they had in the past. In this sense, Freeman (2016) states that "we learn to teach in relation to how we ourselves were taught" (p. 36) and as we gain expertise as knowers of classrooms. This does not necessarily mean that teachers often teach as they were taught, but those experiences as learners do constitute part of the foundations for how they learn to teach. Teachers learn in retrospect from what happened to them, including their earlier experiences as language students in initial basic education (Lortie, 1975). They learn to decide on what they want or do not want to take from those previous experiences, as they become acquainted with theories and develop expertise in their teaching. Lin (2005) reminds us that those experiences as language learners tend to impact their subsequent experiences as learners of language teaching in a teacher education program and in their professional practice.

On the other hand, as participants completed their second practicum period at a public primary or secondary school during their final year in the teacher education program, their conceptions of language teaching were similarly altered. Initially, their experiences throughout the program facilitated the study of language teaching methods from theoretical perspectives. The overall tendency in this regard appeared to have been the promotion of communicative practices, and of a combination of methods in response to students' needs and the conditions of the setting. This combination of teaching approaches may correspond to a form of eclecticism where teachers "pick and choose elements of multiple methods to increase student engagement, language use, and communicative capacity" (Cushing-Leubner & Bigelow, 2014, p. 247). In terms of communicative practices, Freeman's (2016) notion of the language classroom as the place to mimic the world by creating communicative tasks as the

purpose of language teaching seemingly represented the participants' views of language teaching. A few other participants highlighted the tendency of trying one method, and if it did not work, to try something else. This trial-and-error perspective differs from Farrell's (2009) claim that "novice teachers who are mentored in a formal manner […] [often] learn from guided practice rather than depending on trial and error alone" (p. 184).

In contrast to the previous ideas, other participants assumed a more critical position towards the teaching methods and approaches used through the program coursework, particularly the general English courses. They claimed that these courses should have focused more on approaching the learning of English from the perspective of the English teaching profession, as opposed to relying on approaches used for regular English courses usually aimed at individuals interested in developing general proficiency in the language. The previous idea relates to the concept of English-for-Teaching (Freeman *et al.*, 2015) in reference to the language skills that the teacher can draw on to deliver instruction and to interact with classroom activities. For instance,

> […] in giving homework, a teacher may write the assignment on the board, copying the information from her instructional materials. To introduce an activity, she may describe the activity and offer examples for carrying it out. To provide feedback to students, she listens to what students produce and then may ask questions or model a desired response. (Freeman *et al.,* 2015, p. 5).

The experiences associated with their practicum also led participants to be more aware of the relevance of context in teaching. Not only the classroom and school context, but the broader social context of individual students. A parallel pattern was also identified in Pishghadam *et al.'s* (2009) study, where some participants' metaphors revealed a situative perspective of learning which "draws more attention to social processes and joint activities with knowledge being seen as situated, by-product of the activity, context and culture in which it is developed and used" (p. 28). Interestingly, this study may equally

lend support to a de-colonial attitude as participants assume a more critical position of their teaching reality. To illustrate, it was mostly through the practicum experiences that the participants realized the inappropriacy of extraneous methodologies vis-à-vis the social conditions of their students. In fact, most participants claimed to have understood that their teaching had to be tailored to the characteristics of their teaching setting. This reminds us of Maldonado Torres' (2011) claim that "the ethic that underlies such a 'de-colonial attitude' is one which generates epistemologies and politics which affirm the idea that 'another world is possible'" (p. 18), a world where the principles and procedures for the education of second language teachers are designed from the perspective of the people and the social realities of where the target language is going to be taught.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This retrospective study examined a group of student teachers' conceptions of language teaching in an attempt to better understand their process of learning to teach English. The participants' conceptions of English language teaching as they entered a teacher education program showed a sense of dissatisfaction with the learning experiences during their regular English classes in public schools, and a more positive view of their English learning experiences in language institutes and in vocational education and training courses during their senior years in high school. In contrast, participants' conceptions of language teaching while completing the final practicum in the teacher education program showed a growing awareness of the contextual circumstances in regard to students' needs and social realities.

As the participants progressed through different scenarios and were exposed to many teaching and learning situations, they were able to gain a more explicit understanding of context-related factors that make language teaching a challenging job. Thus, the narratives of these student teachers seemed to add to the view of teacher learning as a process that is progressively and socially constructed (Freeman &

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Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 2009b; Smagorinsky *et al,* 2003). Results from Barahona's (2014) study similarly revealed that "pre-service teachers' previous experiences shaped their understanding of language teaching and learning" (p. 118). We believe that student teachers should continue to refine their own conceptions of language teaching in ways that satisfy the needs and expectations of their learners' social context. It is unreasonable for prospective language teachers to simply comply with established language teaching traditions in their workplace, especially when these continue to offer dissatisfied learning outcomes for their students.

Teacher education programs should provide the space for examining the preconceptions that prospective language teachers bring with them as they enter the program. Castellanos (2013) stresses the need for teacher educators to help teachers gain awareness of their entering beliefs about teaching and to experience changes in them so that more explicit beliefs can guide their teaching. Barnes and Smagorinsky (2016) also reaffirm the need to offer a space for self-inquiry, so that prospective teachers can reflect and learn from the analysis of their own narratives as learners of language teaching. This might equally raise awareness among prospective language teachers that they bring a body of knowledge in the form of narratives of experience that teacher educators need to tap into in order to begin to transform their developmental path of learning to teach.

One of the challenges for teachers, according to Johnson and Freeman (2001), is to situate the theoretical knowledge they gain in formal education within the social contexts where it is to be considered, so that the interconnectedness of that knowledge becomes evident. It follows that in their process of adaptation to the practicum environment student teachers should seek to reconcile potential differences between their recently gained conceptions of language teaching from formal teacher education and the established orthodoxy of language teaching in the context of the practicum.

Finally, an in-depth exploration of the tensions that student teachers experience between implementing what they learned in a teacher education program and following what experienced in-service teachers at practicum settings do is strongly recommended. This takes further consideration, as Kang & Chen (2014) claim that teachers are more likely to practice what they have experienced as opposed to what they have studied, and Borg's (2009) view that teachers' resistance to change remains a powerful adversary in learning to teach. It seems clear, however, that the attitudes of teacher educators, policymakers, school community, and above all, teachers themselves, are very likely to determine whether teacher learning evolves or stays unchanged.

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