

Participants' Narratives of the Fulbright FLTA Program on their Intercultural and Professional Experience

Narrativas de Participantes del Programa Fulbright FLTA sobre su Experiencia Intercultural y Profesional

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a narrative inquiry study on exchange programs, intercultural awareness, and professional development in eight former participants of the Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant -FLTA- program. This study used written narratives to collect data from eight participants of the FLTA scholarship program who belonged to the cohort 2017-2018. The results of this study showed that after being a FLTA, participants improved their English language skills; they became more aware of their teaching practices by implementing and adapting different teaching methodologies, they experienced cross-cultural interaction, and understood better cultural differences which really fostered their personal and professional development as English language teachers in their home countries.

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Keywords: English as a foreign language teacher, exchange programs, language immersion, intercultural awareness, professional development

Resumen

Este artículo informa los resultados de un estudio de indagación narrativa sobre programas de intercambio, conciencia intercultural y desarrollo profesional en ocho exparticipantes del programa Fulbright de Asistente de Enseñanza de Idiomas Extranjeros FLTA. Este estudio utilizó narrativas escritas para recopilar datos de ocho participantes del programa de becas FLTA que pertenecieron a la cohorte 2017-2018. Los resultados de este estudio mostraron que luego de ser un FLTA, los participantes mejoraron sus habilidades lingüísticas en inglés; se hicieron más conscientes de sus prácticas docentes al implementar y adaptar diferentes metodologías de enseñanza, experimentaron una interacción intercultural y entendieron mejor las diferencias culturales, lo que fomentó su desarrollo personal y profesional como profesores de inglés en sus países de origen.

Palabras clave: profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera, programas de intercambio, inmersión lingüística, conciencia intercultural, desarrollo profesional

Introduction

During the last decades, countries like the USA, the UK, Mexico, Brazil among others have sponsored multiple programs to strengthen educational, professional, and intercultural exchanges, enabling participants to learn from culturally diverse environments. Exchange programs in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) have not been an exception in Colombia; particularly because Colombian universities want to be part of internationalization and interinstitutional processes (Velásquez-Hoyos, 2021). According to the Colombian Fulbright Commission (2021), English language teachers want to enroll in these programs seeking opportunities to improve their teaching practice and cultural understanding. Hayden (2009) states that exchange programs facilitate a mutual understanding between the host community and the participants by actively forcing them to confront cultural differences. For example, when teachers encounter intercultural experiences, they exchange information, knowledge, culture, and interact with host families and immigrants from diverse cultural backgrounds.

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Through such intercultural encounter, professional development and cultural awareness play important roles in these exchange programs, as they are built by different experiences and language improvement that participants get after the process. In that vein, Herrera and Ortiz (2018) state the need to work on intercultural awareness in language training focusing on problems derived from the participants' own context and culture before understanding or questioning others; this allows participants to be more critical, understandable, and communicative in intercultural contexts. Additionally, Gutierrez (2022) points out that learners need intercultural exchange experiences to strengthen the dialogue among differences, which

enables participants to enrich and overcome the inevitable conversation breakdowns. Hence, participants of exchange programs become aware of intercultural differences that trigger their critical views in the teaching and learning, particularly in the teaching of languages. In this sense, Garcia-Ruiz and Figueroa (2007) explains that in intercultural experiences, individuals understand the need of resignifying themselves for the comprehension of others; they see the diversity of peoples/cultures and “the uniqueness of the human race, that is, the uniqueness of culture and the diversity of human groups” (p. 37). In other words, participants need to be able to understand themselves and the uniqueness of their culture in order to understand others.

When participating in exchange programs, participants experience different intercultural encounters. For instance, Garcia-Ruiz and Figueroa (2007) explain that in intercultural exchange, individuals are simultaneously part of different social groups, which means that they participate in different cultures “and that these do not necessarily correspond to identical cultures [...] this process of interaction between social groups and individuals generates practices that make the process more complex” (p. 41). This process is what makes the intercultural encounter more enriching as participants resignify themselves and question critically their own and other's cultural differences, allowing them to develop their intercultural awareness.

Besides, Azola (2021) states other important elements of intercultural exchanges. First, the intercultural experience. This allows applicants to have a global view, be more assertive on decision-making, become aware of the difference, get out of their comfort zone, and understand how things are made in their own context and other places. Furthermore, Azola (2021) mentions that participants in intercultural exchange might experience tensioning periods that empower them to recognize themselves, from their own identity and culture, and even others from diversity. Second, the academic elements. This has to do with obtaining determined competencies and objectives, which are connected to a life project. In this sense, when selecting the exchange program, applicants need to have clear objectives of what they want to achieve. For this research paper, an exchange program is any type of intercultural exchange among teachers in their same country or in a foreign country that facilitates the exchange of visions, perspectives, identities, narratives, and teaching perspectives.

One of the most prestigious exchange programs in Colombia in the last decades is the Fulbright Scholarship Program. This program is “the official student exchange program sponsored by the Information and Cultural Section of the U.S. Embassy” (Fulbright Colombia, n.d). The most common Fulbright scholarships for English language teachers are the Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) Program and Teaching Excellence and Achievement (TEA) Program. Both scholarships are intended to improve teachers' professional development. In the case of the FLTA scholarship, it enables university professors or senior students from a bilingual teaching program to travel to the USA and teach their

mother language in a North American university as a way of enhancing participants' teaching skills.

Even though the Fulbright FLTA scholarship is a predominant program in Colombia and in the world (Department of State of the USA, n.d), few studies have been conducted to deeply know the experiences of former FLTA participants (Fulbright Scholar Program, n.d). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to know the experiences of former FLTA participants and describe the impact that exchange programs have had on their intercultural awareness and professional development. The research question that guided this study was: What are former FLTA participants' narratives regarding their experience in the exchange program?

Theoretical Framework

To achieve a better comprehension of the present study, concepts such as exchange programs, intercultural awareness, and professional development are going to be explained.

Exchange Programs

Cultural exchange programs provide students with an opportunity to study or share with people from different contexts. According to Hayden (2009), exchange programs facilitate a mutual understanding between the host community and participants by helping them understand, respect, and confront cultural differences. A similar definition is provided by the Department of State of the USA (n.d). It manifests that exchange programs are meant to experience educational and cultural interchange; that with the intention of strengthening participant's knowledge of different cultures and creating better international relationships. These definitions demonstrate the strong link that participation in an exchange program has in understanding cultural differences.

In the same line of thoughts, Colombian Fulbright Commission (n.d) points out that these programs are intended to foster mutual understanding. In other words, participating students must recognize themselves and their own identities, and be in contact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, comprehend cultural differences, and learn from those. Additionally, exchange programs benefit these students in terms of language improvement, cultural awareness, and professional development. Berg (2016) highlights that the main benefit of exchange programs is the opportunity these students have for growing personally and most relevant professionally.

A closed perspective is proposed by Roberts (1998, as cited in Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005), when he mentions that the benefit in these types of programs is that participants are exposed to different social and cultural environments. Besides, it is a fact that being part of an exchange program changes one's stereotypes of other nationalities, but it also contributes

to creating other ones; something that can be also tensioning while participants interact with the other environments. That is why exchange programs give an alternative point of view of the world, and participants acquire a “new-found recognition of the extent to which their own cultural values and norms differ from those of their counterparts in their host country” (Roberts, 1998, as cited in Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005, p. 43). These perspectives show the advantages of participating in exchange programs, which commonly include the acceptance and better understanding of the coexistence of diverse cultures. Furthermore, it gives the chance to expand the social circle through interactions with different people that enriches “intercultural competence and intercultural communication” (Tique et al., 2016, p. 26).

In agreement with previous ideas, Otero-Gomez et al. (2018) developed a study in Colombia and Mexico exploring the perceptions of the participants in the exchange. The study reported that participants benefited from the program in terms of improvement in coexistence, autonomy, self-confidence, and administration of financial resources. The authors found that the cultural and academic enrichment that this program provided was significant. The process in the exchange program became a generator of new expectations for professional development.

Exchange Programs and Intercultural Awareness

Culture is a social and political construct that determines the way human beings understand the world they live, and the relationships of power and control that people from the global south are immersed in. Nieto (2008) suggests that culture is ‘the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and religion’ (p. 129) Thus, all cultural representations, mediated by socio-political and economic issues, are related to the phenomenon of language. Language and culture are intrinsically connected and if English language students and teachers want to have a successful learning process of the English language, they must approach the languages’ cultures.

Now, in the field of English language teaching (ELT), intercultural awareness is one of the key aspects to understand how communication works in an effective and ethical way. According to Faten (2020), intercultural awareness is “being familiar and having knowledge of different cultures in order to promote worldwide and multi-cultural acceptance” (p. 70). Thus, learning a language not only implies syntactic and semantic aspects, but also the development of acceptance, tolerance, and critical thinking skills.

In this sense, when developing intercultural awareness, teachers foster a critical perspective of how culture and society work and mentor students to be critical about their own context, the foreign cultures, and their social dynamics. It is a matter of acknowledgment and the

recognition of the political and ethical scene that is included in the process of teaching a language. Hence, intercultural awareness enhances critical interculturality. Walsh (2009) states that when developing critical interculturality, teachers would be able to establish and promote relationships based on respect and equality. In this way, this interculturality is understood as “a political, social, ethical and epistemic project - knowledge -, which affirms the need to change not only relationships, but also the structures, conditions and devices of power that maintain inequality, inferiorization, racialization, and discrimination” (p. 4). Therefore, teaching, guided by the principles of cultural awareness and critical interculturality, is a space to transform the educational field into a new paradigm in which critical thinking, resistance, and understanding are the foundations.

Following these ideas, it is necessary to highlight the paramount role that exchange programs play in the development of teacher’s intercultural awareness and critical interculturality. Paik et al. (2015) explain that the contact teachers have when being part of exchange programs reduces prejudice. The authors coin the term “*manage intercultural exposure*” to mention how this develops “cross-cultural development and intercultural acumen in teachers, which in turn foster intercultural tolerance and a pluralistic worldview” (p. 101). In other words, the authors expose that being part of an intercultural exposure experience enables participants to increase their understanding of their own native countries and social realities and others’ cultures’ phenomena.

Related results are exposed in Ospina and Medina’s (2020) study. These authors point out that exchange programs help teacher-participants to gain cross-cultural awareness due to the interaction they have with different educators from different environments. Additionally, Ospina and Medina highlight the challenges teachers face when teaching in another context. Some of them are “cultural shock, school system and communication” (p. 45); however, participants mentioned that these challenges boosted their intercultural awareness and professional development. Equivalently, Kyei-Blankson and Nur-Awaleh (2018) complement Ospina and Medina’s (2020) ideas when they mention that participants increased their intercultural awareness, as they were able to understand better cultural differences and cross-cultural sensitivity.

18 In the Colombian context, Arismendi (2022), explains that it is paramount to strengthen intercultural exchange, which must not have to be an international but also a national one, in which language teachers interchange their beliefs, histories, experiences, knowledge, and practices. In this sense, participants accept and internalize cultural aspects that are not related to their immediate cultural context. Similarly, Granados-Beltran (2016) explains that, in Colombia, there is an urgent need for English language teachers to expose their students to critical interculturality to decolonize diversity and cultural perspectives regarding the teaching of English. Granados-Beltran invites English language teachers to question what has been imposed on them, empowering them to rely on their personal knowledge, helping teachers

make their voices visible, and not to adopt foreign policies that are totally out of teachers' and students' cultural realities.

Professional Development

Due to the improvements that participants in exchange programs experience in their professional development (PD), defining this term becomes crucial for this study. Hayes (2010) describes PD as “the many types of educational experiences related to an individual’s work. It is the only strategy school systems must strengthen educators’ performance levels and the only way educators can learn, so that they are able to better their performance and raise student achievement” (p. 1).

Regarding PD in the teaching field, Richards and Farrell (2005) share a similar perspective. They define it as a “general growth not focused on a specific job. It serves as a longer- term goal that seeks to facilitate growth of teachers’ understanding of teaching and of themselves as teachers. It often involves examining different dimensions of a teacher’s practice as a basis for reflective review and can hence be seen as ‘bottom-up’” (p. 9). Thus, PD is seen as a reflective work or process that teachers need to go through to keep growing as professionals in their field and polish their teaching methodologies (Gonzalez Marin et al., 2017).

A similar perspective on PD is proposed by González (2007). She says that in PD, it is necessary to move on from ideas that consider teachers as people who need to be filled with knowledge. She explains that there is a need to include context-sensitive models that reflect teachers’ decision-making and experience. This incorporates reflection, teachers’ practices, and general teaching skills.

In fact, language teachers are immersed in a continuous process in which they must keep updating and reinforcing their knowledge and capacities in the teaching field. This continuous learning and updating leads to PD which refers to how teachers study and improve in their own profession in a reflective way. Novoshenina and López Pinzón (2018) state that a “lack of continuing professional development may result in serious issues. It is a fact that the modern world is changing rapidly; therefore, what students learn at the university may become outdated by the time they graduate from it, and some professions that will be highly demanded in ten years might not even exist now” (p. 114). Thus, the participation of teachers in exchange programs becomes paramount for PD since they offer teachers multiple ways of updating their teaching practices (Hamza, 2010). Additionally, Rapoport (2008) agrees on the fact that when teachers participate in exchange programs not only their PD increases but also institutions in their home countries benefit since academic practices are better when these teachers come back. In a further study, Rapoport (2011) concludes that exchange programs for teachers are essential for their multiplier impact that they can share in their home institutions. Torres-Casierra’s (2021) study, developed in Colombia, shows

the impact that teachers' exchange programs have in teachers' personal and professional development. This study concludes that institutions in Colombia and bilingual teaching programs need to encourage students and teachers to participate in exchange programs as they increase professional development and enable them to improve on aspects such as language immersion, interculturality, personal and professional relationships, among others.

Method

This study is framed under the qualitative research paradigm with a narrative inquiry orientation, intending to describe and interpret the narratives of eight former Fulbright scholars of the Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) Program. According to Barkhuizen and Wette (2008, as cited in Gomez-Vásquez & Guerrero Nieto, 2018), narrative inquiry aims at understanding the experiences of teachers that they place in the context where they work. Additionally, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) state that narrative inquiry focuses “not only on individuals' experiences but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (pp. 42–43). Thus, a narrative inquiry orientation allows participants to tell stories related to their professional, personal, and social experiences faced in the exchange programs.

Context and Participants

Eight former Fulbright FLTA teachers participated in the study. These FLTAs belong to the cohort 2017-2018. They are not English native speakers with no USA residence or citizenship. All of them hold a BA in English Language Teaching or related degrees; meaning that they are in-service English language teachers or have experience teaching this language in their home countries. The 2017-2018 cohort has a Facebook account through which they received an invitation to be part of a study and completed a Google Form telling their experiences as FLTAs. Initially, 314 received the invitation, but only eight voluntarily sent their experiences. For ethical considerations (See appendix 1), the participants got informed about the purpose of the study. For this study, the names of the participants were not revealed, instead nicknames were assigned to each participant.

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The requirements of the FLTA scholarship are that participants need to teach their mother language in universities or colleges in the United States for one academic year. They also need to organize events within the academic community to share their culture and take classes inside the university/college that facilitate them to learn about cultural aspects. The participants of this study taught different languages in various places around the USA as indicated in Table I.

Table 1. Participants' Profile

Gender	Country of origin	University/College they taught in the USA	Language taught
Female	Tanzania	Yale University	Swahili
Female	Mexico	Susquehanna University	Spanish
Female	Colombia	Lewis & Clark College	Spanish
Masculine	Malaysia	Ohio University	Malay
Female	Colombia	Gardner Webb University	Spanish
Masculine	Morocco	New York University	Arabic
Female	Argentina	Gardner Webb University	Spanish
Masculine	Venezuela	Salve Regina University	Spanish

Source: Own creation

Instruments and Data Analysis

For developing this study, written narratives were collected in the form of short stories. The participants completed a Google Form in which they were asked to write their home country, the language and university they taught in the USA, and their experience as a FLTA in a North American University/College. The narratives were written in English, and they did not have a word limit. However, the idea was to describe as specific as possible all the moments faced during the exchange program. The following questions were included:

Describe your experience as a FLTA in the USA, what is the most significant learning experience of being a FLTA? What was the most challenging aspect of being a FLTA? What is your insight after participating as a FLTA in the Fulbright Program?

For analyzing the narratives, this study employed the Smallest Space Analysis (SSA) model. This SSA model, according to Gimenez (2010), is a structured model to summarize, synthesize, and interpret narratives following an inductive process for analyzing information. This author explains that there are two approaches for analyzing narratives: componential and functional analysis. The first focuses on the structure of the narrative. The latter analyzes the way in which narrators tell the story and interpret the world without paying attention to the structure. The approach used in this research was functional analysis, as we, the researchers, wanted to see the meaning of these experiences. To analyze these narratives, they were organized into a matrix in which they were classified from themes to patterns, and then to categories, thus highlighting the most relevant information.

Findings and Discussion

From the qualitative analysis of the participants' narratives, we, the researchers, identified three main categories that express the benefits, gains, and difficulties they experienced while being in an intercultural exchange.

Cross-cultural Interaction

The first category that emerged after the analysis of information provides insights about participants' cultural experiences in terms of cross-cultural interactions. They expressed that they needed to manage both cultures in terms of time management, time schedules, and other cultural aspects. For instance, Alexis' narratives demonstrate that after the exchange program, she was able to have a better understanding of her own culture and other cultures; including some grantees' culture, as follows:

Learning to manage my time and deal with both cultures was very significant to me. I think it's called adapting. (Alexis' narrative)

What is described by Alexis in her narratives is linked to what Tique et al. (2016) present. These authors mention that being part of an exchange program enriches intercultural competence; that is understanding and questioning both cultures. Besides, and as Walsh (2009) states, to be able to approach a critical intercultural experience, it is necessary to develop a deep understanding of each culture as a social and epistemological project. Similar ideas come from the narratives of Acren and Heather, they state that even though it was difficult to be away from family and confront cultural differences, they figured out that living in a different context, different from theirs, and their experience as FLTA enabled them to grow and survive in the new culture (Faten, 2020). The following narrative exemplifies this insight:

The most challenging aspect of being a FLTA was being forced to get out of my comfort zone and adapt to situations I was not used to encounter (Cultural differences). Living by myself in another country for the first time and being away from my family for so long was also difficult; but I realize that these challenges are what made me grow the most and that understanding really helped me to adapt better, come back to my country and include cultural elements in my teaching practice. (Acren's narrative)

I learned a lot about American culture and reflected on that of my own. (Heather's narrative)

These narratives agree with Hayden's (2009) ideas when she explains that exchange programs allow participants to embrace cultural differences and make plans to overcome difficulties that might emerge during the stay in the host country. In both narratives, Heather and Acren manifest their cultural interaction which somehow was permeated by tensions since at the beginning there was an intrinsic act of resistance. They adapted themselves in order to survive, enabling them to enrich their reflection and personal growth. These

demonstrate that participants were in the process of developing their intercultural awareness: resignifying their own culture and values to understand others (Paik et al., 2015). Hence, the participants understood that culture is “dialectical, conflicted, and full of inherent tensions” (Nieto, 2008, p. 139).

Another paramount aspect related to cross-cultural interaction is how participants gained knowledge about North American culture and other grantees' cultures. The FLTA Fulbright program helps participants to interact with different people in different events. During the seminars in which all FLTA gather, they can socialize with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, share their customs and traditions, and create personal and professional networks, as mentioned in Lyndah's narrative:

During my time as a FLTA, I learned about culture; cultural aspects about American culture, but other people's culture because I get the chance to meet other FLTAs from other countries, learn from them and form professional relationships and networks. (Lyndah narrative)

The previous excerpt is aligned to what Berg (2016) and Paik et al. (2015) point out when they indicate that exchange programs benefit students in terms of increasing cultural awareness and building international professional networks. Berg's and Paik et al.'s ideas are reinforced in Taryk's narratives as presented below:

I consider that the most significant learning experience of being a FLTA was being able to meet new people from different cultures. I, as an English teacher in my country, think that the opportunity of getting in touch with that many cultures and traditions, new ways of thinking and understanding life and knowledge, really enriched me as a human being and as a professional. (Taryk's narrative)

In his narrative, Taryk reflects upon the benefits he obtained after being part of the FLTA program. He emphasized on the idea that this experience helped him grow as a professional and as a human by being immersed in a cross-cultural diverse experience in which the participants can interact with other grantees and immigrants from other cultures, allowing FLTA to boost their intercultural awareness.

Language Immersion

This category accounts for the improvements that participants made in their English language skills. As it was aforementioned, participants of the Fulbright FLTA program are not English native speakers, but they are all English language teachers in their home countries. Therefore, they consider being a FLTA as an opportunity to meet different English language teachers from all over the globe to improve their pedagogical skills, language skills, and cultural knowledge. Even though language immersion is a crucial aspect in exchange programs, participants face challenges, as Hamid indicates:

At the beginning, it was difficult being exposed to the language all the time. Spoken communication is hard when it is the first time you travel to another country. (Hamid's narrative)

The experience of Hamid is consistent with the results of Herrera and Ortiz (2018). These authors say that being exposed to intercultural diverse contexts challenges people to be more communicative and open to bring their own reality, from their learning experiences in their home countries, to the new one. Furthermore, participants highlight that managing different languages benefited them in their teaching since in a country like the USA, there are immigrants whose native language is not English, so being able to speak other languages helped participants to empathize better with immigrant students, as it is expressed in the following narrative:

I realized how important it is to be able to manage more than one language when you are teaching in the USA as you find people with different language backgrounds, so it is easier to understand them. (Andrea's narrative)

Another significant aspect that participants underline is how this experience enhanced their language skills. In the narratives of Hamid, Andrea, and Lyndah, there is evidence of the improvements they made in their listening, speaking, and writing skills in English particularly because this was the first time these participants were immersed in a diverse intercultural environment as they shared with grantees from other cultures and local people from the USA (Azola, 2021). The following narratives exemplify this insight:

After my experience as a FLTA, I improved my speaking and listening skills. (Hamid's narrative)

I really improved my speaking and listening skills as I needed to use English everywhere. In my country, I just use English when I am working, but in the USA, it was all the time, which really helped to improve my English. (Andrea's narrative)

Apart from listening and speaking, I improved my writing skills. I took American History class, and that subject really pushed me to write papers. I had writing advising sessions in the Writing Center of the university I was at, so that was a great opportunity for me to improve my writing in English. (Lyndah's narrative)

Besides language improvement, participation in the FLTA program challenged participants' cross-cultural knowledge. They were able to interact better in events outside the universities' campus. This interaction enabled them to comprehend better the local and other grantees' traditions since participants developed different types of cultural fairs and activities in which they could share their home countries' culture. This is evident in Chantal and Andrea's narratives:

I was able to handle different situations, I was not very effective at communicating with people outside campus because of the way they spoke; I was not used to their accent. In the end, I managed to communicate with them, and I even learned popular words they use. (Chantal's narrative)

As an English teacher in my country, I think that the opportunity of getting in touch with many cultures and traditions, new ways of thinking and understanding life and knowledge. (Andrea's narrative)

These previous narratives are connected to the ideas of Tique et al. (2016) and Azola, (2021) mainly as they say that exchange programs enrich intercultural competence, intercultural communication, and language skills.

Professional Development

In the narratives, participants expressed that being a FLTA enabled them to reflect on different teaching aspects such as teaching methodologies, learning environments, and enrolling in didactic programs. These led them strengthen their teaching skills and see educational models that they could adapt when teaching languages, as described in the following narrative:

While in the program, I was part of didactic programs which acted as an eye opener in the world of academia. I learnt about academic writing, publishing articles, doing research, creating professional networks, and teaching methodologies. (Acren's narrative)

This participant illustrates that during his time in the FLTA program, he enrolled in a didactic program that gave him tools to enrich his professional development; he learnt about pedagogical and research aspects that are necessary for an English language teacher who wants to be part of academia. Acren's narrative corroborates what Richards and Farell (2005) manifest. These authors say that PD facilitates the growth of the teachers by being part of activities such as didactic programs, which give them a better sense of teaching and their role as teachers. Similarly, Hamid expresses that being part of this exchange program gave him the opportunity to enroll in long-term activities; for instance, pursuing a master's degree for having another vision of teaching languages (González, 2007). This signifies that Hamid improved his PD by reflecting on the implementation of techniques, strategies, theories, and that provoked him to study as a postgraduate. He says so as follows:

My experience as an FLTA was incredibly amazing and eye-opening. I realized I was really good at teaching Spanish and this program encouraged me to move forward and pursue a master's degree in teaching Spanish. I got to learn a lot from my advisors in the Language Department and gained plenty of insight on pedagogy and multiculturalism during that unforgettable year. (Hamid's narrative)

Moreover, effective teaching was another element that participants were exposed to. In this particular case, they got better insights about teaching methodologies and classroom management. The narratives of the participants showed the connection with González's

(2007) work that explains the importance of the adaptation of context-sensitive models, as seen in the following excerpt:

There are a lot and in different areas, professionally I learned how to use and adapt a new and more effective way of teaching when returning to my home country, I also learned to handle problems diplomatically. Personally, I learned to be confident and considerate with others... I learnt a whole new way to live. (Taryks' narrative)

In the same line of thought, Chantal expresses that besides enriching her knowledge about effective teaching methodologies, participating in the FLTA program reiterated her interest and passion for teaching languages, giving her a new perspective of facilitating her classes. She says the following in her narratives:

I would love to continue teaching using the methodologies I learned and reinforced during my time in the USA, in my everyday life as a teacher, as well, and finding new ways to teach intercultural understanding. (Chantal's narrative)

Furthermore, Heather's narrative complements previous ideas described by other participants since this program permitted her to have practical experience that is invaluable in her career as a language teacher:

The program is heuristic by nature, giving room for a hands-on experience which is imprinted in my mind. (Heather's narrative)

This assertion shows what Novoshenina and López Pinzón (2018) explain about the importance of continuing professional development. It allows teachers to be updated in their pedagogical and didactic knowledge, increasing students' possibilities and adapting their learning experiences with the needs of the modern world.

Conclusions

This research paper answers the question about Former Fulbright FLTAs' narratives regarding their experience in the program. These conclusions do not attempt to generalize the perspectives of FLTA, but they come from the data analyzed from eight participants of the program that served as a guide for wider research with this population.

From the eight participants, their narratives describe how their experiences helped them re-signify their teaching practice. The knowledge they gained while being a FLTA contributed to enriching their professional profile. After this experience, participants decided to enroll in Postgraduate studies, join different professional networks, and learn about methodologies and approaches to teach languages. These narratives also demonstrate how the participation in the program nourished their teaching identity as participants were immersed in a

multicultural diverse environment, teaching and sharing their mother language and traditions to people with different cultural backgrounds.

As regards intercultural competence, the teacher-participants demonstrated to develop cultural awareness since they got the opportunity to know and confront culture from different perspectives: their own, as they taught their mother language and customs; the North American culture, in which they were immersed participating in the daily life in the U.S; and other FLTA's cultures through the seminars and events the Fulbright Program organized for their grantees. These experiences enrich the way they understand culture and how important it is to comprehend themselves and others ethically. This is aligned to what Faten (2020) proposes when she indicates that intercultural awareness allows people to think, understand, and communicate with others. However, this is just the beginning. To develop a critical interculturality, as Walsh (2009) states, these kinds of exchanges and gatherings between diverse communities must open the doors to understand culture as a complex phenomenon permeated by power and ideology and so, to build relationships based on equality and democracy to transform education and the society. Even though this paper was based on an international intercultural exchange program, our invitation with this research is to promote a change in the conception of these kinds of programs; particularly, because in Colombia there is a belief that an intercultural exchange implies traveling to another country, denying the possibility of having these experiences in the same country which offer, as well, opportunities for professional development, intercultural awareness, and context-sensitive pedagogical experiences. In this sense, Fulbright Colombia and other organizations should continue working on abroad exchange programs, but also national ones. Both would enrich the Colombian English language teachers' identities that will eventually lead to more equal and democratic teaching practices.

On the other hand, after participating in the FLTA program, results show that participants developed an awareness that made them rethink all the processes they went through as teachers, which led to a significant improvement in their professional development. Participants were able to improve in terms of reflection, teaching methodologies, professional development, language teaching skills, and student motivation. Furthermore, their narratives illustrate that this experience in the FLTA program increased their passion for teaching by the desire of continuing implementing and adapting all the methodologies learnt.

Moreover, participants improved their language skills in English since they were constantly using the language in and outside campus. They not only improved their listening and speaking skills, but they also improved their writing skills as during their classes, they needed to present different papers and some enrolled in writing centers in English. As Herrera and Ortiz (2018) mention, exchange programs help students to challenge themselves in diverse contexts, leading them to use different linguistic and paralinguistic resources.

Another conclusion derived from this study is that intercultural exchange programs such as the FLTA program offers opportunities for professionals to broaden intercultural perspectives building a new point of view toward people and culture. Participants end up bringing their personal and professional experiences to enrich their home institutions and create a greater space for students' learning; they become more informed and empowered about life in their own local culture and the others. On top of that, participants have the chance to enhance their professional skills. That is, "changing their frames of reference and shaping their practices in a way that helps them to function more effectively with different learning styles and unfamiliar behaviors that foster students' change" (Hamza, 2010, p. 65), meaning that surviving and adapting to a different environment or conditions is necessary sometimes for growing professionally.

Concerning the contribution of the study to the English language teaching field, this paper serves as a baseline to see the relevance that exchange programs have in English language teachers' professional development and intercultural awareness. Participants' narratives show that exchange programs increase their professional development in terms of language exposure, teaching skills, cross-cultural interaction, critical thinking, and understanding. Hence, it is paramount that Bilingual Teaching Programs in Colombia promote the participation in intercultural exchange programs even in the same country, and more importantly, conduct research to see the benefits that these programs have in ELT professionals.

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Appendix 1. Consent Form

Dear former FLTA grantees,

We kindly invite you to participate in a research study with the goal of understanding the impact that the participation in the FLTA program had on your Professional Development.

This study has the following goal: To investigate former FLTA participants' narratives regarding their experience in the FLTA program and professional development.

What are the study procedures? What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will ONLY be asked to complete this form with your narratives related to your experience as a FLTA.

What are the risks or inconveniences of the study?

We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, a possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the study.

What are the benefits of the study?

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study may contribute to the impact that Exchange Programs have on non-English native language teachers.

Will I receive payment for participation? Are there costs to participate?

There are no costs, and you will not be paid to be in this study.

How will my personal information be protected?

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality. Your confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used.

Can I stop being in the study and what are my rights?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

Whom do I contact if I have questions about the study?

Take as long as you like to answer this Google Form. We will be happy to answer any questions you have about this study. If you have further questions about this study or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the principal investigators.