

# HOW

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# HOW Journal

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The Colombian Association of Teachers of English

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## Editorial 2023-2

Edgar Lucero<sup>1</sup>

In the field of English language education in Colombia, teacher-researchers have studied various topics. The insights of those studies have re- or constructed knowledge that leads to visions of English language education in the country. Colombian journals that have specialized in publishing studies of this kind become relevant in the construction of such knowledge and visions. *HOW* keeps its work on making teacher-researchers' studies come into the light for the construction of knowledge about English language education in Colombia.

In this issue, for example, Angela Patricia Velásquez-Hoyos and Lizeth Andrea Martínez-Burgos present an article about the impact of exchange programs on English language skills and teaching methodologies. These teacher-researchers emphasize intercultural awareness and its role in personal and professional development. By presenting the results of a narrative inquiry study on exchange programs, as part of the professional development of eight former participants of the Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant -FLTA- program, the authors portray how cross-cultural interaction and understanding cultural differences are part of the participants' experiences in that program. They conclude that the FLTA program fostered personal and professional development as English language teachers in their home countries.

Another study in this new *HOW* number refers to the role of language pedagogy in redefining attitudes toward gender identity. Under this line, Karen Tatiana Camargo-Ruiz and Daniel Aponte-Moniquira present a study that explores individual gender realities and constructions in teaching practices. Thus, the study on the embodiment of femininities and identities in language pedagogy fosters resistance and resurgence against gender paradigms in teaching. These teacher-researchers used a narrative inquiry approach to inspect two language teachers' life stories in an initial teacher education program. They conclude that

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femininities, embodied in teachers' practices, provide a broader spectrum of individual gender realities and constructions.

As embodiments can be related to hegemonic aspects of teacher gender identity, so are factors influencing students' emotions, such as academic load and personal life. Anthony Ceron and Norbella Miranda talk about this topic in their article to realize that there are palpable connections between emotions and language learning processes. These teacher-researchers study the presence and impact of emotions in language learning by using a mixed-method study on students' emotions while participating in conversation clubs in English at a public university in Colombia. The significance of emotions in the development of oral skills within conversation clubs contributes to the understanding of language learners from a broader perspective in the field of English language education in Colombia.

The study of emotions parallels the study of perceptions in English language education. Language education not only refers to teaching or learning, but assessment is also a remarkable part of it. This is the part that Frank Giraldo, Daniela Escalante-Villa, and Daniela Isaza-Palacio refer to in their article, particularly about the role of language assessment literacy in English language teachers' understanding of assessment practices. Thus, there is value in test analysis and collaborative tasks in English language teachers' professional development. By case-studying teachers' perceptions of an online assessment course's contents, activities, and impact, these teacher-researchers highlight that test-analysis tasks made English language teachers aware of what language assessment is and do, subsequently, of their mistakes in assessment processes. From this study, several recommendations for improving language assessment literacy courses can be accounted for.

Marta Isabel Barrientos-Moncada, Natalia Andrea Carvajal-Castaño, and Hernán Santiago Aristizabal-Cardona also refer to the professional development of English language teachers in Colombia; but in their article, they do it to make more visible the need for contextually relevant and differentiated professional development programs. In their article, they stress the challenges in EFL teachers' professional development in the Eastern region of Colombia. Since EFL teachers' professional development in Colombia has been characterized by top-down policies, teachers claim for more ongoing and contextualized programs that differentiate school levels and instructional material design and adaptation available in the local communities. The implications for educational institutions and further research denote that there should be more localized and coherent professional development programs for English language teachers in the country.

In their article, Marian Lissett Olaya-Mesa and Willian Alexander Mora also highlight the importance of English language teachers' professional development in early education for the enhancement of classroom teaching practices. Through a qualitative study under the exploratory paradigm, these teacher-researchers study elementary-rural-school English

language teachers' perceptions and attitudes affecting the incorporation of English in their teaching practices. They found frustration, motivation, and lack of expertise as the main perceptions that interfere with the participating teachers' teaching practices. They conclude that professional development strategies to identify teachers' perceptions and attitudes affecting their English language teaching should be incorporated to improve teaching practices in the classroom.

There is an international contribution to this new *HOW* number. It talks about the measurement of text readability and its appropriacy for language proficiency levels. Benjamin Carcamo's article comes from Chile. He accounts for the differences between classic readability indices and language-specific indices between the new EFL Chilean textbook and the readability level of the texts used in the Cambridge B1 preliminary exam to check their appropriacy. The results of his study revealed that, even though the classic readability indices show a similar level of difficulty in the texts of these two sources, the specific index for second language learning shows a statistically significant difference. There are subsequent implications for local and international language education standards since the texts in EFL textbooks can be more difficult to read than the ones learners are supposed to read in classrooms or exams.

These seven articles in the new *HOW* number highlight several crucial insights that hold significant importance for the journal's reader community. Exchange programs on English language skills and teaching methodologies underscore the role of intercultural awareness in personal and professional development; this is valuable for educators and institutions aiming to enhance language education through cross-cultural interactions and understanding. The intersection of language pedagogy and gender identity sheds light on how teaching practices can redefine attitudes towards gender, fostering resistance against traditional gender paradigms in education. Emotions play a pivotal role in the development of English-language oral skills; thus, there should be more language learning environments that consider learners' emotional experiences.

For the professional development of English language teachers, there are three significant insights. The first is about how language assessment literacy can emphasize the value of test analysis and collaborative tasks to enhance improved assessment practices and a better understanding of assessment processes. The second addresses the need for contextually relevant and differentiated professional development programs for English language teachers that consider the unique challenges faced by teachers in different regions. The third insight underscores the significance of understanding teachers' perceptions and attitudes to improve classroom teaching practices, particularly in elementary-rural schools. Finally, the measurement of text readability and its appropriacy for different language proficiency levels brings implications for both local and international language education standards to align instructional materials with learners' abilities.

Each insight contributes to a more comprehensive and effective approach to English language education, catering to the diverse needs and challenges faced by educators, teachers, researchers, and learners in different contexts. *HOW* invites its readers to consider the studies presented in this new number, and previous ones, in further research and curricular or academic environments.

## **From the President of Asocopi**

**Claudia María Uribe Hoyos**

As an undergraduate student, I learned of ASOCOPI, the Colombian Association of Teachers of English. I saw this association as something big and full of learning possibilities. I also saw it as a community of practice that should be cherished, nurtured, and deeply valued as a treasure. Some years ago, I got actively involved in ASOCOPI, thinking about how relevant it would be for me to be part of this community and show all the English language teachers in Colombia and the world that together, we can do important actions for the education of our communities. The English language is an excuse to get together and share our dreams of a more equitable world. Those dreams, this English language teacher has, are part of a task that ASOCOPI can endure, although such a task can be difficult. Today, when I am writing this letter, I want to invite our readers, teachers, educators, and researchers to become actively involved in an association that is going to be 60 years old in 2025; an association that needs the strength, efforts, and synergy of all generations of the English language community who believe and work for ASOCOPI.

Dear colleagues, ASOCOPI is more than our annual conference, journal HOW, Board of Directors, legal team, and administrative manager. An association also offers monthly webinars and diploma courses where scholars share their insights and lessons on designing teaching practices. ASOCOPI is a community that works together every day of the year, looking for other possibilities to improve and raise local voices. This is my kind invitation to assume this association as a personal asset that constantly needs to be revitalized.

This has been a fantastic but challenging year. We worked on organizing every single detail of our 58th Annual and 4th International ASOCOPI Conference in a beautiful city such as Manizales with a great team of professionals at Universidad de Caldas. This event reminds us of the reasons to work for our association. We always want to guarantee spaces to share with our colleagues, build networks, and take knowledge and learned lessons to the different scenarios where there is an ASOCOPI member.

I want to express my gratitude to every teacher who has ever attended our conferences in different roles because they are the essence of our gatherings. This is the way we make a difference in education.

To our international plenary speakers, Dr. Gabriela Veronelli, Dr. Juliana Zeggio Martínez, and Dr. Juan Rios, my most profound appreciation for having accepted to be part of our conference and for contributing your ideas, experience, and constructions in such

a natural and enriching way. You are ASOCOPI! To our local plenary speakers, Dr. Clara Onatra, Dr. Claudia Díaz, Dr. Carlo Granados, and Mag. Yimmy Alexander Hoyos, please continue strengthening our roots with your perspectives and transformations.

To my friends and colleagues who are part of the association's board of directors: Kaithie Ramirez, Adriana Sánchez, Eliana Alarcon, Marlon Vanegas, Clara Lozano, and to our Administrative Manager, Myriam Vera, thank you! Your dedication, critical perspectives, punctuality, and respectful opinions have contributed to an exercise where all voices are heard. We can work synergically to give the association more strength and possibilities for the rest of our period as BoD. To Edgar Lucero (HOW Editor) and José David Largo (HOW Assistant Editor), I truly hope you continue an exercise that excels in quality in the academic world. Altogether, ensure that ASOCOPI accomplishes its vision of quality teaching and social responsibility wherever someone follows the association or reads the journal.

I want to finish by telling you that ASOCOPI always works by looking for better activities to be shared with our communities. We permanently look for ideas that fulfill our mission of contributing to improving ELT and offering quality to the association's members. ASOCOPI always needs your constant support for the accomplishment of its goals. I want you to prepare to participate actively in the 59<sup>th</sup> National and 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference of ASOCOPI and 4<sup>th</sup> LAALTA (Latin American Language Testing Association) in Barranquilla, Colombia, in October 2024. We are willing to see you there to keep learning together.

## **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.

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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.

## **Embodied Femininities in Language Pedagogy. A Study of Two Language Teachers' Experiences**

### **Feminidades Encarnadas en la Pedagogía de Lengua. Un Estudio de las Experiencias de Dos Profesores de Lengua**

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#### **Abstract**

Gender studies have become relevant for English language teaching and initial teacher education. This study uses a narrative inquiry approach to inspect two language teachers' life stories in an initial teacher education program. We document how their femininities and identities are embodied through their language pedagogy since it is a praxis that allows resistance and resurgence against paradigms that limit their identities. Findings reveal that femininities provide a broader spectrum of individual gender realities and constructions. Teachers' femininities are embodied in teachers' practices. This is why some traits of these embodiments can be related to hegemonic aspects of gender, without this necessarily meaning that there is no resistance in the pedagogical field. On the contrary, it shows the capacity to redefine these attitudes that, from the pedagogical perspective, resist the hegemony of teacher gender identity.

*Keywords:* embodiment, English language pedagogy, femininity, gender, identity

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## Resumen

Los estudios de género se han vuelto relevantes tanto para la enseñanza del inglés como para la formación inicial de docentes. Este estudio utiliza un enfoque de indagación narrativa para inspeccionar las historias de vida de dos profesoras de inglés de un programa de formación docente. Documentamos cómo sus feminidades e identidades se encarnan a través de su pedagogía de lengua ya que esta permite la resistencia y el resurgimiento frente a paradigmas que limitan sus identidades. Los hallazgos revelaron que las feminidades brindan un espectro más amplio de realidades y construcciones de género individuales. Las feminidades de las docentes se encarnan en sus prácticas, inclusive, algunos rasgos de estas encarnaciones pueden relacionarse con aspectos hegemónicos de género, sin que ello signifique que no existan resistencias en el campo pedagógico. Por el contrario, esto muestra la capacidad de redefinir estas actitudes que, desde la perspectiva pedagógica, resisten la hegemonía de la identidad de género docente.

*Palabras clave:* encarnación, feminidad, género, identidad, pedagogía del idioma inglés

## Introduction<sup>3</sup>

Documenting masculine and feminine identity constructions in English Language Teaching (ELT) is not common. In the Colombian milieu, some scholars have shown interest in exploring gender within the ELT classroom (e.g., Castañeda, 2012; Mojica & Castañeda-Peña, 2017). Such interest has brought to the table the importance of documenting how English language teachers and learners build their identities and professional selves regarding gender. Although these studies have shed light upon gender configurations, relations of power, and gender discourses in ELT, not much has been explored regarding the construction of femininities in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs. Little has been said about how English language teachers embody their own gender identities in their language pedagogy.

The issue of gender has as well dealt with differences in which gender is contested because of its colonial binarism (Lugones, 2007); one that has positioned women as subalterns (Sunderland, 1994) due to a colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal genealogy (de Sousa-Santos, 2009) still present in teaching. Feminine expressions in teaching have kept a minor role given the social injustices associated with patriarchy (Edwards, 2018). In this arrangement of male ideology, “English language teaching and learning are simply a [...] European/capitalist/military/Christian/patriarchal/white/heterosexual/male ideology” (Castañeda-Peña, 2018, p. 27). We believe that such a colonial legacy has not allowed the exploration of varied gender expressions, nor has it been permitted to analyze its implications within ITE.

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<sup>3</sup> This manuscript is the result of a study conducted by members of the “Semillero de Investigación Internautas: Contextos y Prácticas” of Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Bogotá, Colombia. It is embedded in a broader study -Language pedagogy and teacher identity. Learning from narratives told by Colombian Teachers of English – ID: 4-165-611-20.

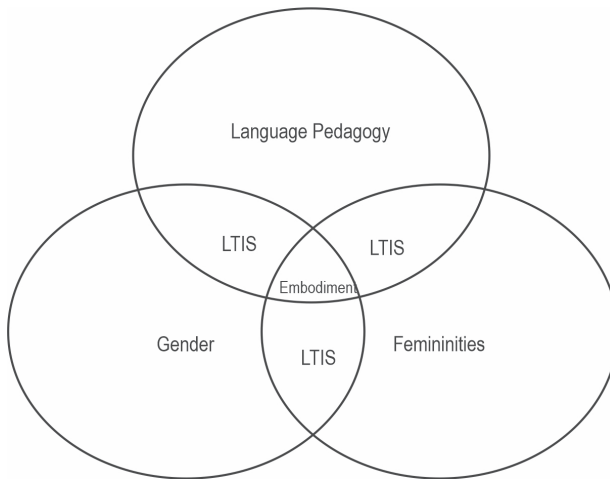
As a result of this evident coloniality, we believe that Language Teacher Identities (LTIs) are not just cognitive, social, emotional, ideological, and historical (Barkhuizen, 2017), but we consider these are also forged in gender. We refer to the notion of femininities to explore how these are expressed in language pedagogy. This last, a concept we problematize as a deeper and complex idea that is not only related with ELT from a methodological point of view, but one that also moves and is permeated by gender.

## Theoretical Foundations

This theoretical section's rationale draws on the notion of embodiment. In Figure 1, we position it in the center of our analysis to intersect the following terms: language pedagogy, gender, and teacher identity. Figure 1 then illustrates how these elements intersect and are built from and related to the notion of embodiment.

### *Language Teacher Identities*

LTIs have been standardized by a colonialist perspective imposed in the ELT field. For instance, one can find discourses that establish a hierarchical order, extolling native English speakers as the most prominent authoritative knowers of English (Torres-Rocha, 2019). Such a trend has become a well-established meta-narrative that undervalues local teachers' knowledge, identities, and practices (Guerrero-Nieto & Meadows, 2015).



**Figure 1.** Theoretical foundations.

As the colonial meta-narrative present in the ELT has aimed at “breaking the link between the subject of enunciation and the ethnic/racial/sexual/gender/epistemic place, [...] [and] the epistemic, geo and body-political place of the structures of colonial power/knowledge from which the subject speaks” (Grosfoguel, 2010, p. 459), LTIs, in the plural, should be seen from other enunciative perspectives. Ubaque-Casallas and Castañeda-Peña (2021) claimed that gender is still an area to be addressed as traditional hierarchies have imposed colonial structures of being. This approach to understanding LTIs echoes scholars who point to the scarce research concerning queer LTIs (see Lander, 2018). Although this study does not adopt a queer perspective, it understands LTIs in the teacher and the outside world (Barkhuizen, 2017) to study identity and the gendered expressions of femininity that can be displayed in teaching.

### ***Embodied Gender and Femininities***

One of the most standard ways of understanding femininity starts from the binary generalization, in which “sex is polarized as females and males, sexuality polarized as homosexuals and heterosexuals, and gender polarized as women and men” (Johnson & Repta, 2012, p. 1). This binarism is a construction imposed by a colonial and patriarchal system (Lugones, 2007), where the masculine is bounded with power, intellectual and physical superiority, and the feminine as a synonym of submission, dependence, and delicacy (Martínez-Martín, 2016). As researchers, we can see how assigned roles according to an individual's biological sex may not come close to women's and men's reality. Rallón and Peñaloza-Rallón (2021) echo this by claiming that there is indeed a determinant social connotation that universalizes behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs concerning women and men.

Considering the need to explore new visions that allow the plurality of the gender spectrum within ITE, we place decoloniality as an essential aspect of this study. Since “decolonial theories question the hegemonic Eurocentric patterns that [...] justify a discriminatory differential treatment for people who do not fit into their modern classification: male, white, literate, heterosexual, and purchasing power” (Saldarriaga & Gómez, 2018, p. 46), we believe this lens can help to rethink the role of gender today and see that gender and sex subjectivities are nested and challenged in colonial discourses, practices, and representations (Lugones, 2007) that are expressed in the body.

Since gender is provisional, shifting, contingent, and performed, it refuses essentialisms, non-changing concepts, notions of genuineness, truth, dominion, and objectivity (Butler, 1991). Following that, as researchers, we think of femininities as a series of variable, and changeable spectra materialized and embodied through people's narratives (Rojas, 2012) and chosen behaviors. In this way, we adopt Fausto-Sterling's (2019) notion of embodiment as it is “automatic, unintentional and found in all aspects of our nervous system” (p. 5). This

study conceives femininities as embodied and related to each teacher's subjectivity, which leads to understanding that a multiplicity of femininities spectra exists.

### *Language Pedagogy*

Language pedagogy (LP) is a critical dimension in ELT. For years, English language teachers have approached language teaching using different methods. That theoretical-based approach to teaching has broadly categorized three significant language pedagogy dimensions: the language, the teaching process, and the learner (see Richards, 2015). However, this categorization barely conceals pedagogy beyond the instrumental view of language and teaching process. In addition, language pedagogy has been built from ideas promoted by official entities that hegemonize and make subjectivities invisible, creating a language stipulated as a mere mechanism of work and economy (Rivera & Salazar, 2020). Therefore, the role of English language teachers has been limited to instructing, transmitting, and teaching grammar.

Language pedagogy is more than a theoretical-methodological category. For instance, from a critical perspective, in the Colombian local ELT, Samacá-Bohórquez (2012) found that teachers are transformative intellectuals; they must reflect on ideological principles to make sense of their teaching. Therefore, as authors, we claim that language pedagogy must be rethought to move away from colonial notions in which teaching is only linked to practices and teaching processes. Language pedagogy cannot continue as a colonizing tool, reproducing ideals centered on marginalizing discourses and practices (Castañeda-Peña, 2018; Rivera & Salazar, 2020). We think about Language pedagogy as a space in which new knowledge, practices, and identities are experienced collectively. These forms of re-existence might bring about new horizons against colonialist purposes (Ubaque-Casallas, 2021a). We argue that language pedagogy is an extension of (English Language Teacher's) ELTs. However, we see it as an embodied category that can make explicit beliefs and ideological positionings.

### **Context and Contextualization**

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This study was carried out at a public university in Bogotá, Colombia. Two English language teachers and educators, Danna and Sandy, were invited to participate. Their teaching experiences were essential to document how their gender identities and femininities were embodied through language pedagogy. Danna's and Sandy's ages range from 27 to 35; they teach English language courses to student-teachers. These courses aim to instruct student-teachers in mastering the linguistic and formal components of the English language and going around language skills. However, their participation also responds to an interest

in exploring how femininities are portrayed in and through language pedagogy. Their voices and subjectivities were welcomed to start from their life stories and enter their experiences.

### ***Research Path***

Narrative inquiry examines how LTIs are in specific social, historical, and cultural contexts (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). It is not limited to any methodological paradigm, as the participants in this study disassociated themselves from the concepts of researcher and researched (Ortiz-Ocaña & Arias-López, 2019). Instead, there was a conscious attempt to co-construct an alternative way to document data. Such a co-construction was seen as a process in which relationships among those who converse can build a shared meaning (Gill & Goodson, 2011; Talmy, 2010). Furthermore, authors such as Smith (2007) suggest that bodies are linked and known in part through narratives, as humans, after all, tell stories about, in, out, of, and via our bodies. In this way, we used narrative inquiry to show how femininities are embodied and narrated in our participants and their role in constructing language pedagogy.

### ***Analysis of Experiences***

Barkhuizen et al. (2014) claim a clear union between stories and research. As life stories are narrative accounts of experience, these can help researchers to access a reality that is individual and constructed from perceptions and social and historical contexts that distance from a pre-established 'truth' (Kim, 2015). To carry out this study, the life stories were divided into the experiences of each participant. Then, we first transcribed the stories narrated by Danna and Sandy. This process was assisted by ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. Our analysis of Danna's and Sandy's narratives took place in two phases. First, we aimed to organize data into central areas of inquiry that could shed light on how it is that through language pedagogy, Danna's and Sandy's own gender identities and femininities are embodied. After this, data were subjected to open coding to identify critical categories. We must say that after transcripts were coded, we followed a comparative method to merge common categories. This allowed us to reduce and identify many themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013) that could be used for a more in-depth analysis. Finally, as this analysis is not tied to a particular paradigmatic orientation, we focused on the individual realities (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). These will hereafter be presented as themes for analysis.

### **Findings**

The analysis of Danna's and Sandy's life stories allowed us to identify several findings of their teaching work, their gender representation, and the spectrum of femininity that is part

of their LTIs. As a result of this analysis, Figure 2 illustrates how analytical categories were considered to help create themes.

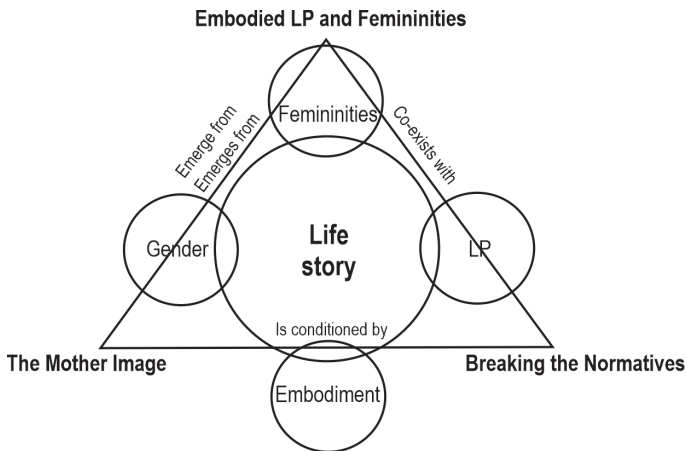
The research project centered on the exploration of life stories as the primary focus. Through the examination of these narratives, participants provided valuable insights into various aspects, including femininities, life experiences, embodiment, and gender. These personal accounts formed the basis for identifying and generating key themes that emerged within the research.

### *Danna's Life Story*

Although gender theorists have struggled to see how the theory can be applied to multiple femininities and the function of femininity in gender hegemony (Schippers, 2004), it is worth noting that comprehending femininities, in the plural, allows a broader understanding of how LTIs are constructed. As a matter of fact, femininity has always been perceived as a non-inherent category of identity. Castañeda-Peña (2018) highlighted that “there is a single and monolithic idea of the language teacher” (p. 18) that hinders teachers’ subjectivities. Therefore, the analysis will open a window to approach teachers’ gender and femininities from a non-linear understanding.

### *The Mother Image*

We highlight that Danna’s narratives initially focus on her teaching experience with children in initial school stages; however, the role of ITE programs will be mentioned later.



**Figure 2.** Emerging themes. A perspective from the life story.

In her narration, she seems to be constructed by her students from a hegemonic perspective, which has to do with women as a symbol of motherhood. Danna says,

In my classes, I represent their relationship with their mothers to my students. I feel that the mother's figure is significant to them. (...) So, the teacher can easily create that bond of "your mother is not here, but I am, I can protect you too"; then, apart from teaching, I think I can protect, I can be with them, I can be their support, and I think that makes me generate that bond, a bond I reinforce in my classes. [sic]

Motherhood is a long-standing gender norm expectation. Various researchers take different approaches to examining the maternal norm, focusing on different facets of how the normative expectation operates (Whitehead, 2016). Motherhood seems to be a salient category that constructs Danna's LTIs. She seems to reinforce this by building a figure of the female teacher as someone who takes care of students. As a matter of fact, what is feminine is idealized with characteristics associated with and expected of women (Connell, 1995). However, the association of an affectionate and kind teacher who allows herself to maintain a maternal relationship with the students can go so far as to contradict a hegemonic construction of a teacher who must maintain authority and command (Denman & Al-Mahrooqi, 2019). We believe this feminine construction of her professional self shows that Danna's gender identity embraces a more nurturing dimension.

Accordingly, Danna perceives that, although being a female teacher makes it easier for her to represent a mother figure in the classroom; it is also a personal representation that allows her to connect with the other, with the future English teacher. This relationship does not seem to be built on authority, but on a figure of love and care. Let us explore this in more detail by drawing on Danna's experience on ITE:

Maybe it can happen that the students look for that weak side of the woman in her warmth and that one is not so hard suddenly to say "you have 0 and I don't change it for anything" [...] At the university I had students who told me that the professors treated them badly. [...] I am more interested in their learning, that is for me the most important thing. [sic]

The relationship that Danna establishes between being a teacher and the protection that she can offer, replacing the mother figure in the classroom, is a feature to highlight both her femininity and her LTI. This construction of her femininity, which may fit into a hegemonic gender identity of women as friendly and passive (Barnett, Hale, & Sligar, 2017), reflects not only an alternative language pedagogy that allows her to connect with her student-teachers from affection, comfort, and familiarity. It also shows a particular way of resisting the vertical logic installed in teacher training in which students' comfort is not the teacher's primary concern. Danna's search for her students' well-being contests some classroom management agreements that set principles to maintain discipline and teacher authority in front of students.

Danna's narrative also shows other ways of opposing hegemonic constructions from language pedagogy. This analysis would make evident the idea that the forms of resistance have varied spectra and shows that there are some gray areas in between that also allow taking part in those opposition exercises. The mother figure, part of Danna's LTI, was not just externalized in her first job as a teacher, it has been present during all her professional career as part of her identity. She was able to perform her gender within the ITE classroom and embody maternal expressions thanks to the fact that they remained deeply rooted and linked to her identity. Klein (2008) argues that life stories narrate change since identity is inscribed in the experience of change, reconfiguring, and updating experience into the present.

### ***Breaking the Normative***

Danna's gender/feminine identity creates a unique way of being a language teacher. Danna incorporates different aspects of her gender to teach and reach her student-teachers and differentiate herself from other professors. However, in this personal construction, her language pedagogy distances itself from meeting the standards for ELT and learning (Granados-Beltrán, 2018). Therefore, this idea of language pedagogy is something we consider worth exploring. Danna says,

More than part of my pedagogy, it is part of my personality. For example, I sometimes feel that teaching is too distant from students. So, I intend to be warm with my students. No, I do not want to be that moody teacher whose personality changes! I like to reach people, [...], I feel that the main factor in pedagogy is knowing how to be a good human being and make others better. [sic]

Danna's language pedagogy does not seek to satisfy universal methodologies. Although these establish how the teacher should behave in the classroom, Danna finds a model of struggle based on her personality. She invests her values and beliefs to create better social relationships in the classroom (Salinas & Ayala, 2018). She shares a vision of an English teacher as a promoter of 'warmth,' she challenges the colonial forms of hegemonic power in teacher-student relationships (Ubaque-Casallas, 2021b).

Another salient aspect in Danna's narrative is the classroom benefits and limitations created by gender. There seems to be an authoritative construction of the male-teacher figure in which effective classroom management correlates with reducing disruptive behavior. This seems to be perceived by students based on the teacher's gender. Danna continues,

Sometimes, even men have a little more advantage when they are teachers [...]. For example, I noticed that the students behave better with male teachers; at least, they do not do it as much as they do with female teachers. However, (...) I think it depends on how creative and resourceful one is. I teach my classes being a female teacher and as someone who does not depend on authority but on respect. [sic]

Authority in the classroom depends on ideas related to gender. Danna and her authority have been subjected to sexist social constructions, in which roles are established based on gender (Burke et al., 1988). Litosseliti (2006) describes gender as social behaviors, expectations, and attitudes related to being a man and a woman. These constructions seem not to be far from the classroom. Danna's notion of power catches our attention. According to Freire (1997), power alienates students from teachers as 'necessary' to not lose class control. Danna does not see the need for power in total authority and obedience in the classroom. Instead, she proposes to develop a collaborative power relationship in which students and teachers, through warmth and trust, can rethink power relations and how to execute new effective ways of leading and interacting in the classroom.

### ***Embodied LP and Femininities***

Danna's femininity is embodied and expressed through her language pedagogy. This embodiment is reflected in aspects such as her way of dressing and tone of voice. These also become part of her teaching. Let us explore what she says about this:

Well, it is known that the image counts in all professions and if I dress too sporty, maybe the students will see me suddenly like "ah, this teacher is very relaxed" (...) So the image sells, right? If I dress with heels, (...) generates respect and generates the difference between student and teacher. [s/z]

There is a relationship between the construction of femininity and dressing. Historically, there has been a systematic variation between men's and women's clothing since the late Middle Ages (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). Although these relationships given from binarism are being left behind, Danna shows feeling identification with them. Moreover, she uses formality rules to portray herself as different from her students. On this, Dunbar and Segrin (2012) argue that teachers strive for a moderately formal clothing style.

Danna perceives the image as an essential resource that differentiates students and teachers. This is because clothing is an aspect of communication that can influence perceptions of credibility or attractiveness (Dunbar & Segrin, 2012). The search for physical differentiation does not necessarily try to recreate spaces of power but to maintain a student-teacher relationship in which each one differs in their way. This embodied femininity can be reflected in clothing or tone of voice and how and when humans communicate with others.

The embodiment process of femininities is then reflected in every apex of the body, even the tone of voice plays an essential role. Danna refers to it as an essential aspect of her relationship with students when she mentions:

I feel that one as a woman is sometimes sweeter, more affectionate, the voice does not raise so much. You try to reach the student more, and you try to get closer to them, showing that affection, not seeing it as “ah, you are the student, you are there in your position, and I am the teacher”. [sic]

A passive, soft, and sweet tone of voice can be easily related to heteronormative gender constructions (Barnett, Hale, & Sligar, 2017). Danna seems comfortable with this, as her way of relating to others within the classroom fundamentally avoids changing or raising her tone of voice to maintain relationships based on mutual respect and affection.

In this way, Danna proposes that it is not necessary to change the tone of voice to have class control but positions an alternative in which the teacher no longer represents an authority figure that needs to have a solid and tough tone of voice but experiments with a new way of relating to students putting their well-being and importance above everything else.

Danna raised a question about the overrepresentation of women in her classes, which led to a discussion about the link between LP and gender. Traditionally, women dominate in LP due to societal rules (Corzo-Morales, 2020). The body is the primary agent of change in this field. Danna aims to challenge the standard approach by promoting alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and living, which challenge Western ideologies and capitalism (Walsh, 2015). She shows perspectives on how to create liberating practices in the ELT.

We have seen how Danna sets aside hegemonic practices using aspects such as her motherhood, a pedagogy of “warmth”, and caring for the other. These notions built from her identity allow understanding that the LP “not only follows theoretical principles or a set of procedures but also, and mainly, that it be an extension of the personal epistemology and ontology of the teacher of English” (Ubaque-Casallas, 2021c, p. 37). We propose that LP is a space where the body and the embodiment then forge a knowledge from the local.

### *Sandy’s Life Story*

Femininities obey a concept of multiplicity that allows their plurality and understanding from the individual. On the one hand, as authors, we can speak of hegemonic femininity, an idea in which femininity is defined as a reunion of characteristics that legitimize a hierarchy that positions men as dominant and women as subordinate (Schippers, 2007). In this order of ideas, hegemonic femininity follows guidelines based on binarism and indirectly allows a power relationship in which masculinity plays a ruling role. On the other hand, femininities that do not align with the rationale above can be considered non-hegemonic. Hence, they allow a greater capacity for variations that grant the plurality character of gender. We highlight that both ‘types’ are related to teachers’ identities and language pedagogy in this study.

### ***The Mother Image***

Regarding the development of a maternal image, Sandy shows no indication of this spectrum in her femininity. She even denies it and shows how she does not feel identified with this characteristic. Sandy seems more academically and intellectually focused, thus delegating the home and the mother figure. This special disidentification with the mother figure shows how Sandy performs her femininity, clearly resisting a hegemonic vision of gender that relates all women to motherhood. However, there are other visible feminine performances she embodies in her teaching.

### ***Breaking the Normative***

Sandy argues that expressing ideas is the main objective of teaching English differently. Sandy's teaching practice is based on comprehending that each student-teacher has different abilities. However, focusing on linguistic aspects is not the central objective to consider in the classroom. Instead, she prefers her students to learn English by expressing their beliefs and thoughts about daily life:

It shows students that some will be very good at reading, others at listening and writing, and each skill requires a very exorbitant accompaniment. So, to show the students all the possibilities, everything is a range of options, see what they like, and finally, talk about after all those processes. [sic]

Sandy's teaching practice offers a local context that changes from traditional approaches since language teaching has been subjugated to traditional perspectives in which students must achieve a mastery of the language and disconnect from reality (Mendieta, 2009). However, according to Sandy, it is relevant to allow students to take advantage of language to construct their own identity.

Support and comprehension also allow satisfactory language learning processes (Yunus et al., 2011). In essence, Sandy presents a caring language pedagogy that seeks to understand her students and form an environment that positively impacts them. She creates emotional support for students, showing them that their development is unique, making them feel confident to express their thoughts and ways of being.

Sandy's LTI's express her affinity for academics as a way of being a woman. In her narratives, she seems to face attitudes in the girls of her classes who follow hegemonic gender standards, as she talks about how studying is a way to free herself.

So, it is also from my role of "hey, wait, you are intelligent, you have a lot to contribute, girls, (...) it is not that you are scared to speak in public, but it is also you to assume that role of empowerment" (...) It is pathetic (...) what I have seen in the classrooms, 19 or 20-year-old girls are looking for a husband instead of studying. [sic]

In this way, Sandy's struggle is carried out, avoiding an alienating education. She leaves aside a language pedagogy that focuses on 'filling in' specific imposed topics to reflect on the world and themselves, establishing a different way of thinking (Freire & Macedo, 2018) about being women. Following Patarroyo-Fonseca (2021), Sandy's message is vital since a teacher transforms thoughts, behaviors, and realities.

Sandy's teaching tries to change heteronormative aspects such as gender roles, gender relations, and gender behaviors and attitudes in society (Mojica & Castañeda-Peña, 2017) that are aligned with a gender hegemony she seems to dislike. In her narrative about gender issues, she tries to empower women for them to reconstruct their reality and not continue with gender inequalities. Moreover, Sandy sees education as a way of carrying out changes in gender relations. The role of gender in her LTI is distinguished as she demonstrates that behaviors and thoughts such as *looking for a husband* might be put aside as they perpetuate gender roles. In her perception, it could change using educational means, allowing student-teachers to have a broader perspective of their role in society, considering the importance of their gender performance.

### ***Embodied LP and Femininities***

How Sandy embodies her femininity can be considered non-hegemonic. Her narrative rejects aspects such as rules about personal image and duties associated with gender. As Sandy's image is not essential for class development, she opts for more comfortable options such as tying her hair instead of having a glamorous hairstyle. The following excerpt allows going deeper into this assumption:

Because I am a woman, do I have to prepare lunch? I was not raised like that. Then suddenly, the students find it funny that if I pick a bun, I do not have to iron my hair; how students perceive that and my role as a teacher and as a woman suddenly articulated in my day today. [sic]

This shows how she embodies her femininity through her language pedagogy and how it is not defined by traditional standards in which women must follow clothing and hairstyle models aligned with fashion patterns; the latter, a conception that seeks to intervene in the management of appearance to match the social expectations of gender. Student-teachers find Sandy's actions funny due to an attempt to minimize new ways of embodying femininities by relating them to lack of self-image. This reaction may reflect the widely internalized idea of what femininity should look like so that non-hegemonic femininities are not readily accepted.

As Sandy moves away from hegemonic gender patterns, as researchers, we can support the idea that femininities are embodied in supremely multiple ways (Rojas, 2012). Sandy's contradiction to the gender guidelines that historically relate women to a hegemonic, maternal, and home femininity represents a clear and direct resistance.

In addition to reflecting on them in language pedagogy, Sandy tends to prioritize her comfort, one of her students, and the quality of her teaching over beauty standards, dress code for teachers, or gender normative guidelines. This can be seen when she mentions that:

As an English teacher, I can say, “I am going to do an essay in English, even though I have a bag full of clothes to wash and do housework,” I give priority to academics, for me, it is not a priority that I have to make lunch because I can ask for food delivery. [*Sú*]

This perception of Sandy about the priority of academics over housework is an apparent contradiction to the traditional guidelines on the behavior and duty of women in society. Having rejected those rules of hegemonic femininity supports the importance of the idea of femininities in the plural, as Mojica and Castañeda-Peña (2017) state when mentioning that “a pluralistic vision promotes the idea that there is not a particular masculinity, but masculinities; and there is no single femininity, but femininities” (p. 142).

Non-hegemonic femininities directly affect language pedagogy. Sandy stated in her narrative that she takes class time to talk about her perception of what a woman could be. This allows the classroom to become a space where gender issues are debated and authorized, broadening the horizons of students' beliefs about behaviors and duties assigned due to sex. We can say that Sandy's language pedagogy is undoubtedly loaded with a gender discourse directly related to her way of understanding femininity.

## Final Thoughts

Femininities are characteristics of the being that alter any individual's personal and professional identity. In the case of Danna and Sandy, they not only embody their femininities in aspects such as their clothing, tone of voice, or behaviors but also embody it in their LP. Language pedagogy then is based on their individuality, context, thinking, and gender (femininities and/or masculinities), defining teachers' particularities.

By leaving aside the hegemonic vision of the English teacher as a mere language vehicle, and LP as an instrumental framework for teaching methodologies, language teachers can understand that through language teaching, teachers need to be faithful to their individual and professional identity, concepts that are permeated by gender. In this way, language pedagogy is embodied thanks to its relationship with LTIs, and this could be seen in how they understand the role of their students, their own teacher role, as well as the development of their classes in the Teaching Education Program (TEP) sharing their own perspectives to the student-teachers. The latter simultaneously allows femininities to be brought to the body in their construction process.

Concluding, we understand that femininities are multiple and cannot be categorized as 'correct' or 'incorrect' forms of being. They are unique ways of expressing who someone

is from an individual construction of being. On the one hand, narratives show that Sandy seeks to use class time and focus on empowering her female students breaking hegemonic standards. On the other hand, Danna is built by her students as a warm teacher, in which motherhood is the aspect that highlights the most, and that was re-signified to show how this can contradict some normative classroom management agreements.

Colombian literature has not deeply covered the construction of femininities in ITE. This study then invites various scholars to explore how it is that femininities are embodied in LP within the ITE context. We think that more research is needed to get further analysis on how future and present ELT's identities can also be thought from a gender perspective. We consider it is essential to emphasize that teachers create different ways of teaching English from their gender as they can exercise power in the classroom, express their thoughts, empower their students, or perpetuate hegemonies.

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## Portraying Students' Emotions in English Conversation Clubs at a Colombian University

### Caracterización de las Emociones de los Estudiantes en Clubes de Conversación de una Universidad Colombiana

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#### Abstract

Emotions are ubiquitous and permeate all aspects of human life, including language learning. However, little attention has been paid to emotions in the ELT curriculum, let alone in the design and implementation of conversations clubs. In this article, we share the qualitative results of a mixed-method study on students' emotions while participating in a conversation club at a public university in Colombia. Findings show an ample range of students' emotions, factors commonly associated with these emotions such as academic load and personal life, and the connections of emotions with students' language learning processes. This study identifies how emotions can facilitate or interfere with language learning, highlights the importance of emotions in the development of oral skills in the context of conversation clubs, and contributes to the understanding of the language learner from a holistic perspective in the field of Applied Linguistics.

*Keywords:* conversation club, emotions, feelings, language learning, university students

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## Resumen

Aunque las emociones están siempre presentes y permean todos los aspectos de la vida, incluyendo aprendizaje de idiomas, ha habido poca investigación sobre ellas en el área de la enseñanza del inglés y se les ha prestado poca atención en la planeación de clases o en el diseño curricular, aún menos en la implementación de clubes de conversación. En este artículo, compartimos los resultados cualitativos de un estudio de caso con enfoque mixto sobre las emociones de los estudiantes que participaban en un club de conversación en una universidad pública colombiana. Los resultados muestran una amplia lista de emociones, factores comúnmente asociados con esas emociones como son la carga académica y la vida personal, así como conexiones de las emociones con el proceso de aprendizaje del idioma de los estudiantes. Este estudio identifica cómo las emociones pueden facilitar o interferir en el aprendizaje de idiomas, destaca la importancia de las emociones en el desarrollo de la expresión oral en el contexto de los clubes de conversación y contribuye a la comprensión del aprendizaje de idiomas desde una perspectiva holística en el campo de la lingüística aplicada.

*Palabras claves:* club de conversación, emociones, sentimientos, aprendizaje de lenguas, estudiantes universitarios

## Introduction

Emotions are inherent to human life, yet they are not always perceived or understood at first glance; one needs to carefully observe the signals unconsciously or unwittingly sent by others to acknowledge, interpret, and respond to them in an adequate form. In educational settings, emotions are invariably present and involved in learning; they affect students' motivation, their attention and centeredness in the class activities, and the choice for participation, among others (Pekrun, 2014).

Research on emotions and the affective domain in Applied Linguistics has been outnumbered by the bulk of cognitive studies (Dewaele, 2019; Prior, 2019; Shao et al., 2019) and a concentration on language learning anxiety (Horwitz, 2010; Horwitz et al., 1986), although this might not be the most common emotion experienced by foreign language learners (Beseghi, 2018). However, following the recent affective turn, the interest in researching emotions has started to grow and there is a renewed call for a better understanding of emotions in language learning and teaching (Dewaele, 2019; Kong, 2019; Prior, 2019; Shao et al., 2019).

Studies indicate that students tend to show negative reactions towards activities focused on oral skills, particularly when these are presented through individual work, rather than in pairs (see Beseghi, 2018; Gknou, 2013; Jorquera Torres et al., 2017; Méndez López & Peña Aguilar 2013). Students feel wise, motivated, and skillful when collaborating with a partner as compared to feelings of ignorance, isolation, and clumsiness when working on their own (Beseghi, 2018; Jorquera Torres et al., 2017). Regardless of what might be the source of emotions: students' personal beliefs, their performance in grades and tests, the type of

learning activities, or teachers' decisions (Beseghi, 2018; Gkonou, 2013), and their fluctuation over time (Beseghi, 2018; Gkonou, 2013), emotions certainly impact students' motivation in both positive and negative ways (Méndez López, 2022; Méndez López & Peña Aguilar, 2013). All in all, studies agree on the need of teachers to be aware of students' emotions and to work with, instead of against them (Beseghi, 2018; Gkonou, 2013; Jorquera Torres et al., 2017; Méndez López & Peña Aguilar, 2013).

In Colombia, studies about emotions in education have primarily investigated the impact of teacher attitudes and teaching methodologies on students' self-esteem (Sarmiento Pérez & Sanabria Herrera, 2003), the use of affective strategies to reduce anxiety in oral performance (Sánchez Solarte & Sánchez Solarte, 2017), and the use of a holistic theater content methodology to reduce the affective filter in participants (Gualdrón & Castillo, 2018). As it can be seen, researchers have limited the nature of emotions to specific feelings, such as anxiety and self-esteem. Although research has been conducted on the topic of emotions, there is currently a lack of research specifically on emotions and English language teaching in both Colombian and international contexts.

Conversation Clubs (CCs) are increasingly being used to supplement instruction. They are considered a leisure activity where learners are free from the pressure of a more formal learning environment like language classes, which include evaluation and normally demand regular attendance. Words used to characterize the environment of CC include “uncanny communicative experience” and “boost your English”<sup>3</sup>, and a place “to make friends”<sup>4</sup>. Hence, CCs are expected to be a learning space clear of unpleasant emotions and to naturally contribute to the development of students' oral skills. In Colombia, conversation clubs as a language learning context have barely been included in research. Emotions are an under-researched area in the context of CCs that supplement ELT in higher education, unlike formal settings (e.g., Méndez López, 2022). To delve into emotions and the role they might play in ELT learning in such a context, in this paper we address the questions: What emotions do students experience in English conversation clubs in the context of higher education? And, what type of relationship, if any, is there between students' emotions and their learning experience?

## Theoretical Background

### *Emotions in Language Learning*

Emotions are one of the many features of the affective domain, which also includes beliefs, aptitudes, personalities, values, self-esteem, and motivation (Aragão, 2007; Méndez

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3 <https://www.konradlorenz.edu.co/noticias/new-talk-show-conversation-club/>

4 <https://cienciasociales.uniandes.edu.co/lenguas-cultura/servicios/recursos-linguisticos/coffee-time/>

López & Peña Aguilar, 2013). As an umbrella term, the concept of “affect” refers to the “aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which can condition behavior” (Arnold & Brown, 1999, p. 1). The American Psychological Association Dictionary (American Psychological Association Dictionary [APA], 2020) defines emotion as “a complex reaction pattern, involving experiential, behavioral, and physiological elements, by which an individual attempts to deal with a personally significant matter or event” (n.p). Nummenmaa et al. (2018) assert that emotions are more than an abstract concept and that they are biologically embodied in humans; they are felt through the whole body, entrenched in our physical bodies, and expressed in movements. In the same vein, Maturana (1990) speaks of the bodily and movement characteristics of emotions which, for him, are domains of actions; this means that emotions are a biological dynamic system leading to different actions based on the situation or person. Although there is no clear agreement on an exact definition of emotion (Shao et al., 2019), common to the above definitions is its perception as innate processes experienced in and expressed through the body, making them sometimes visible to observers through various ways such as the tone of voice and sweat, to mention a few examples.

As opposed to emotions which are internal body states and experienced through unconscious neural patterns, feelings are conscious and expressed through discourse, creating self-awareness of their presence (Kalaja, 2003, as cited in Aragão, 2007). Feelings are “image-representations of the state of the body relative to itself and to external objects” (Kramsch, 2009, p. 68) and make part of the linguistic world (Aragão, 2007). For instance, excitement (an emotion) might be connected to the feelings of happiness, surprise or even insecurity, depending on the situational context. In sum, the difference between emotions and feelings is mainly theoretical and while they are closely interrelated, the latter will be present only if the former exists.

The influence of emotions in language learning evinces the connection between two domains that have historically been divided: the cognitive and the affective. Researchers have emphasized the cognitive domain and left aside affection when studying learners and their language acquisition processes. In his theory of biology of cognition, Maturana (1990) highlights the relevance of emotions in the way we communicate, behave, and make decisions in our daily life. He questions the assumed superior human characteristic of rationality, and states that people’s emotions come prior to action. Similarly, Kramsch (2009) reminds us that: “many researchers and teachers still consider language learners as talking heads that have to be taught from the neck up” (p. 28).

Brown (2000) acknowledges the role of affection in language teaching and learning. His Language Ego principle, for instance, leads to students’ fear of making mistakes and their feeling of fragility in front of the class. Self-esteem, a principle that entails students’ concept, acceptance, and reflection of the self as an individual and in interaction with others, is connected to building self-confidence in the learning process. Risk-taking, another principle,

is a product of students' confidence which allows them to see mistakes as part of their learning process.

The distinction between emotions and feelings helps to identify them in the context of CC. Damasio states that this differentiation is useful to understand certain phenomena, such as empathy, identification, and alienation, all of which play a role when learning a language (Damasio, 1994, as cited in Kramersch, 2009). Brown's affect principles, in turn, supports the connection between the emotions and feelings and language learning.

### ***The Affective Turn***

In the field of Second Language Acquisition, research interest has moved from the mind, learner cognition, how the brain works to the social context, and its relation to students' learning (Pavlenko, 2013). Pavlenko (2013) refers to the affective turn to stress the need to place "embodied subjects in their linguistic and social context" (p. 14). For the author, there is a need to connect students' social and emotional domains to build stronger theories that unite the contributions of Linguistics, Psychology, and Social Sciences. Similarly, Kramersch (2009) positions the learner and the teacher as multilingual subjects who embody knowledge and become new people intellectually, emotionally, and physically –the embodied self. She emphasizes that learners acquire the language through their senses, questioning the tradition in Applied Linguistics that has focused on the formal aspects of the language. Kramersch (2009) highlights the importance of not separating the mind from the body and asserts that learning a language deals with emotions, body experiences, and the social context.

The concept of embodied self (Kramersch, 2009) and its various dimensions supports the connection between the biology of emotions and their sociocultural nature. The learner's self arises not only through internal stimuli, the person's memory, thoughts of anticipation, reflection, and narratives, but also through direct experience with the immediate environment and its objects. What is more, the self emerges in the interaction with others and their responses in specific situations: "the self develops a sense of intersubjectivity through its response to other selves. It understands others by understanding itself in tune with others" (p. 70). Emotions are therefore entrenched in all dimensions of the self, thus influencing the subject's learning processes.

### **Research Design**

We used a case study research design following a mixed method approach with an exploratory sequential design. Case studies allow us to observe the wholeness of the individual and gain insights into a particular issue (Stake, 1995). Through case studies, one can get "an understanding of the inner dynamics of a unit... to understand the... social phenomena

in real-life environments” (Aaltio & Heilmann, 2010, p. 68). The case, university students' emotions, was instrumental to shed light on what feelings university students portrayed during conversation clubs and how their emotions influenced their learning. Following the exploratory sequential design, qualitative data were collected first through the journals of a small group of students to explore the range of emotions they experienced. The results were used to design the survey for data collection of quantitative nature. This use of mixed method approach helped develop a better understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For this paper, we focus on qualitative data.

### ***Context***

We conducted the research at Universidad del Valle (Univalle), a public university in the southwest of Colombia. The University has a total of 11 campuses in the Valle del Cauca and Cauca departments, with a student population of more than 30,000. Univalle offers 21 technological programs, 63 undergraduate programs, and 59 postgraduate programs. Through the section of Foreign Languages for General and Academic Purposes (LEFGA), the University provides language courses to all undergraduate programs. To support student independent learning, the language curriculum includes different activities and resources such as tutoring, software, and conversation clubs. This last strategy was the learning context of the research.

### ***Conversation Clubs***

There is no formal definition in the academic literature for the concept of conversation clubs. Littlewood's allusion to the classroom as a social context involving social interaction activities (Littlewood, 1981, as cited in Bygate, 1987) or a as space for discussions (Gómez Rodríguez, 2017) helps to describe conversation clubs (CCs) as a gathering of language learners, aimed at practicing oral skills. CCs can combine direct and indirect teaching methods (Brown, 2000), i.e., can be planned, but at the same time, they can include spontaneous conversations triggered by a topic or an activity proposed by the teacher (Harmer, 2007). The CCs at Univalle include both planned and spontaneous activities and are planned and held by student-teachers of the *Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras* during their practicum. For two semesters, student-teachers plan and implement conversation clubs for weekly 90-minute sessions. The content of the sessions is linked to the language curriculum offered to non-English majors; in this case level I (semester 2019-1) and level II (2019-2), which corresponds to the transition from A1 to A2 English language proficiency level. Most clubs follow Task-Based Teaching and Learning, with tasks such as making a chart to compare local and foreign universities, creating a guide for a tourist in Cali, and sharing rituals before exams. Activities are varied: watching videos, reading texts, completing forms, pair discussion, among others. The number of participants in each club fluctuates from 10 to 18 students per session.

## *Participants*

One hundred forty-three students participated in the quantitative segment of the research. Selection criteria for the survey consisted of students being registered in English for General and Academic Purposes, levels I and II and having participated in Conversation Clubs (804 students). Out of the 206 students who answered the survey, 143 students (17,8%) provided complete answers.

Eight students collaborated in the qualitative component of the research. Students who attended the sessions of the CC led by one of the authors of this article during semester 2019-2 were invited to participate in the research. We explained the study and asked volunteers to complete the informed consent in which they agreed to continue attending the sessions and to write a journal. The list of participants is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Participants

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Academic program	Semester
Javier	M	23	Technology in Ecology and Environmental Management	3
Johan Stid	M	19	Bachelor of Basic Education with emphasis in Mathematics	5
Miguel Ángel	M	20	Bachelor of Basic Education with emphasis in Mathematics	5
Natalia	F	23	Technology in Ecology and Environmental Management	3 - 4
Nathalia	F	19	Technology in Ecology and Environmental Management	3
Nayely	F	18	Bachelor of Popular Education	2 - 3
Paredes	M	19	Technology in Ecology and Environmental Management	3
Yina	F	18	Technology in Ecology and Environmental Management	3 - 4

## *Data Collection Methods*

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We used an online survey for the quantitative segment of the research and journals for the qualitative data reported in this paper. The survey was designed based on the results of students' journals and the literature review (feelings portrayed by students in Aragão 2007's study and the Language Ego, Self-esteem, and Risk-Taking principles by Brown, 2000). This was an online survey divided into three sections: (a) background experience in English, (b) emotional states and factors related to the conversation club, and (c) sociodemographic information.

Journals provide rich data from participants; they are like bridges that connect people with their inner world. Through journals, we aimed at understanding emotions that arose during the CC and to gain an insight of the learners' world and of factors that may interfere in the learning process (Pavlenko, 2007). We drew on both "elicited journals", which allows the learners to write explicitly for an audience in mind, in this case the researchers, and "dialogue journals" in which teachers engage in a discussion through the journals to clarify doubts and avoid misunderstandings with the data (Bailey, 1991).

For the journal entries, the participants answered three questions: ¿Cómo te sentiste durante el club de conversación?, ¿Qué actividad te provocó sentimientos negativos o positivos?, ¿Por qué te sentiste así?<sup>5</sup> These questions were answered immediately after each club session (retrospective data) to reduce the possibility of forgetting the events (Bailey, 1991). Students wrote their journals in Spanish so they could feel at ease. The amount of students' diary entries ranged from three to twelve. We collected a total of 73 entries during two academic semesters (2019-2 and 2020-1) which covered a total of 24 CC sessions. The journals were kept by the researchers and distributed to participants after the CC sessions for their writing. The participants not only answered the questions above, but also addressed queries posed by the researchers to clarify or elaborate on specific ideas.

### *Data Analysis*

The analysis of the journals was based on Saldaña's (2013) coding procedures, which included several readings, coding, recording, and grouping. We used Saldaña's "emotion coding" method, leading to an initial number of 74 feelings, which we merged later into 28 feelings, based on frequency and word class. We then grouped codes into families considering the possible main origins of feelings (*triggering factors*).

Two themes generated from the previous analysis: *Emotions leading to learning* and *Emotions interfering with learning*. Our analyses are plausible interpretations and correspond to a unique situational context and learning experience in the CC. Trustworthiness of the research study was achieved through the definition of main concepts (emotions, feelings), using different types of data to answer the research questions and support findings, peer examination for the data collection instruments, member checking with participants through their diaries, and checking consistency in the data analysis between the two researchers.

Findings from the students' journals are presented below, organized in three sections: (a) the identification of students' feelings, (b) the factors that triggered feelings, and (c) their relation between emotions and language learning.

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<sup>5</sup> How did you feel during the conversation club? What activity provoked negative or positive feelings in you? Why did you feel that way?

## Findings

### *Students' Feelings*

We found a great variety of feelings experienced by students in the CCs (Table 2). They ranged from feelings of bravery to insecurity, happiness to sadness, from comfort to discomfort. Because of space, we will share only a few samples of students' emotions.

**Table 2.** List of Students' Feelings and Their Frequencies

No	Feeling	Frequency	No	Feeling	Frequency
1	Alone	1	15	Happy	31
2	Annoyed	6	16	Insecure	7
3	Anxious	38	17	Intrigued	1
4	Ashamed	3	18	Judged	1
5	Brave	5	19	Lazy	4
6	Comfortable	30	20	Motivated	19
7	Confident	13	21	Overshadowed	2
8	Confused	18	22	Overwhelmed	5
9	Dispirited	2	23	Preoccupied	1
10	Empty	1	24	Proud	5
11	Free	2	25	Sad	14
12	Frustrated	6	26	Surprised	3
13	Good	33	27	Tired	8
14	Guilty	3	28	Uncomfortable	14
				<b>Total</b>	276

As it can be seen, the most frequent feeling found was “anxious”, which resulted from merging other codes such as distressed, “*asurado*”, desperate, stressed, worried, scared, afraid, nervous, and frightened. In her journal, Nayely wrote: “Well, regarding the activity of the Chinese telephone, I felt anxious or stressed... it’s like carrying a responsibility, regardless of the fact that they [classmates] won’t judge you” (Nayely, 12/20/19). Javier also expressed:

"You may wonder why I did not eat breakfast and it is because I live alone, this leads me to experience anxiety, loneliness and I have realized that it has affected my academic, personal, interpersonal performance" (Javier, 08/29/19). Despite different sources, both students experienced feelings of worry and uneasiness.

Students often expressed feeling "Good", such as in Nathalia's case: "I felt good, it was fun, most of the activities caught my attention" (Nathalia, 09/05/19). Similarly, feeling comfortable was also frequent: "I felt comfortable in small groups of people, sharing information or questions in English" (Yina, 08/22/19). A less frequently reported feeling, one that would ideally be increased in future CCs was "proud". In this matter, Miguel Angel (08/15/19) expressed: "I felt proud when during the first activity I had to answer a question posed by another classmate because I did it correctly and without saying it slowly". He rejoiced at being able to communicate effectively. In fact, in his next entry, Miguel Angel (08/22/19) explained that he felt "much more comfortable because I interact with more classmates due to the confidence I have developed through the club".

### ***Factors Triggering Feelings***

Students' feelings during the CC were linked to ten different factors, which we have named accordingly. Below, we present these triggering factors and exemplify them with extracts.

*Academic Load.* This factor refers to academic tasks and duties. "I would have liked to participate more by asking [questions] my classmates, but it was difficult for me to create them, perhaps because I felt somewhat exhausted by the academic load and the intensity of this semester" (Miguel Ángel, 09/05/19). Comments like this were common in students' diaries; they show how academic duties not related to the CCs are the source of tiredness which sometimes restrain students from engaging more in the sessions.

*Baggage.* We called outside issues brought to the sessions "Baggage". "The day before [yesterday], I received a call from someone very important to me, and as she said she was going through many difficulties. Hearing her cry made me very worried and so I am preoccupied with her... making me be unfocused" (Javier, 09/05/19). Javier brought this emotion from his daily life context to the CC, affecting his performance in the session. Just like him, other participants also mentioned distractors from outside the sessions. In the case of Javier, we highlight that he comes from Bogotá and the experience of living by himself adds more pressure to his life.

*Homeostasis.* We used Nummenmaa et al.'s concept of homeostasis (2018), which includes biological states such as hunger or thirst, to refer to students' physical conditions. In one of her entries (09/05/19), Nathalia wrote:

At the beginning of the club, I felt dispirited and didn't want to work, but ... it was more because I felt somewhat sick... I am on my period, as I had menstrual cramps, I felt more annoyed but as they passed... my attitude changed.

A similar situation was experienced by Nayely (08/22/19):

I've been sick for four days and today was no exception. I felt that my body was warm during the whole conversation club... my head hurt, I just wanted to lie down. However, the class was fun [and] I felt angry and discouraged when trying to speak and not being heard or understood because of how affected my voice was due to the flu.

*Club-Insiders.* Other participants in the CC can also trigger different emotions in students. In the case of Javier, Nayeli and Natalia, there is evidence of how a classmate's attitude or level can impact students' feelings and willingness to participate as they might feel annoyed, overshadowed, or comfortable.

...in general, throughout the conversation I was annoyed by a boy who did not stop talking ... and distracted me since I get easily distracted. With this boy, it was difficult to pay attention and [I was] also hungry, so I began to feel frustrated (Javier, 08/22/19).

In this group of classmates there was a new girl... apparently, she was good at English, it was obvious that she knew... She took the lead and started writing... when it came to sharing, she did everything, as if she didn't realize that she was not allowing others to speak... And unfortunately, I had to work with her again when we did the activity of the festivals and she is the one who took the floor again (Nayely, 08/29/19).

The third activity, I liked it more because I had to work with a partner who spoke English more fluently and could hold a conversation with her, the words I did not understand, she explained them to me ... (Natalia, 11/15/19).

*Club-Outsiders.* As opposed to Club-insiders, the presence of outsiders of the CC is what triggers emotions, like in Javier's case: "Another thing that happened today... is that a friend came to work at Dexway [near the space of the club] and because of some things that had happened between us before, I felt a little uncomfortable" (09/05/2019). In this extract, it was a person not participating in the session that caused feelings of uneasiness and discomfort, preventing an appropriate learning environment.

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*Group Dynamics.* Students' interactions within the club influence their emotions. This is clear in Nathalia's journal entry (08/29/19): "[I felt] an extra interest; in addition to working with people with whom you feel some empathy or simply do not bother ... me, they generate a feeling of satisfaction and make the class more enjoyable". Another example of Group dynamics triggering emotions was Miguel Angel's extract (09/05/19):

Regarding the activities, I felt good in the first activity because there was good chemistry with the group and we always tried to answer the questions in English and speak in English. In the second

activity I felt a bit nervous because there were classmates who were very fluent when doing the activity.

Both students felt comfortable in the type of interaction that had generated. In the case of Miguel Ángel, however, contradicting feelings appeared simultaneously because of his classmates' perceived higher level.

*Knowledge.* Students' knowledge of the topic addressed, and linguistic competence seem to be a strong factor in triggering students' emotions. In several cases, students mentioned that the limited knowledge of English prevented them from more participation. Here's an example: "In today's conversation club I felt somewhat frustrated and annoyed by the fact that I could not understand the activities well when I wanted to be able to understand what the teacher was asking us" (Paredes, 09/05/19). In the case of Yina (02/07/20), it was not knowing about politics that frustrated her: "Today I felt uncomfortable in the club, I have no knowledge about politics, I did not know what to answer regarding the questions asked".

*Personality:* Students' individual differences in their patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving relate with the emotions they experience in the CCs. Extraversion or shyness, for example, mark different degrees of participation and of the feelings expressed. The following excerpts are examples of how shyness is embedded in feelings of insecurity: "Since one generates questions, I wonder if it will be easy or difficult [to make them]? Can I answer it? How will the people around me react? The insecurity" (Yina, 08/15/19).

But the activity that worried me the most was the last one because it was time to speak in public and I really didn't want to because I wouldn't be able to do the exercise with the bases [of the language] that I currently have and that, without considering how embarrassed I can feel. (Paredes, 09/05/19)

*Nature of Speaking Activities.* Diaries entries often referred to the content of oral activities and how they affected their emotions, like in this case: "Regarding the activities, I really liked the story, I laughed a lot, the feeling was joy because the direction the story took was funny" (Johan Stid, 08/22/19). In her journal, Natalia (08/22/19) explained that "the closer my turn to speak got, the more anxious I felt because I didn't know how to connect the sentences one with the other". These two extracts refer to the same activity: a story that students needed to complete with their own ideas- and yet they produced different reactions and emotional experiences.

*CC Facilitator.* Feelings triggered by the student-teacher included his attitudes and pedagogical decisions during the CCs. Here are a few examples of this group: "From the CC facilitator's club, I always learned something new, but the most important thing is the confidence that he builds, which ... helps me lose fear of [using] English" (Natalia, 02/14/20).

I also feel more comfortable in the conversation clubs than in the English class I am enrolled in. In the club, the CC facilitator instills... confidence when carrying out the activities and understands [our] feelings and why the students act like the way they do. (Yina, 08/15/19)

In these extracts, the student teacher's attitude and decisions about class activities contributed to the confidence of the CC participants in their learning process.

### ***Emotions and the Learning Experience***

To answer the second research question about whether there was a relationship between students' emotions and their learning experience and if so, which type, we clustered findings in two themes: *Emotions leading to language learning* and *Emotions interfering with language learning*.

*Emotions Leading to Language Learning.* These are emotions that contribute to students' effective reception of the topic, the CC environment and input from the teacher. Examples of cases of these emotions were frequent in the data with the entries of Nathalia (09/05/19; 08/29/19), Yina (08/22/19; 08/12/19), Miguel Ángel (08/15/19; 08/22/19; 09/05/19), Natalia (11/15/19) and Johan Stid (08/22/19), for example, who mentioned that they felt good, proud, free, comfortable, satisfied, empathetic, secure, or happy. While they experienced these emotions, they participated in the CC activities and paved the way for language learning. Natalia (11/15/19) explained: "In the conversation club I felt very good... I liked the labyrinth activity a lot because it is a strategy to learn to trust our classmates and above all a method to speak English in a way more fluid and in a didactic way". Her remarks show the link between her feelings triggered by a type of activity, and her learning of English. In addition, Nayely (08/22/19) stated that "When we did the next two [activities], I was able to feel proud that I made minimal errors and they made me remember and reflect that I must always keep the simple present in mind even if we are looking at the past." Again, Nayely's comments reveal how activities trigger the feeling of being proud of oneself allowing the learner to reinforce topics.

*Emotions Interfering with Language Learning.* As the name announces, these refer to emotions that limit or prevent students from profiting from the CC input and activities and from appropriating knowledge for they seem to be stronger and more relevant to the individual and absorb the time, attention, and energy they need to engage in learning. The extracts presented above: Nayely (12/20/19; 08/22/19; 08/29/19); Javier (08/29/19; 09/05/19; 08/22/19; 09/05/19); Yina (02/07/20; 08/15/19); Miguel Ángel (09/05/19), Natalia (08/22/19), and Paredes (09/05/19) show moments where emotions restricted their learning process. Students wrote that they felt tired, anxious, lonely, worried, ill, dispirited, angry, annoyed, hungry, insecure, frustrated, uncomfortable,

stressed, and nervous, all of which became obstacles to learn. In one of her entries, Nayely (08/29/19) expressed:

The third and fourth [activities] I almost didn't like; my classmates don't tend to talk. I've already been with them, so I felt tied to the same thing, I didn't feel free. For me, I would try to say everything in English, but seeing that my classmates' attitude is not like that, it makes it almost impossible for me, it makes me enclosed in a little bubble of shyness. Additionally, there are so many words that I don't know how to say or I don't know how to express myself, I get blocked and that's so frustrating, I don't even ask.

It is clear how classmates' attitude can interfere with students' feelings and participation, which in turn limits their opportunities to learn.

As emotions fluctuated during one single session, the opportunities to learn were also transformed. See Miguel Ángel's case (08/29/19):

Finally, I could say that the closest feeling to something negative in the club was when they asked us to socialize about our festivals, because there was a classmate with penetrating glaze and made me feel uncomfortable, also because she is not bad at English, so somehow, I felt a bit judged, but my other classmates somehow made me avoid that feeling because I felt good.

At the beginning, Miguel Ángel experienced an emotion which interfered with his learning as he decided not to participate because he was feeling judged. Nevertheless, the pleasant class environment and the fellowship built with other members of the CC, led to a switch in his emotions and a gain in learning.

Another example worth mentioning is Nayely's experience: "At the time of socializing or speaking in front of everyone, I feel motivated, but at the same time I feel also afraid of being wrong yet hearing that several [students] make mistakes reduces my fear of speaking" (08/15/19). She also said that: "Normally I hardly speak because of the fear of being wrong or saying something silly, but in these spaces, I am creating the confidence to do so, because it is English and because we are in the same condition to learn" (12/20/19). Here, the student reflects on what she saw as an opportunity to learn; although she was afraid of making mistakes, at the same time she felt excited and was ready to overcome her fear and gain confidence.

Finally, expressing feelings seems to be helpful for students in areas other than the academic, as Javier extract shows (05/09/19): "I think that the writing of what I feel and the reasons why I feel that way, make me feel some peace of mind by not keeping everything to myself". Just as Javier, other students were grateful for the opportunity they had to identify, acknowledge, and speak of their emotions.

## Discussion

### *A Wide Range of Emotions but Limited Vocabulary to Express Them as Feelings*

Students seem to experience a vast group of emotions in CC sessions and, given that emotions are “an essential building block of consciousness” (Nummenmaa et al., 2018 p. 9198), paying attention to them when teaching and learning the language becomes important. Nevertheless, learners do not seem to have enough vocabulary to articulate their emotions in words. For instance, when they were asked to write how they felt during the CC sessions, the second most frequent feeling mentioned was “Good”, each student having used this word at least once. “Good” is a rather generic adjective to describe an emotional experience, it is not specific and can be interpreted as a shield to avoid opening to others or as an indicator that students might not know or have enough vocabulary to express their emotions more accurately. After noticing the use of generic terms which would hinder the understanding of students’ emotions, we decided to provide the participating students with a list of feelings (Nummenmaa et al., 2018) that they could use to talk about their emotions in the CCs. Jorquera Torres et al. (2017) and Pekrun et al. (2005, as cited in Méndez López, 2022) also used instruments with names of feelings to research emotions. The lack of sufficient vocabulary to express emotions can be an indicator of the need to study emotions more in depth in the area of Second Language Acquisition and Applied Linguistics (Dewaele, 2019; Pavlenko, 2013; Prior, 2019) and to educate learners in their emotions.

Even though anxiety (and its related terms, e.g., distress, worry, desperation, and stress) was the most frequent feeling in students’ journals, and it has been proven to affect students’ learning process (Gkonou, 2013; Krashen, 1982), we cannot downplay other emotions that are felt by students. Besides anxiety, similar feelings of insecurity appeared, which also interferes with learning (Gkonou, 2013; Sanchez Solarte & Sanchez Solarte, 2017; Sarmiento Pérez & Sanabria Herrera, 2003). Nevertheless, it is interesting to see differing feelings such as “comfortable”, “motivated” or “happy”, appearing simultaneously during and after the CC sessions. As Gkonou (2013) and Beseghi (2018), we found that anxiety and emotions can fluctuate, and our findings confirm the variability of feelings.

Nevertheless, this is not always the rule. As it was apparent in students’ diaries, some feelings persist and might have an impact on learning, such as students’ fear of making mistakes or appearing foolish in front of others when speaking. Hence, one main objective in CCs is the improvement of oral skills, there is a need to work towards a change of this belief (Gkonou, 2013). Seeing speaking as something enjoyable (e.g., Johan Stid) that generates happiness has a better chance to lead to language learning.

## ***Emotions and Learning: A Complex Relationship***

In contrast to Beseghi (2018), Méndez López and Peña Aguilar (2013), and Pekrun (2014) who refer to positive and negative effects of emotions, we prefer to speak of *Emotions leading to* and *Emotions interfering with language learning* to avoid making judgements or oversimplifying their complexity (Kong, 2009), and to acknowledge that the so-called “negative feelings” can bring positive outcomes in students’ learning while “positive feelings” might lead to unwanted outcomes (Méndez López & Peña Aguilar, 2013), contrary to what is expected.

Our data showed that different emotions lead to language learning through students’ participation, reflection, and socialization in CC sessions. At the same time, these same aspects can interfere with students’ learning process, proving the complexity of the relationship between emotions and learning. Therefore, it is not only anxiety, lack of motivation, or low self-confidence that can block learning (Krashen, 1982), but a great variety of emotions that deserve deeper analysis.

Emotions are associated with different sources. As expected, we found that the academic load interferes with students’ learning; however, this does not seem to be the main issue. For some students, their daily life and their family’s or friends’ problems might be more important, and they show little or no control over the associated feelings (Nummenmaa et al., 2018). Hence, it is important to convert the CC into a space sufficiently engaging so that students can forget about other issues at least temporarily and be emotionally present.

This research confirmed that physical conditions like being sick or hungry affect students’ bodies and minds and therefore their learning, as emotions are embodied (Nummenmaa et al., 2018). Although teachers cannot control these factors that are internal, their acknowledgement can help understand why students perform in certain ways. As Kramsch (2009) states, learning a “foreign language is first and foremost experienced physically...emotionally” (p. 60), which can be seen with a physical reaction (e.g. Nayely’s case). Besides, peers’ attitudes, personality, and language level (Club-insider’s feelings) affect students’ emotions and learning. As Méndez López and Peña Aguilar (2013) show, when students compare their language proficiency level with others’ (such in the case of Miguel Ángel and Nayely), their confidence decreases, and this interferes with their learning. Students’ inhibition to speak is caused by their belief of “superior strangers”, i.e., people they are not acquainted with might have a higher language proficiency level than theirs (Aragão, 2011). Nevertheless, some students might not feel threatened when interacting with classmates who have a higher language proficiency level and they can even profit from this situation (e.g., Natalia). Students’ emotions resulting from their peers’ language proficiency level might be linked to personality traits (personality feelings),

ego (see Brown, 2000), or their lack of knowledge (Knowledge feelings). In general, the students' emotional reaction to their partners' language proficiency level and the link this might have with their learning is complex and needs more research.

As it is expected, limited knowledge of the language (Méndez López & Peña Aguilar, 2012) and particularly the lack of vocabulary as the study reported here shows (e.g., Paredes, Yina, Nayely) restrict students' participation. In fact, the unfamiliarity with the topic and unknown lexis might trigger anxiety (Gkonou, 2013) as opposed to students' fluid participation and collaboration when having knowledge of the language, as in the case of Miguel Ángel in our study. What is more, personality traits such as insecurity (Yina) or shyness (Paredes) trigger emotions interfering with students' learning. Aragão's study (2011) demonstrated that students restrain from participation due to shyness. It is difficult to address personality traits in CC, but at least a good environment can be provided so that students feel comfortable. On the other hand, the fellowship students have with each other (Group Dynamics feelings) allows them to participate and learn in the CC. Pavlenko (2013) helps understand the importance of social aspects; therefore, in our opinion, conversation clubs can be seen as a place not only to learn the language, but also to accept each other and to build empathy (Kramersch, 2009; Maturana, 1990).

In general, language learners worry about speaking in public and making mistakes. Gkonou (2013) speaks of "the fear of appearing foolish in front of their teachers and their peers" (p. 61) while Méndez López and Peña Aguilar (2013) refer to the "fear of mockery" (p. 117), which trigger feelings of anxiety or nervousness, because students usually want to express things right (Bygate, 1987). This was confirmed in our study, we found that it was probably linked to students' personality traits or lack of linguistic knowledge. The data in this study also showed that the student-teacher that led the CC sessions plays an important role in students' learning and self-esteem (e.g., Natalia), which supports findings by Aragão (2007) and Gkonou (2013). This shows how relevant it is to have teachers in charge of CC that care about participants and try to transcend the academic domain in order to contribute to students' self-confidence and risk-taking (Brown, 2000).

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The analysis of the data in this research contributes to understanding the diversity and dynamism of feelings, and their relation with the learning process. While Maturana (1990) places emotions as a key factor in rationality and Kramersch (2009) asserts that "rational condition, judgment, agency, and moral value, that are associated with the brain, could not exist without emotions... it is emotions that guide us in our decision... to ensure the physical and social survival of our organism" (p. 67), we also find an inseparable connection between emotional life and learning deserves greater attention.

## Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications

This study shows a range of university students' emotions in the context of conversation clubs. It sheds light on different factors that affect students' emotions and their overall well-being which might impact learning in different ways and degrees. Students face different types of barriers for participation and therefore learning in CCs. Findings indicate the need to conduct more studies that delve into the nuances of the complex relationship between emotions and learning.

The impact that teachers can have on students is significant; students are not only provided opportunities to learn but also to build language learning confidence that can affect their future knowledge. Although it is difficult to care for each individual student in CC sessions, this should not be an impediment to restrict from attempting to approach students holistically and to create classes that seek to impact their lives beyond the academic domain. Future teachers need tools to understand not only how cognition works, but the role emotions play in learning. With these tools, they could help transform feelings interfering with learning.

One limitation of this study was the lack of expertise in the field of psychology, which would have benefited the analysis. For future studies in the area, the collaborative interdisciplinary work between language educators and psychologists could offer a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between emotions and the language learning processes.

Emotions play a permanent and important part of students' lives. Hence, we recommend paying attention to this area in the development of the curriculum and the creation of lesson plans for the purpose of educating students holistically. We claim that there is a need to embrace the affective turn in foreign language teacher education so that future teachers cultivate not only the mind but also the soul.

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## **English Teachers' Perceptions of a Language Assessment Literacy Course**

### **Las Percepciones de los Docentes de Inglés sobre un Curso de Literacidad en Evaluación de Lenguas**

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#### **Abstract**

Language assessment literacy has gained recent attention in the field of language testing, particularly on teachers' profile. However, the literature on LAL is limited regarding teachers' perceptions of language assessment courses. In this paper, we used a case study method to characterize the perceptions of eighteen English language teachers into three components of an online assessment course: contents, activities, and impact on their professional development. For data collection, we used a questionnaire and a focus group interview. Findings indicate that the teachers perceived course contents as organized, relevant, and useful; they also considered test analysis and collaborative tasks as valuable. Regarding professional development,

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the teachers explained that test-analysis tasks made them aware of their mistakes in assessment. Finally, the teachers suggested that the course raised their awareness of what language assessment is and does. Based on these results, we provide recommendations for LAL courses elsewhere.

*Keywords:* assessment literacy, language testing, language assessment literacy, teachers' professional development

## Resumen

La literacidad en evaluación de lenguas extranjeras ha sido un foco de gran atención en el campo de la evaluación de idiomas, en especial lo concerniente con el perfil de los docentes. No obstante, hay poca literatura relacionada con las percepciones de los docentes sobre cursos de evaluación de idiomas. En nuestro artículo, acudimos al estudio de caso para analizar las percepciones de dieciocho docentes de inglés, en relación con tres componentes de un curso de evaluación en línea: los contenidos, las actividades y el impacto del curso en el desarrollo profesional docente. Los hallazgos indican que los docentes concibieron los contenidos del curso como organizados, relevantes y útiles; además consideraron el análisis de pruebas y el trabajo colaborativo como elementos valiosos. Con respecto al desarrollo profesional, los docentes plantearon que se hicieron conscientes de sus errores en la evaluación a medida que hacían las actividades relacionadas con el análisis de pruebas. Por último, los docentes indicaron que el curso elevó su nivel de consciencia sobre lo que es e implica evaluar idiomas. Basándonos en estos resultados, hacemos unas recomendaciones para cursos de evaluación en lenguas extranjeras en otros contextos.

*Palabras clave:* desarrollo profesional docente, evaluación de lenguas, literacidad en evaluación, literacidad en evaluación de lenguas

## Introduction

Language assessment literacy (henceforth LAL) refers to the knowledge, skills, and principles needed for contextualized language assessment (Davies, 2008; Fulcher, 2012; Inbar-Lourie, 2017; Taylor, 2013). These three components have remained constant in LAL discussions for the past fourteen years (Bohn & Tsagari, 2021; Giraldo, 2018). Alongside conceptual discussions of this construct, scholars have argued that LAL is needed among various stakeholders, including teachers, school administrators, parents, and even students (Butler et al., 2021; Malone, 2017; Taylor, 2013). The need for LAL comes from the notion that assessment is an impactful activity that has educational and even social consequences (Fulcher, 2010; McNamara & Roever, 2006). Notwithstanding the call for LAL for various people, language teachers have been a major focus of scholarly attention. This focus is sensible given that teachers spend a great deal of time assessing their students' language ability and make decisions based on the data from the assessments they use (Coombe et al., 2012; Tsagari, 2021). Additionally, research studies across the world have shown teachers' need and expectation to develop their LAL (Baker & Riches, 2017; Coombe & Davidson, 2021; Fulcher, 2012; Giraldo & Murcia, 2018; Sultana, 2019; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014).

Research on teachers' LAL has focused on two interrelated aspects. On the one hand, there has been a major impetus for describing their LAL state and needs. This line of research has suggested that teachers are, generally, underprepared for language assessment (Fulcher, 2012; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). The second research focus—which has been gaining pace—revolves around courses for teachers to foster their LAL. Overall, these assessment courses have helped these stakeholders develop the knowledge and skills components of LAL (Arias et al., 2012; Giraldo & Murcia, 2019; Kremmel et al., 2018). However, as Giraldo (2021) shows, discussions of principles (e.g., ethics and fairness) are rather limited in LAL initiatives.

Particularly, research on LAL courses has shown that they impact teachers' LAL positively. In the existing initiatives (for a review, see Giraldo, 2021a), the teachers report that they become aware of what language assessment implies and how it can positively impact teaching and learning (Arias et al., 2012; Montee et al., 2013); concepts and frameworks for language assessment (e.g., validity and authenticity; formative and summative) (Kleinsasser, 2005; Nier et al., 2009); and design skills such as those needed to make clear rubrics (Koh et al., 2018; Kremmel et al., 2018; Levi & Inbar-Lourie, 2019). However, the existing literature on teachers' LAL, thus far, has not studied extensively their perceptions into language assessment courses, specifically tasks they engage in, and materials used for LAL development. Thus, it may be argued that a current gap in LAL research is a clear description of major guiding principles for a pedagogy of/for LAL (Fulcher, 2020); one source to advance such a pedagogy may be teachers' feedback on LAL training.

Against this background, our purpose with the present paper is to characterize the perceptions of English language teachers into three components of a course for LAL: contents, activities, and impact on teachers' professional development. In reporting our findings, we hope to contribute to a pedagogy of/for LAL, based on these teachers' voices vis-à-vis the LAL course in which they participated. We start this paper with a conceptual and research overview of LAL, and then we present the research methodology of the study. Further, we present and discuss the findings and close with recommendations for LAL initiatives elsewhere.

## Literature Review

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As we stated earlier, as a construct, LAL is composed of knowledge, skills, and principles. In Table 1 below, we synthesize discussions on each one of these components of LAL, based on the work of various scholars (Davies, 2008; Fulcher, 2012; Giraldo, 2021b; Herrera & Macías, 2015; Inbar-Lourie, 2008; 2012; 2013; Stabler-Havener, 2018; Taylor, 2013). We must indicate, however, that LAL is a rather recent discussion in language testing. Most certainly, LAL as a construct might expand on two areas: (1) the number stakeholders engaged in language assessment across contexts and (2) the nature of language and language use (Inbar-Lourie, 2017; Levi & Inbar-Lourie, 2019; Tsagari, 2021).

**Table 1.** A Synthesis of LAL as a Construct

LAL Components	Some Examples
Knowledge of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Language ability</li> <li>– Language use</li> <li>– Concepts such as validity and reliability</li> <li>– Personal assessment context</li> <li>– Frameworks, e.g., norm- and criterion-referenced</li> <li>– Score interpretation</li> </ul>
Skills in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Design of closed- and open-ended items and tasks</li> <li>– Statistics: calculation and interpretation</li> <li>– Integration between assessment, teaching, and learning</li> </ul>
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Ethics</li> <li>– Fairness</li> <li>– Democracy</li> <li>– Transparency</li> </ul>

### ***Conceptualizing LAL***

Davies' (2008) paper first conceptualized LAL as having three major components: knowledge, skills, and principles. This early conceptualization has remained in the literature and seems to apply to various stakeholders in language assessment: professional language testers, applied linguists, teachers, among others. However, each component has been the focus of elaborate descriptions. Fulcher (2012, p. 126) collected information from teachers, regarding their training and needs in language assessment; based on this research, the scholar proposed a definition that includes “knowledge, skills, abilities, processes, principles, and concepts”. These components, as Fulcher explains, should be deeply rooted in contexts for language teaching and assessment, which include “historical, social, and philosophical frameworks” (p. 126). Scarino (2013) echoes Fulcher's idea of context, especially regarding language teachers. She argues that teachers' context is a key component of their professional development through language assessment.

Besides, Inbar-Lourie (2008) argues that LAL should address three fundamental questions. According to this scholar, the *why* refers to purposes for language assessment; the *what* refers to descriptions of language ability and language learning; the *how* refers to methods for collecting information about skills, to achieve stated purposes.

Other scholars have suggested that LAL as a construct differs depending on the stakeholders involved. While knowledge, skills, and principles are important for those engaged in assessment, they do not have or need to have similar levels of literacy (Butler et al., 2021; Kremmel & Harding, 2020; Taylor, 2013). According to Taylor (2013, p. 410), teachers should have a sound knowledge of “language pedagogy, sociocultural values, and their local contexts” and be able to design assessments and interpret the data they yield.

### ***Drawing Teachers’ LAL***

As stated above, LAL is highly context-dependent, especially when it comes to teachers. Notwithstanding this observation, we argue that the following are core characteristics of teachers’ LAL, which we derive from relevant literature (Arias et al., 2012; Brindley, 2001; Fulcher, 2012; Giraldo, 2018; Inbar-Lourie, 2008, 2012, 2013; Scarino, 2013; Taylor, 2013). The three components below are common in conceptualizations of LAL (see Davies, 2008; Fulcher, 2012), each is followed by examples.

*Knowledge:* language learning models and frameworks (e.g., the CEF); concepts such as validity and authenticity; purposes of assessment; methods for assessment.

*Skills:* design of closed-ended and open-ended items and tasks to assess language ability; score interpretation; connection between assessment, teaching, and learning; design and use of alternative assessment methods.

*Principles:* Transparency, democracy, ethics, and fairness.

Research involving teachers’ LAL has shown that they require and expect LAL training in various areas, and this occurs at the pre-service and in-service levels (Fulcher, 2012; Giraldo & Murcia, 2018; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). To reach this conclusion, research studies have collected data through instrument analysis, interviews, and surveys (Frodden et al., 2004; Montee et al., 2013; Tsagari & Vogt, 2017; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). Based on the data produced by these methods, various studies have reported the design and implementation of LAL courses, which we review below.

### ***LAL Courses***

Empirical studies on teachers’ LAL have indicated that teachers expect to learn about language assessment through practical, hands-on tasks in which theory is presented and used (Fulcher, 2012; Giraldo & Murcia, 2018; Tsagari, 2021). Courses deriving from this teacher-based feedback have, accordingly, focused on engaging teachers in learning about assessment through a praxis-based approach (Arias et al., 2012; Baker & Riches, 2017; Janssen, 2022;

Kremmel et al., 2018; Nguyen & Dursun, 2022). In a review of sixteen LAL courses, Giraldo (2021a) highlights the following major characteristics:

*Contents:* Overall, these courses tend to focus on topics such as validity, reliability; test purposes; types of tests; models of language ability; and guidelines for the design of assessments of language skills (e.g., listening, speaking).

*Activities:* LAL courses include test critiques and test design as major tasks for LAL development.

*Principles:* Principles such as ethics or fairness appear in few LAL courses.

The existing literature on LAL courses primarily report their outcomes, rather than the participants' perceptions towards how they learned or were taught. Of course, the purpose of most existing reports was not to evaluate participants' perceptions of their learning. Feedback from teachers in LAL courses, however, may ignite discussions leading to successful LAL initiatives for these stakeholders. Against this background, in this report we now describe how we studied English language teachers' perceptions into the contents and activities in an LAL course, with particular attention on how the course impacted their professional development.

## Methodology

Since we investigated English language teachers' perceptions into an educational phenomenon, we resorted to a purely qualitative case study in a natural context (Creswell, 2015; Richards, 2011). Following Richards' (2011) idea of instrumental case studies, whereas the LAL course took place in a particular educational/social context, the findings may be relevant elsewhere, specifically because a pedagogy of/for LAL is needed in the field (Fulcher, 2020).

The participants in the LAL course of the study were eighteen English language teachers from state high schools in the center of Colombia. The teachers are tasked with teaching the English language to students in urban and rural schools in this area of the country. All teachers participated in a project called Language Assessment Literacy and Teachers' Professional Development.<sup>4</sup> This project was divided into two major stages: a diagnostic and an implementation. In the first stage, we collected data on teachers' LAL needs and practices, through individual interviews, an analysis of assessment instruments, and a questionnaire on their LAL learning needs. Three major findings from this stage are as follows:

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<sup>4</sup> The present article comes from a research study called *Literacidad en Evaluación de Lenguas Extranjeras y Desarrollo Profesional Docente* (Language Assessment Literacy and Teachers' Professional Development). The study was sponsored by the Vicerrectoría de Investigaciones y Posgrados of Universidad de Caldas, Manizales, Colombia. Code: 0509020.

- *The Need for Overall LAL with an Emphasis on Creating Assessments:* In the interviews, the teachers reported that they wanted to learn about language assessment across the board. They expressed the need to create high-quality assessment instruments.
- *A Course Focused on Knowledge and Skills:* In the results from the questionnaire, the teachers indicated that they wanted to learn about theoretical and technical aspects (i.e., design) of assessment. The results in this instrument confirm the need for LAL training that the teachers reported in the individual interviews.
- *Issues with Design of Assessment Instruments:* Through the analysis of assessment instruments the teachers shared, we identified issues in design: Teachers created items and tasks that posed potential problems to construct validity, reliability, and authenticity.

The report we present here is based on the implementation stage, i.e., the online course. The course had the features outlined in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Major Features of the LAL Course

Features	Description
LAL Contents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Fundamentals of language assessment: purposes, constructs, and methods</li> <li>– Qualities of language assessment, e.g., validity, reliability, authenticity.</li> <li>– Assessing the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing</li> <li>– Integrated-skills assessment</li> <li>– Ethics &amp; fairness in classroom language assessment</li> <li>– Alternative assessment</li> <li>– Online assessment</li> </ul>
LAL Learning Activities & Tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Mini tasks derived from reading the handbook (see <i>Support Materials</i> below) and based on the Colombian context of assessment.</li> <li>– Instrument analysis against fundamentals and qualities of language assessment.</li> <li>– Writing up test specifications for planning professional assessments.</li> <li>– Designing assessment instruments based on such specifications.</li> <li>– Discussions around school-based assessment situations: challenges, problems, and solutions.</li> <li>– Mini presentations of assessment materials, e.g., online resources or tests designed in the course.</li> </ul>

Features	Description
Length	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 40-hour course, between March and May 2021</li> <li>– 10 weeks</li> <li>– 4 hours a week</li> <li>– Two 2-hour workshops every week</li> </ul>
Modality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Taught online, synchronously, thanks to Google Meet and, in general, Google's Workspace technology.</li> </ul>
Learning Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– A handbook as preparatory reading material for teachers to read before each workshop (see the Appendix A for excerpts).</li> <li>– Recordings of all workshops for teachers to watch asynchronously, especially when they could not attend a workshop.</li> <li>– Slides and online handouts prepared by the course instructor and delivered through Google Workspace.</li> </ul>

To tap into the participants' perceptions towards this LAL initiative, the study was guided by the following related questions:

What perceptions do English language teachers have regarding the contents and activities in a language assessment course?

What perceptions do these stakeholders have regarding the impact of this course on their professional development?

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

To answer the two questions above, we used two data collection methods. On the one hand, we gave all teachers a questionnaire that they needed to complete every week, by the end of the second workshop. The questionnaire asked them about their perceptions towards the contents and activities in class, along with how they thought the course was impacting their professional development. On the other hand, we administered a focus-group interview to ask the teachers about these matters.

We used an iterative process to identify and analyze emerging themes from the data (Creswell, 2015; Kuckartz, 2014). We found commonalities in the closed- and open-ended items of the weekly questionnaire. Then, we transcribed the answers to the focus group interview and compared the data from both methods to identify major trends, which then led us to the findings we present and discuss next.

## Findings and Discussion

The findings in this research study are divided into three sections. First, we explain and discuss the findings related to teachers' perceptions of the contents they learned in the LAL course. Secondly, we refer to findings about teachers' perceptions of activities in the course. Finally, we describe the findings related to the impact this course had on the participants' professional development.

### Teacher Perceptions of Contents in the LAL Program

#### *On Content Organization, Relevance, and Usefulness*

In the focus-group interview, the teachers affirmed that the contents they studied were organized coherently. Additionally, they reported that the contents held relevance for their LAL development, explaining that this was because of how the data from the diagnostic stage were used for course planning. In the sample below, T10 states that:

*Todos [los contenidos] están muy contextualizados [...], basados cuando nos hicieron la primera entrevista y usaron los instrumentos que usábamos para dizque evaluar. Se ve reflejado. De lo general a lo específico, con una buena secuencia. Si me pierdo una clase, me pierdo la conexión al siguiente tema o contenido.*

All [contents] are very contextualized [...] based on what we had suggested in the first interview and the instruments we used to, supposedly, assess. We can see that we go from general to specific topics, and the lessons have a good sequence. If I miss a lesson, I lose the connection to the next topic or content.

Thanks to the questionnaires used throughout the course, the teachers had the chance to state whether course contents were useful for their LAL development. Tables 3 and 4 below include examples of how the teachers agreed on the usefulness of these course contents for their LAL.

**Table 3.** Questionnaire for Week 1 (15 respondents)

Content	Not useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful
Constructs and standards for language assessment.			15 (100%)

**Table 4.** Questionnaire for Week 9 (10 respondents)

Content	Not useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful
Ethics and fairness in language assessment.			10 (100%)

The literature on courses for language teachers has shown that these stakeholders welcome the contents they study. Most specifically, they tend to appreciate contents that are more directly related to their classroom experience in assessment (Kremmel et al., 2018; Montee et al., 2013). This positive response towards course contents may occur when teachers willingly participate in language courses, which is also the case in the present study.

As for content relevance, we designed the course in the present report by considering the data from the diagnostic stage. The course catered to teachers' needs in LAL, which may be the key reason why they welcomed course contents. Thus, a diagnostic stage for course planning has been proven to be useful for problematizing teachers' LAL development (Arias et al., 2012; Fulcher, 2012; Montee et al., 2013). Additionally, as the teachers in Fulcher's (2012) study argue, they expect LAL training that relates to their profiles as teachers within their personal contexts. In fact, as Scarino (2013) argues, teachers' LAL contexts are crucial for professional development. Thus, based on the feedback given by teachers in these studies and ours, LAL courses need to be context-sensitive and have a coherent organization in theoretical contents that are relevant to teachers.

### *On Learning about Design in LAL*

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the teachers expected a course with an emphasis on how to design assessment instruments. Correspondingly, this was a content that teachers perceived as majorly useful in the LAL course. Most importantly, the teachers suggested that learning about design allowed them to practice knowledge in LAL (i.e., content). For example, in Table 5, all teachers stated that they found design considerations useful in the course.

**Table 5.** Questionnaire for Week 6 (12 respondents)

Content	Not useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful
Considerations for designing items for reading and listening assessments: T-F, MCQs, open questions, and matching.			12 (100%)

Following is an answer from a teacher (T25) in the focus group interview, through which T25 remarked on the usefulness of learning about design:

*Me ha servido [el tema de diseño] mucho. Las rúbricas, como decía T10. No nos habían dicho cómo hacer y plantear rúbricas. Esa parte ha sido importante y la estoy aplicando en las guías de aprendizaje que está enviando [a sus estudiantes].*

[The topic of rubric design] has worked well for me..., as T10 said. We had not been told how to make and propose rubrics. That part has been important, and I've been applying it in the learning guides I am sending [to her learners]].

Research studies in LAL have consistently shown teachers' positive perceptions towards learning about assessment design. Such content makes teachers aware of technicalities pertaining to test construction (Giraldo & Murcia, 2019; Kremmel et al., 2018) and the importance of describing constructs well for assessment (Arias et al., 2012; Baker & Riches, 2017; Nguyen & Dursun, 2022).

The interview excerpt above reiterates teachers' need and want to develop the skills of LAL, operationalized here as the design of assessments. As we highlight in the literature review above, research findings have shown that the design of assessment is a skill that teachers should develop more conscientiously (Frodden et al., 2004; Levi & Inbar-Lourie, 2019; Koh et al., 2018). Ultimately, as Fulcher (2010) states, the design of good assessment instruments is a fundamental task in language assessment.

## Teacher Perceptions of Activities in the LAL Course

### *Analyzing Assessment for LAL Development*

In the LAL initiative reported in this paper, two major tasks involved the analysis of existing assessment instruments and the design of assessment based on specifications. The answers the teachers gave in the weekly questionnaire and the interview suggest that these two tasks were major catalysts of knowledge, skills, and reflection towards language assessment. The first data sample below comes from the questionnaire in week 2 and suggests how useful the teachers found analysis of tasks for LAL.

**Table 6.** Questionnaire for Week 2 (15 respondents)

Activity	Not useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful
Analyzing assessment instruments based on qualities (e.g., authenticity and practicality)			15 100%

The next sample comes from an open-ended item in the questionnaire for week 5 in the course. The teacher (T22) commented on the usefulness of test analysis.

I think having the opportunity to look at the example of the Cambridge test was so helpful because it allowed me to understand the way it is conducted. I could also analyze the probable constructs they consider before designing the test.

Reported initiatives for teachers' LAL have shown that as teachers analyze and/or design assessment, they become aware of aspects ranging from technicalities of design, e.g., how to make a more robust rubric (Arias et al., 2012), theoretical considerations (Giraldo & Murcia, 2019; Kremmel et al., 2018; Nguyen & Dursun, 2022), and principles such as democracy and transparency (Arias et al., 2012). The course we report here placed great emphasis, particularly on design, given the need expressed by teachers in the diagnostic stage. This may have been, fundamentally, the reason why teachers appreciated design as a core activity for LAL.

Most importantly, perhaps, is how analyzing assessments is an activity that contributes to LAL development. In the present study, teachers merged theoretical and technical aspects of LAL as they studied assessment carefully. In other studies, with this LAL activity, teachers became aware of faulty design and how it could negatively impact the validity of assessment (Arias et al., 2012; Baker & Riches, 2017; Kleinsasser, 2005). In conclusion, the findings in our and other studies provide empirical support for an LAL pedagogy that includes test analysis as a core activity.

### *Collaborative Tasks for LAL Development*

Another core activity that seemed to drive LAL development in the course, as reported by the teachers, was the use of collaborative tasks. The participants continuously affirmed that, as they worked on a collaborative task, they could discuss issues that were meaningful to them and –most importantly it seemed– they could learn from each other. The first data sample is from the questionnaire for week 4. The teachers had to design a speaking assessment based on several specifications.

**Table 7.** Questionnaire for Week 4 (12 respondents)

Activity	Not useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful
Designing a speaking assessment with other teachers.			7 (100%)

The answer below, from the focus group interview, reiterates the usefulness of collaborative tasks. T12 commented that,

*Es importante que él [el instructor del curso] trate de crear espacios, para tener la explicación con él, también en grupo con compañeros. Uno aporta, otro corrige, uno aprende mucho de los compañeros.*

[It is important that he [the course instructor] tries to create spaces to have his explanation, also in groups with classmates. You contribute, another corrects; you learn a lot from classmates.]

Collaborative tasks move attention from a cognitive view of LAL development and place learning communities at the forefront. In fact, a social view of LAL development has been garnering attention in LAL discussions (Baker, 2021; Yan, 2021); the present study provides evidence to support that teachers can learn from and support each other towards their LAL development, especially when they share backgrounds, as it happened in the course reported here.

LAL activities which involve interaction and collaboration among teachers seem to drive LAL development. One way to foster LAL, as the interview data above indicate, is the feedback that teacher participants give to one another. Other studies have indicated that this peer feedback can be useful to increase the quality of assessment instruments (Giraldo & Murcia, 2019; Kleinsasser, 2005; Kremmel et al., 2018; Montee et al., 2013). Thus, consonant with a collaborative and intercultural approach to LAL development (Baker, 2021; Yan, 2021), LAL courses may benefit from including tasks in which teachers give and receive feedback on assessment tasks that they design.

## Teacher Perceptions of How the Course Impacted their Professional Development

### *LAL as a Trigger of Self-Reflection*

The participants in this LAL initiative reported that the assessment course led them to reflect on mistakes they previously made in language assessment. In the questionnaire and the focus-group interview, the data indicate that the teachers were unaware of issues in the design of their assessments and their use. In the first data sample, from the questionnaire for week 9, T19 states how the workshops led her to reflection on mistakes she made.

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The workshops helped me identify the several mistakes I make when I design a test for my students, I haven't noticed many things.

In the focus group interview, T27 commented on changing her perception of assessment:

*Hasta el momento ha tenido que olvidar ciertas cosas que hacía, desaprender muchas cosas porque a la hora de realizar evaluación, sobre todo en un idioma extranjero, cometemos muchos errores.*

[Up to now, I have had to forget certain things I did, unlearn many things because when it comes to designing an assessment, especially in a foreign language, we make many mistakes.]

The fact that teachers became aware of their mistakes in assessment may stem from the test-analysis tasks in the course. The teachers examined traditional and alternative test formats and pinpointed aspects these instruments needed to improve. This analysis then seemed to have led the teachers to reflection on their own assessment instruments. Other LAL initiatives show how teachers reflect on what assessment is and does (Boyd & Donnarumma, 2018; Giraldo & Murcia, 2019) (more in the next finding); however, as far as the literature review for this article goes, there are no studies reporting on how teachers in LAL courses become aware of mistakes *they* make in assessment as they analyze assessment instruments.

### *Understanding Assessment*

A final perception the teachers reported was how the course impacted their professional development through enhanced awareness of what assessment is and does. The teachers reported that now they see the complexity of what assessment involves and the care and rigor that is needed for language assessment to work well. The data below show a common trend. The breadth and depth of assessment can be elucidated in T10's answer below, from the focus-group interview.

Tengo que conocer qué es lo que voy a hacer, cómo, hacia quiénes. Me gustó el qué, cómo, de la evaluación, el propósito. No es coger preguntas y hacerlas al azar de acuerdo con un tema y pare de contar. Es realmente lo que pretendo los objetivos que me tracé desde el principio. Este tipo de herramientas, para mí debe ser algo que se hace con cuidado. Es delicado.

[I must know what it is that I am going to do, how, towards whom. I liked what and how in assessment, its purpose. It is not about taking questions and making them at random based on a topic and that is it. It actually is what I intend to do, the objectives I set out from the beginning. This kind of tool, for me, must be something to be done with care. It is a sensitive issue.]

Learning involves change of perceptions towards a subject, and this is naturally the case when it comes to teachers learning about language assessment. Other studies with pre-service and in-service teachers have shown that these stakeholders' views of assessment change radically after studying assessment formally (Arias et al., 2012; Boyd & Donnarumma, 2018; Giraldo & Murcia, 2019; Jaramillo-Delgado & Gil-Bedoya, 2019; Montee et al., 2013; Restrepo, 2020). This change and growing awareness may occur given the explicit attention that LAL initiatives give to assessment and its impact on language teaching and learning.

Scholars have argued that language teachers need a sound understanding of what assessment is (Brindley, 2001; Fulcher, 2012; Inbar-Lourie, 2008). Such understanding may come from courses that combine theoretical, technical, and critical aspects of assessment, as the present study and others have suggested (Arias et al., 2012; Baker & Riches, 2017; Giraldo & Murcia, 2019). Collectively, the existing research evidence strongly suggests that

LAL courses contribute to how teachers envision assessment and move them, so we argue, towards LAL at large.

## Limitations

We should address three limitations in our study. While we hope our case study will be useful to other contexts where LAL initiatives are being cultivated, we acknowledge that this is a small case study pertaining to a particular LAL context. Thus, the findings and conclusions need to be analyzed against the contexts where other LAL courses are to operate. Secondly, in the questionnaire data, we report the answers given by fifteen respondents, even though we state that the participants were eighteen teachers. This occurred because three teachers could not attend synchronous sessions, so they watched video recordings of all the workshops; these teachers did not answer the questionnaire. Likewise, the number of respondents per week fluctuated, with weeks having seven respondents and others fifteen. This happened mostly because of teachers' lack of access to a stable internet connection. Finally, the questionnaire had three options for each item, which may limit participants' room for decision-making.

Notwithstanding these limitations, we hope that this research report can provide food for thought on what to do, and even what not to do, regarding the implementation of LAL courses for teachers; in other words, as we stated at the start of this paper, we hope that our findings are useful contributions for a pedagogy of/for LAL. As Vogt et al. (2020) argue, local initiatives based on teacher feedback on LAL training can further LAL discussions and improvement.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

In this article, we characterized the perceptions of eighteen English language teachers into three components of a language assessment course: contents, activities, and impact on their professional development. The findings indicate that the teachers found course contents organized, useful, and relevant, particularly because of how they were derived from the diagnostic stage. The teachers also considered the design of assessments as key since it led to careful work and fostering of LAL. Regarding the activities in the LAL course, there were two that teachers found most useful: analysis of assessments and collaborative tasks, both gearing towards LAL development. Regarding the course's impact on the teachers' professional development, we highlight self-reflection on their assessment practices and a heightened awareness of what assessment involves.

Based on our findings and aware of the limitations of the study, we first suggest that a diagnostic stage be conducted to design the course. In this way, contents and activities can

be aligned with teachers' needs and expectations, so they can foster their LAL—the goal of such a course. Furthermore, teachers may become engaged in the course as they perceive progress and learning of the aspects they mentioned in the diagnostic stage. Second, we encourage the prioritization of activities in which teachers analyze and design assessments. These two tasks potentially lead teachers to understand the care and complexity needed for sound assessment. Finally, we recommend the collection of feedback from teachers as the course progresses. During the course, we used a weekly questionnaire that allowed us to know the perceptions of their learning process and make changes to course delivery.

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## Appendix A: Excerpts from The Handbook the Teachers Used in the LAL Course

The writing assessment I will develop now is for the task in Eighth grade: **A survey about consumption**. For this assessment, I will use a method called a checklist. Here are the specifications for this instrument:

### **Grade: 8**

#### **Standards/Syllabus objectives:**

- Completa información personal básica en formatos y documentos sencillos.
- ADAPTED: Creo formatos sencillos para recoger información personal.

**Purpose:** Assess students' progress in their writing skills for the second school period.

**Task:** A Survey about Food Consumption in Households

#### **Skills to be assessed:**

The ability to...

- make grammatically accurate Wh-questions and Yes-No questions.
- correctly spell vocabulary related to food consumption.
- use the present tense with do for the questions in the survey.
- use question marks correctly, at the end of sentences.
- organize the questions in coherent categories.

**Method:** A checklist

#### **Task instructions for students (in L1 or L2):**

*Based on the example survey questions we studied last class, create a survey asking about food consumption in people's households. Include four food categories: Fruits and vegetables, meats, dairy, and grains. Write 3 questions for each category.*

#### **Instructions for writing the descriptors in the checklist:**

- Write the descriptors as achievement indicators, e.g., In this survey, the student uses grammatically correct...

- Write the descriptors as achievement indicators, e.g., In this survey, the student uses grammatically correct...
- After each descriptor, include a small space for comments or evidence of what was done well or what needs to be improved.
- Add a box next to the checklist for point allocation (to be negotiated with students).

### **Washback and use:**

Washback: Show students the checklist at the start of the second school period, so they know what will be assessed and how; ask students questions about the checklist: Are the descriptors clear?

Have your students write a first draft of the survey and conduct a self-assessment exercise. Collect general feedback of what language aspects they want to improve based on the task. Ask students whether they want to add any descriptors to make the survey better. Finally, negotiate point allocation for the checklist. How many points per correct item in the checklist?

Use: Summative. Produce a score based on the checklist to represent students' progress (or part of it) in the second school period.

Based on the instrument, you can plan lessons that allow students to be successful in doing the task. Additionally, the writing task can lead to a speaking task: Students can use some (or all) of the questions for an interview in which they pretend to be a reporter asking questions about food consumption. Of course, many skills above can be used for the interview, with the added skills to represent the construct of speaking.

## Sample Checklist for a Writing Assessment

Task: A Survey about Food Consumption in Households

Student's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Assessment Criteria	Check	Points
1. The student makes grammatically accurate Wh-questions.		
Comments:		
2. The student makes grammatically accurate Yes-No questions.		
Comments:		
3. The student correctly spells vocabulary related to food consumption.		
Comments:		
4. The student uses the present tense with <i>do</i> for the questions in the survey.		
Comments:		
5. The student uses question marks correctly, only at the end of sentences.		
Comments:		
6. The student organizes the questions in coherent categories.		
Comments:		
<b>Totals and grade:</b>		

## **EFL Teacher Professional Development Needs: Voices from the Periphery**

**Necesidades de Desarrollo Profesional de Docentes de Inglés:  
Voces desde la Periferia**

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### **Abstract**

EFL teachers' professional development in Colombia has been characterized by top-down policies that neglect the regions in terms of contextualized professional development programs and resources. This article is an effort to make EFL teachers' needs in the Eastern region of Antioquia, Colombia, visible for academic institutions and local authorities to propose coherent professional development programs. This report is based on a section of the findings of a larger study called "Diagnosis of

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the needs about plurilingualism in the regions of Antioquia”. Findings show that EFL teachers in the Eastern region claim for ongoing and contextualized professional development programs, differentiated for primary and secondary-school teachers, and focused on instructional material design and adaptation according to the resources available in the local communities. Conclusions from this study outline implications for educational institutions to support teachers in pursuing their professional development within their contexts, methodological limitations for researchers, and possibilities for further research for stakeholders in the territory.

*Keywords:* Antioquia, EFL in Colombia, EFL teachers, material design, professional development, rurality, territory

## Resumen

El desarrollo profesional de los docentes de inglés en Colombia se ha caracterizado por políticas centralizadas que hacen a las regiones invisibles. Este artículo es un esfuerzo para hacer visible las necesidades de desarrollo profesional de los docentes de inglés del oriente antioqueño colombiano ante las autoridades locales para proponer programas contextualizados. Este reporte hace parte de una sección de los resultados obtenidos en el macroproyecto titulado “Diagnóstico de las necesidades de plurilingüismo en las regiones de Antioquia”. Los resultados de esta investigación cualitativa muestran que los docentes de inglés en la región reclaman programas de desarrollo profesional continuos y contextualizados; diferenciados para docentes de primaria y secundaria; y enfocados en el diseño y adaptación de materiales de acuerdo con los recursos disponibles en las comunidades locales. Las conclusiones de este estudio enuncian implicaciones para las instituciones educativas para apoyar a los docentes en la búsqueda del desarrollo profesional en sus contextos, limitaciones metodológicas para los investigadores y posibilidades para investigaciones futuras para los diferentes actores del territorio.

*Palabras clave:* desarrollo profesional de profesores, diseño de materiales, necesidades de los profesores de inglés, profesores de inglés, región oriente de Antioquia.

## Introduction

Currently, learning English as an additional language has become an asset for the citizens of our globalized world. To promote the widespread use of English, several language policies have been implemented in Colombia to improve students’ competencies in this language. However, actions to impact the field of Professional Development (PD hereafter) of teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL teacher hereafter) have not been implemented at the same rate as language policies. That is why making visible the PD needs of educators from territories outside the main cities becomes both an echo of historical inequalities and a call for actions that connect with the local contexts.

Language policies in Colombia have mainly focused on EFL. For instance, the Ministry of National Education has launched laws, policies, and programs such as *Ley General de Educación 115* (1994); *Líneas de acción para las lenguas extranjeras* (1999); *Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras (Inglés)* (2006); *Ley de Bilingüismo* (2013); *Programa para el*

*Fortalecimiento de Lenguas Extranjeras (PFDCLE) 2010-2014; Programa Nacional de Inglés (PNI) 2015-2025; Derechos Básicos de Aprendizaje: Inglés (2016); Esquema Curricular Sugerido Grados 6° A 11° English for Diversity and Equity (2016); and Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo (PNB) 2004-2019.* In the last document, Colombia is viewed as a “plurilingual and multicultural country that recognizes its native and creole languages, while opening the doors to the construction of a global citizenship through foreign languages” (p. 5). Although local languages and foreign languages are acknowledged, the vast body of language policies envisions bilingualism in terms of English and Spanish, disregarding the background knowledge of the communities in terms of other languages (Echeverri-Sucerquia et al., 2022).

Recognizing the diversity of languages in Colombia, particularly in the department of Antioquia, the findings presented in this article are part of a larger study called “Diagnosis of the needs of plurilingualism in the department of Antioquia” funded by CODI (Committee for the development of research, acronym for the words in Spanish). The main study addressed needs in terms of plurilingualism<sup>4</sup> in the eight regions of the department. However, the current report concentrates on the findings in the Eastern region of Antioquia, first with a general overview of the languages that coexist in the territory and, second, with a detailed description of the EFL teachers’ professional needs within the context.

The Eastern region of Antioquia is a territory located between the Magdalena and Cauca rivers where the Central Mountain Range (Cordillera Central) crosses the territory. There are twenty-three municipalities in the region with vast rural areas where most people live. However, urban areas within the municipalities near Medellín city (capital city of Antioquia) are currently spreading at a fast rate. According to the “*Plan de Desarrollo de Antioquia 2020-2023*”, the Eastern region of Antioquia has a great diversity of climates and a richness in natural biodiversity. Furthermore, this is an agricultural territory that has a great hydro, biotic, and landscape wealth (p.81).

In the same vein, the Eastern region plays a determining role in the development of the department and the country. This territory has 3.1% of all exporting companies in Colombia and hosts the second most important airport of the country with growing dynamics in cargo transportation, since a large part of the production of flowers and other products from the region leaves the country through this airport (*Cámara de Comercio Oriente Antioqueño [CCOA]*, n.d.).

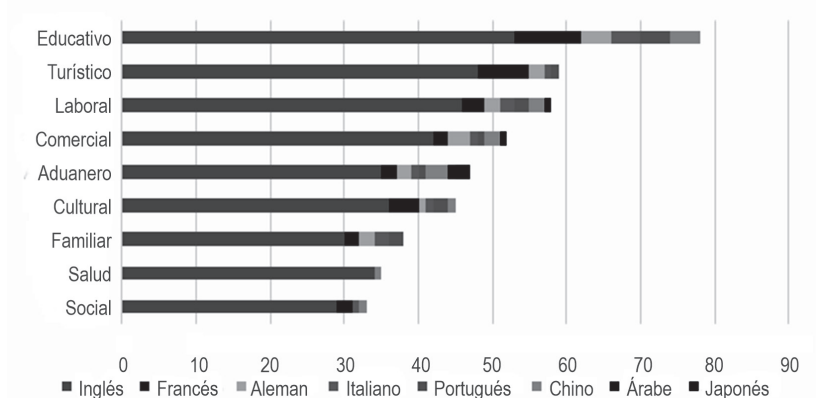
In terms of plurilingualism in this region, we, researchers, observe that the predominant foreign language in the context is English, followed by French and Portuguese. As for the

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<sup>4</sup> *Plurilingüismo es entendido como “la presencia simultánea de dos o más lenguas en la competencia comunicativa de un individuo y a la interrelación que se establece entre ellas”* (<https://cvc.cervantes.es/>).

For this article plurilingualism is understood as the simultaneous presence of two or more languages in the communicative competence of an individual and the interrelation among them (own translation).

sectors in which English is most used, the educational, tourist, labor, and commercial sectors are at the top of the list. French is present in the Eastern region in the educational and tourism sectors, since universities and language institutions offer courses of French to the community. In the following figure, we present a summary of the foreign languages used in the Eastern region according to the sectors.



**Figure 1.** Sectors where the use of foreign languages predominates. East (N=56)

Accordingly, throughout this report, we want to provide evidence of the close relationship between English, as the predominant foreign language in the region, and the needs that language teachers have voiced. To accomplish this purpose, this report relies on the concepts of professional development (PD), English foreign language (EFL) teachers PD, EFL teachers PD in Colombia and their needs in the regions from a sociocultural and critical perspective.

## Professional Development (PD)

According to Diaz-Maggioli (2003), PD is an ongoing process of reflection, change, and growth which results are driven from becoming a community of practice, sustained in time, and focused on co-responsibility towards teachers' professional practices. The PD field offers a myriad of models for teachers to identify with; these models go from workshops and one-time events to long-term learning processes, which foster major changes in pedagogical practices (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003; Freeman, 1989; Johnson, 2009). Likewise, we, researchers of this project, agree that the PD field has been called to follow the process that teachers undergo in their daily practices and to listen carefully to what they express as needs in their local contexts.

## ***EFL Teachers Professional Development***

Historically, PD for language teachers has evolved from being a training process to a more situated and dialogic process. Training programs have originated from experts who think, design, and deliver standardized documents and strategies to regulate pedagogical practices. In other words, EFL teachers training programs have offered step by step instructions that teachers should follow like a recipe to obtain the desired results that these training programs promise (Cardenas et al., 2010). Even though teachers' reality of having an overwhelming workload and extra time, they must devote to lesson planning, grading, and administrative work (Novozhenina & López Pinzón, 2018). The perspective about teacher training has reduced their role as technicians whose job is to implement the prescriptive procedures into the classroom (González-Moncada et al., 2002). One of the core characteristics of grounded PD programs is to be an open and long-lasting process since it is the teacher who decides when the PD program ends. The main objective of such programs is to look for pedagogical options to transform and build knowledge around praxis to adapt instructional actions to students' needs (Cárdenas et al., 2010; González-Moncada, 2007). Accordingly, in Yurtseven and Altun's (2016) study about teacher learning in a PD program, teachers "said that they found the opportunity to be actively involved in the learning process as well as learning from their colleagues" (p. 450). This is why PD of EFL teachers in this research is understood as a process where teachers' voices are valued, heard, and recognized as the path to act upon.

In the same vein, PD programs become well-informed strategies that set long term goals and seek to support teachers in understanding reality, self-discovering, and proposing changes in their pedagogical practices. In this way, grounded PD programs are flexible and individualized according to the teachers' context, needs, and concerns (James, 2001, as cited in Cárdenas et al., 2010). As a result, these programs meet the teachers' "desire of control over the learning experience that will primarily result in more learning" (Kahl Jr & Venette, 2010; Knowles et al., 2014, as cited in Almuhammadi, 2017, p.119), and ownership of the PD process. Therefore, we, authors of this article, based our research on the concept of PD as a flexible and dialogical process to build knowledge around teachers' realities and their agency to transform pedagogical practices.

## **96 *EFL Teachers PD in Colombia***

In Colombia, several scholars and universities have made important efforts to provide teachers with grounded PD programs. One of these efforts resulted in the "COFE project" (Colombian Framework for English) in 1991, which was conceived as an ongoing process to address several dimensions of teacher education having reflection as the basis to build professional knowledge and growth within a context. (Rubiano et al., 2000). Nonetheless, many options teachers have to pursue PD are limited to conferences, publishing companies'

events, and postgraduate studies (González-Moncada, 2021). In a study about PD needs of EFL teachers in Colombia, González-Moncada (2003) asserts that “English teachers claimed the urgency to propose PD programs that responded to the particularities of their settings and included their voices in the design” (as cited in González-Moncada, 2021, p. 141). By the same token, PD needs to embrace the principle of “Particularity”, as in Kumaravadivelu’s (1994) post method pedagogy, so both PD instructors and teachers themselves can become “sensitive to the particular conditions of the sociocultural milieu in which the teaching and learning take place” (González-Moncada & Quinchía-Ortíz, 2003, pp. 91-92). Following the previous characteristics of grounded PD programs, research projects that unveil EFL teachers’ needs in terms of situated PD like this one become a source of information to propose thoughtful PD programs to impact the communities.

### ***EFL Teachers PD Needs in Colombia***

Literature found about local EFL teachers’ needs in terms of PD to accomplish national language policies claims that teachers embrace multidimensional needs regarding their roles as worker, instructor, and learner (González-Moncada et al., 2002). For this study, EFL teachers’ needs as instructors and learners are key to envisioning a more complete picture of the multiple aspects that should be considered in situated PD programs. González-Moncada et al. (2002) affirm that PD programs should provide teachers with opportunities to access, create, and adapt different teaching aids that resonate with their contexts and allow cross curricular integration. In like manner, EFL teachers seek to update their teaching techniques and foreign language proficiency to better impact their school communities.

As a complement to the language teachers’ needs previously described, there is an underlying need for spaces where teachers can learn by “sharing his/her knowledge and experience with peer teachers who have undergone the same” (González-Moncada & Quinchía-Ortíz, 2003, p. 92). Thus, teachers become active agents responsible for both the individual learning and the progress of the PD learning community in which they participate.

Under the same perspective, Bautista Macia and González (2019) add certain characteristics that are connected to the needs of EFL teachers expressed especially in rural contexts and within the environment of the peace agreement framework. The peace agreement signed in 2016 supported the end of a half century of armed conflict in Colombia. This end of the conflict means to stop the suffering of people in Colombia and the beginning of a new chapter for the diverse communities along all the territories in the country (*Poder Legislativo, Colombia: Acuerdo Final para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una Paz Estable y Duradera*. Junio de 2016, 26 Junio 2016). These characteristics are:

- The emphasis in the context.
- The active involvement of the community in the educational process.

- The use of differentiated approaches.
- The access to information and communication technologies.
- The implementation of flexible models that can adapt to the needs of the different communities.
- The availability of qualified teachers to develop the PD programs and make them a long-term process.

These characteristics are echoed in this study, since there is a long journey starting when the peace agreement was signed to the current times when efforts are being made to fully implement it.

In addition, to the needs found in literature, this study tries to explore what language teachers and stakeholders located in the periphery of Antioquia, it means located in municipalities of the Eastern Region of Antioquia (some municipalities are for the most part rural territories), voice as PD needs in their contexts and how these requirements echo the literature and summon new issue to consider when proposing situated PD strategies.

## Methodology

This research project relied on a qualitative exploratory research design to collect and analyze data during the years 2020 and 2021. The circumstances that resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic influenced the research process, especially in the number of participants from the educational, governmental, and cultural sectors and the way to approach participants through computer-based tools.

The data came from four sources of information: document analysis, an electronic survey, interviews, and focus groups with the aim of collecting different perspectives about the plurilingualism needs of the municipalities that belong to the east region. This information was analyzed and coded with the support of NVivo software to find recurrences and connections among the data.

We, researchers of this project, based the document analysis on the review and codification of the development plans of twenty-two municipalities in the region from two periods of time: 2016 - 2019 and 2020 - 2023. In these documents, we studied the indicators and programs proposed by local administrators related to language education.

Regarding the survey, there were 48 responses to the electronic survey from which thirteen people belonged to the governmental sector, secretaries of education, university principals, and public institutions directors: thirty-five to the educational sector, teachers, school coordinators and principals from the region. The responses came from fourteen different municipalities, being Rionegro the municipality from where we received most of

the data. The electronic survey had close and open-ended questions concerning information about the contexts where languages were used and explanation in terms of local needs regarding language education.

We carried out three focus groups with actors from the Eastern region. Five people participated in the educational sector focus group, all of them schoolteachers. In contrast, in the governmental sector focus group there was one participant, a director from a government education institution. The director of the East campus of Universidad de Antioquia participated in a focus group that included the directors from all campuses of the Universidad de Antioquia.

Finally, we conducted two individual interviews with a representative from SENA, the Colombian National Training Service, a public institution for citizens to develop skills and competencies for the job market, and a representative of a company from the airport sector in the region, which is one of the most important sectors in the Eastern region. These participants were selected to cover other visions of the territory that had not been covered in the focus groups. Since the focus groups and the interviews were carried out virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, participants were not asked to sign a consent form. Instead, at the beginning of interviews and meetings, the consent form was read, and it was explicitly specified that if participants remained connected, we could assume that they agreed to be part of the research. Additionally, anonymity was carefully guaranteed and only initials from names and last names were used to reference quotes from interviews and focal groups.

## Findings

Outcomes from this research deal with different issues; however, in this article, we report one of the more salient categories that relates to English language education, specifically the needs in terms of English teachers' professional development.

### *Ongoing PD for Language Teachers within their Contexts*

One of the most relevant needs expressed through data was the demand for contextualized PD strategies for EFL teachers. These programs should embrace the characteristics of the municipalities and detach from Rionegro city, which is the main urban municipality from the East region. Rionegro is located an hour away from Medellín and has historically been the primary host and receptor of PD events and resources for the East region of Antioquia. This request is evident in the quote below from a teacher who affirms that his municipality, Abejorral, receives almost zero resources for PD programs since this place is far from Antioquia's capital city Medellín and from Rionegro the central city in the

East region. Consequently, this teacher considers that his own PD and improvement of both teaching and language skills do not advance.

*...Yo trabajo en un pueblo que siempre está alejado de Abejorral, Abejorral está alejado de Medellín. Entonces allá no llega a prácticamente nada. Entonces uno también se va quedando, se va quedando y se le van olvidando las cosas y se va volviendo casi que una cosa monótona y estar en un salón todo, todo el tiempo, uno casi que se vuelve repetitivo con el trabajo que hace. (L. J, Grupo Focal Sector Educativo Subregión Oriente, 10 de noviembre de 2020)*

[I work in Abejorral town that is quite far away from Medellín (and from Rionegro). Then, almost no resources get to my town. Consequently, you as a teacher stop your professional development, you start forgetting things and begin working with routines in the classroom all the time, and you become repetitive with the work you are doing]. (L. J. Focal Group Educative Sector Easter Region, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

In like fashion, another participant from the focal group states that the PD strategies offered to EFL teachers in the region lack continuity and follow up of the diverse processes that can be originated at the heart of the school communities in the different municipalities. Consequently, teachers might lose motivation to start changing their pedagogical practices. This idea is illustrated in the following extract.

*Bueno, eh. La compañera... lo acaba de decir con las capacitaciones, pero libre de eso, de las capacitaciones, es como hacerle un seguimiento y que esa capacitación no sea una capacitación que hoy sí, mañana no porque infortunadamente eso es lo que ha ocurrido. Sé que este es un departamento bastante, bastante ejecutor cuando se propone hacer algo y cuando de verdad uno inicia ciertas capacitaciones, uno inicia muy entusiasmado y llega un punto dado en que esa capacitación inició un mes por ocho días y no se vuelve a ver. (L. M, Grupo Focal Sector Educativo Subregión Oriente, 10 de noviembre de 2020)*

[Well, eh. My colleague... just said so regarding workshops, but apart from that, the workshops are like to have a follow up in place; the workshop should not become an activity of one day only, since unfortunately, that is what has happened. I know this is a department that accomplishes objectives with high execution rates when they propose to do something. When I participate in certain workshops or PD strategies, I begin the process really motivated but we get to a point in which that workshop lasts for eight days, and it doesn't occur again]. (L. M. Focal Group Educative Sector Easter Region, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

As can be seen, EFL educators in the region require ongoing PD programs based on the needs and realities of the local context. PD programs as the ones described above put the needs of local teachers in the territories at the core of the strategies and turn the whole process of improving professional practices into a coherent endeavor.

### **PD Programs for Secondary Language Teachers to Update Disciplinary Knowledge and for Primary Teachers to Learn the Foreign Language**

One of the main objectives of the PD programs for the region should be fostering learning and improvement of teachers' disciplinary knowledge regarding the foreign language

and the pedagogical practices in the field. As for secondary teachers, they claim that they need PD programs to update their English knowledge and skills. This requirement is explicit in the following quote from an actor of the educational sector.

*Dentro del mismo profesorado existen debilidades, si se puede llamar así que, que por el tiempo, por el recorrido, por la inactividad se van quedando muy atrás, es decir, se sabe que eso funciona con el desarrollo de habilidades. Generalmente en la habilidad del habla. Es algo que se va perdiendo si no se mantiene uno en constante intercambio... (J. R, Grupo Focal Sector Educativo Subregión Oriente, 10 de noviembre de 2020)*

[Inside the foreign language teachers' community there are weaknesses, since teachers start lagging in the language skills due to inactivity in the use of the foreign language, especially in the speaking skills. Teachers' performance in these skills starts getting behind if teachers are not in constant relation using the language]. (J. R. Focal Group Educative Sector Easter Region, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

Regarding the teachers at the primary and preschool levels in rural and urban contexts in the region, they require ongoing education in the foreign language since many of them did not study an undergraduate program on foreign language teaching and learning but they are responsible for the English instruction at their institutions. This situation is illustrated in the following extract from a participant of the educational sector in the region.

*Porque a veces los profesores rurales dan a veces primero, segundo, tercero o cuarto quinto, o sea, dan a toda la primaria y ellos al dar todas las materias porque ellos dan matemáticas, inglés, español, sociales, ellos dan todas las materias. Entonces, yo siento que ellos a veces no tienen buena capacitación o conocimiento para dar un buen inglés, o sea, para manejar un buen idioma. (P. C, Grupo Focal Sector Gubernamental Subregión Oriente, 4 de noviembre de 2020)*

[Teachers in rural contexts sometimes cover grades from first, second, third, fourth, and even fifth grade. I mean, they teach in all grades from primary; they often teach all the subjects, Math, English, Spanish, Social Studies, etc. So, I feel teachers sometimes don't have the skills and knowledge to teach English, I mean, they are not skillful in the language] (P. C. Focal Group Governmental Sector Easter Region, November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

In the same vein, EFL teachers of the region recognize the direct impact that learning and updating their knowledge and skills in the foreign language have in their pedagogical practices inside the classroom. The following excerpt from a teacher illustrates this issue and makes a conclusive call to propose thoughtful strategies that can impact the learning experiences that EFL teachers offer in their institution.

*Entonces la importancia de las capacitaciones radica en eso, en que al uno actualizarse, al uno ir avanzando y aprendiendo cosas nuevas, eso mismo lleva al salón y eso mismo hace que el proceso de enseñanza también mejore. Y ojalá se pudiera dar en algún momento ese tipo de trabajo, porque la verdad el compañero lo decía ahora, hace muchos años, no se brinda ningún tipo de formación para nosotros. Y yo si realmente considero que uno se va quedando estancado y se va quedando siempre en lo mismo, eso es una forma de oxigenar y de que nosotros también*

*cambiamos y empecemos a trabajar de otra manera. (L. J, Grupo Focal Sector Educativo Subregión Oriente, 10 de noviembre de 2020)*

[So, the relevance of PD programs is there, when you update your knowledge, you advance and learn new things; then, you take your learning into the classroom, so the learning experiences inside the classroom improve, too. I would like those kinds of programs to take place any time soon because, as one workmate said, we haven't been offered PD events for a long time. I do consider that you as a teacher start lagging and get stocked in the same routines. PD programs are an alternative to refresh teacher's knowledge, so we teachers can change and start teaching in different ways] (L. J. Focal Group Educative Sector Easter Region, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

In sum, we, researchers, can state that EFL teachers are aware of the limitations they face to access PD programs when they work in the municipalities of the East region of Antioquia. Likewise, they are knowledgeable about both the needs they have as EFL professionals who work in-context as well as about the impact of improving their pedagogical practices and language base knowledge in their students' learning processes.

### ***Ongoing and Contextualized PD Regarding Material Design***

EFL teachers and agents from the educational sector assert that material design should be a cornerstone of the PD programs that are offered for the region. This emphasis on instructional material design should follow three characteristics: adapted to prepare students for national standardized tests (ICFES, acronym that stands in Spanish for *Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación*), sensitive to rural schools' contexts and familiar with different paths to adapt and create situated materials. Additionally, EFL teachers manifest their willingness for learning to adapt and appropriate resources for their classes.

Regarding the process to adapt and create materials related to national standardized tests, data show that there is a need to support teachers in building resources for students to practice and improve language skills and knowledge about the tests in primary and secondary levels. As it was previously mentioned, the fact that teachers who teach English in primary, and sometimes in secondary levels, did not study an undergraduate program in foreign language teaching and learning, poses some trouble to accomplish the objectives of the subject and achieve satisfactory results when students take standardized tests. The following quote exemplifies this issue.

*... Entonces también el uso de materiales, de mirar qué tipo materiales manejan ustedes, cómo podríamos llevar este tipo de material de la escuela de idiomas a las aulas de clase de nosotros, cómo poder ayudar a otros profes que no tienen tanto conocimiento porque no sé si pasa en los demás municipios, pero en ... sí pasa, que el que da inglés es el profe normal y él no sabe, entonces él se siente encartado con un área que no maneja y que los tiene que enfrentar a unas pruebas ICFES, que es igual para todo el mundo, a unos exámenes que son estándar para todos y que no saben llegarle pues a esos muchachos. (L. J, Grupo Focal Sector Educativo Subregión Oriente, 10 de noviembre de 2020)*

[So, the use of materials, looking at the kind of materials that people use (at the university), I wonder how teachers from public schools in municipalities can take those resources that teachers use at the school of languages (at the university) to our classrooms, how other teachers who are not prepare to teach English but deliver such lessons, and often feel frustrated and stressed with the subject and the pressure to prepare students to face standardized tests can received support from different stakeholders]. (L. J. Focal Group Educative Sector Easter Region, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

In a similar manner, PD programs should fundamentally offer different alternatives about resources and materials that teachers can access, adapt, create, and implement in the diverse rural contexts such as “*escuela nueva*” where they work. This request is supported with this extract, “*Porque a veces los profesores rurales dan a veces primero, segundo, tercero o cuarto quinto, o sea, dan a toda la primaria... Entonces me encantaría unas guías para los docentes, talleres también para ellos?*”. (P. C, Grupo Focal Sector Gubernamental Subregión Oriente, 4 de noviembre de 2020) [since, teachers in rural areas sometimes teach first, second, third, fourth, and fifth grade, I mean, they teach the whole primary... So, I would love some guides for the teachers, workshops, and activities for them too] (P. C. Focal Group Governmental Sector Easter Region, November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

Lastly, teachers should be provided with a myriad of possibilities and opportunities for adapting and creating situated materials, since factors such as the profound shortcut of resources and budget of public schools deeply influence the foreign language learning process inside institutions. As a result, teachers are constantly making their best efforts to get materials and use them according to the knowledge they have, usually doubting the choices they are making. This is why, it is imperative to support teachers in following a well-structured adaptation and appropriation process of the resources they have available in their contexts. Thus, teachers can both build knowledge about the alternatives to create their own contextualized materials and propose innovative instructional materials and pedagogical strategies that match their particularities. One of the participants from the educational sector referred to this issue as follows.

*Los colegios no tienen los mayores recursos para trabajar, es lo que uno medianamente pueda ir consiguiendo en el camino. Los colegios ya ofrecen muy pocas, pues recursos y materiales y que libros y que guías y que audio, no lo que uno pueda conseguir, porque los colegios ya no proporcionan ningún tipo de material...Nosotros trabajamos con lo que tengamos y hacemos el mejor esfuerzo para que esos muchachos logren cualquier cosita.* (L. J, Grupo Focal Sector Educativo Subregión Oriente, 10 de noviembre de 2020)

[Schools don't have resources to work; resources are limited to what we can get on the way. Schools currently offer few resources, materials, books, guides, recordings, etc, so materials are restricted to what we can get; schools no longer provide resources... We work with what we have, and we do our best effort so students can learn something]. (L. J. Focal Group Educative Sector Easter Region, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

Likewise, teachers explicitly express their willingness to adapt and find appropriate resources to impact diverse contexts at the heart of the municipalities of the region. However, teachers themselves acknowledge they lack information regarding these aspects as it is stated in this extract “...uno también no sabe si ese material se puede adaptar a otros, a otras escuelas, a otras formas o cómo poderles llegar también ayudar a esas escuelas donde no llega nada. En determinado momento, con el diseño de ese material” (L. J. Grupo Focal Sector Educativo Subregión Oriente, 10 de noviembre de 2020). [We don’t really know whether those materials can be adapted to other contexts, schools, ways, and how we can get to impact those schools that have nothing. In a certain way, material design can help] (L. J. Focal Group Educative Sector Easter Region, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

To conclude, we, researchers, can clearly perceive the need that EFL teachers must access PD programs focused on material and instructional design in the region. Teachers urge for such programs since the lack of resources, materials, and knowledge about these topics is undeniable. EFL teachers also face numerous questions about how to face their realities with the shortcomings they experience and the doubts they have about the path to create contextualized materials to transform their English classes in their territories.

## Discussion

EFL teachers in the East region of Antioquia are making visible their needs regarding PD programs, which should address three fundamental characteristics: being sustainable and situated, differentiating between the needs of primary and high school teachers, and emphasizing on teaching material creation and adaptation.

The first characteristic entails to propose sustainable PD programs in the region that continue functioning despite changes in local administrations. In this way, PD programmers will understand, read, and reflect local realities of the east region of Antioquia. This claim is an echo of what Cárdenas et al. (2010) argued about the expectations of EFL teachers about their PD, since teachers prioritize programs that involve educators and their cultural and social realities. Consequently, PD programs should dialogue with the diverse contexts teachers live and be aligned with their needs and expectations. In similar fashion, certain authors have asserted that when PD programs are based on teachers’ needs, skills, and experiences there is a high possibility to have a positive impact in the professional life of educators, their pedagogical practices, and their students (Giraldo, 2014; González-Moncada, 2006). In this sense, we, researchers, can conclude that contextualized and sustainable PD programs for EFL teachers can result in improving the foreign language teaching and learning process in local schools in the region.

The second foundational characteristic of these PD programs is to provide opportunities for primary teachers to improve the language skills and pedagogical strategies to face the English class and for secondary teachers to update their language instructional practices. This finding is updating the claim that Cadavid-Múnera et al. (2009) made one decade ago. The authors reviewed several studies that highlighted the need to have skillful teachers both in the foreign language and in the use of strategies to face the English teaching and learning process at the primary level. This situation is markedly different from the secondary school context, where teachers who major in English teaching are officially enrolled. Accordingly, some scholars have found that teachers who are skillful in the foreign language or major in a language program are significantly few in primary contexts. Unfortunately, this situation does not tend to change due to the lack of clear national policies regarding EFL teaching at primary level and the absence of strategies implemented in these contexts to promote permanent change (González-Moncada et al., 2001; Cárdenas, 2010; Cadavid-Múnera et al., 2004; Quinchía & Cadavid, 2007). Consequently, there is a need to promote national language policies that work towards the EFL proficiency levels, the pedagogical knowledge required to work with primary level population and the contextualized PD programs to impact the primary teachers' community. Similarly, PD programs to tackle the need to update language and pedagogical knowledge from secondary school teachers should be on the radar.

The third characteristic that PD programs should include is the use, adaptation, and creation of instructional materials as a fundamental aspect to empower teachers in their territories. González-Moncada (2006), in her study about language teacher education in Colombia, the formation offered to language teachers about the use of materials, concluded that teachers perceived materials as a key component in an effective teaching process. Likewise, teachers in the Eastern region of Antioquia recognize that the instruction about material use, creation, and adaptation should be explicit from the undergraduate programs, complemented by visiting the vast variety of school realities that coexist in Colombia, such as: public schools, private schools, rural schools "*escuela nueva*", etc. As a result, we, researchers, can assert that both the teachers in González-Moncada's (2006) study and teachers in the Eastern region of Antioquia foresee the fundamental role that contextualized materials, their local uses, adaptations, and possibilities play in the PD programs to have a more profound and steady impact in the region.

To conclude, it is claimed that PD programs for the Eastern region of Antioquia should have three main cornerstones: a) sustainability and contextualization, b) differentiation according to the characteristics of teachers, and c) deep knowledge about material design and adaptation of resources according to the specific needs of the diverse municipalities. These characteristics reflect the voices from educative and governmental actors from the region who know the territory and live the difficulties of unstable PD programs for EFL teachers in the communities.

## Conclusions

Throughout this study, we, researchers, realized about the latent requirements EFL teachers have in the Eastern region of Antioquia and the urgent need they have to address their PD in an ongoing and contextualized way. Firstly, teachers argue that the diverse contexts they live should be at the core of PD programs as opposed to the central views that PD programs have displayed during the last decades in the region. Secondly, EFL teachers assure that their PD should be addressed differently according to the school level where they work, their language skills, and the resources they have available at their local communities.

Regarding the limitations in this study, we experience methodological constrains due to the Covid 19 pandemic. We could not visit the territories as it was originally planned but conducted all the data collection instruments in an online fashion. A similar challenge posed the fact that researchers were in different municipalities and did not meet face to face during the research process; that situation was particularly challenging for the data analysis process and writing of the discussion of the findings. Additionally, it was expected more participation from actors from the different sectors, but we understood that people from the Easter region of Antioquia have other concerns as priorities during that crucial time of humanity.

Findings from this research should be considered by stakeholders in different spheres of the educational process. For instance, universities are called to create partnerships with local authorities and community organizations to design and offer situated PD programs for EFL teachers and accompany the PD strategies that are already in place to strengthen the impact in the territories. As for researchers, this study visualizes routes to propose follow-up actions such as systematizing the experiences of different PD programs implemented and the actions that teachers take in their pedagogical practices that might be reflected on students' achievements. Finally, language teachers along the Easter region of Antioquia are encouraged to pursuit their PD and actively participate in the strategies proposed to voice their realities and be agents to transform their contexts.

Undoubtedly, the conclusion of this study is an energetic call to persist and cultivate an ongoing presence of diverse PD projects that can be situated and sensitive to the needs of local communities to observe significant changes in the EFL teaching and learning process in the territories. As a result, what the Easter Region of Antioquia has to say about English in their communities can be echoed and visualized in the main cities and considered in the government agenda.

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## **Elementary Teacher's Conceptions towards the Incorporation of English in Their Teaching Practices**

### **Concepciones de Docentes de Primaria hacia la Incorporación del Inglés en sus Prácticas de Enseñanza**

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#### **Abstract**

Teacher's beliefs and conceptions of teaching English are an important area for the professional development path of primary teachers. Giving primary teachers opportunities to grow professionally and support their learning belongs to the wide variety of practices that can be implemented to foster early education today. To do that, the Colombian government has implemented different initiatives; however, through the exploration of literature, primary public-school teachers need more professional development opportunities to fulfill the objectives stated by the Ministry of National Education. This is why, the present study aims to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of elementary rural teachers involved in the incorporation of English in their teaching practices. A total of ten teachers were selected to be involved during a semester that lasts the implementation of the project. Through qualitative

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research under the exploratory paradigm, we identified frustration, motivation, and lack of expertise as the main perceptions that interfere the teaching practices of the selected population. Findings suggest that professional development strategies should be incorporated as an eventual strategy to foster the teaching practices in the classroom.

*Keywords:* professional development, primary education, public education, teacher perceptions

## Resumen

Las creencias y concepciones de los docentes sobre la enseñanza del inglés son un área importante para el camino del desarrollo profesional de los docentes de primaria. Brindar a los maestros de primaria las oportunidades para crecer profesionalmente y apoyar su aprendizaje pertenece a la amplia variedad de prácticas que se pueden implementar para fomentar la educación temprana en la actualidad. Para ello, el gobierno colombiano ha implementado diferentes iniciativas; sin embargo, por medio de la exploración de la literatura, los docentes de escuelas públicas primarias necesitan más oportunidades de desarrollo profesional para cumplir con los objetivos planteados por el Ministerio de Educación Nacional. Por ello, el presente estudio tiene como objetivo investigar las percepciones y actitudes de los maestros rurales de primaria involucrados en la incorporación del inglés en sus prácticas docentes. Un total de diez docentes se seleccionaron para participar en el proyecto. A través de una investigación cualitativa bajo el paradigma exploratorio identificamos la frustración, la motivación y la falta de experticia como las principales percepciones que interfieren en las prácticas docentes de la población seleccionada. Los hallazgos sugieren que las estrategias de desarrollo profesional deben incorporarse como una estrategia eventual para fomentar las prácticas docentes en el aula.

*Palabras clave:* desarrollo profesional, educación primaria, educación pública, concepciones docentes

## Introduction

Public education in Colombia faces a lot of issues such as class size, students' background, socio-economic conditions of schools, and lack of efficient professional development programs directed to primary teachers (Correa & Gonzalez Moncada, 2016; Le Gal, 2019). This situation is clear when primary teachers must teach English without enough preparation. The lack English teachers at the rural elementary level is frustrating because “there is a palpable lack of methodological and pedagogical precision that allows the design and implementation of training experiences not only in the teaching-learning of English as a foreign language but also in the teaching-learning of content through English (Fandiño-Parra, 2014; p. 232). If the Ministry of National Education (MEN as for its acronym in Spanish) expects increasing the English language proficiency level of students to be part of a globalized world, then, the local secretariats and schools need to support elementary teachers not only at fostering the English language skills but also in current didactic and pedagogical strategies to foster English teaching and learning. From that sense, Bermudez Jiménez et al. (2021) argued,

Teacher training should be committed as early as possible not only to programs oriented towards the successful acquisition of a foreign language and the relevant mastery of its teaching, but above all to the effective knowledge of the construction of educational and linguistic policy agendas. (p. 21)

Consequently, elementary teachers face significant disadvantages in rural settings. First, a few rural elementary teachers must teach English without being trained. Second, the lack of the availability of technological resources; and third, the implementation of the bilingual programs of the MEN which impacts all primary teachers, especially in the department of Boyacá. These disadvantages likely make public schools get low results at *Pruebas Saber*<sup>3</sup> comparing to private schools. According to a report about Saber test from the local Secretariat of Education in Boyacá, the results in 2019 at Firavitoba school showed that the 32 students who took this test were on average 48 %.

In an early interview with the thirteen teachers of this institution, they argued that the government has left teachers alone trying to figure out by themselves how to carry out all the goals and requirements of the MEN; especially for those who are not English language teachers, which is the case of this rural school. Besides, the lack of appropriate materials and resources, and poor socioeconomic conditions of this population make teaching a foreign language a challenging situation. Consequently, hearing the voice of those teachers who face bilingual policies and challenging teaching conditions, affecting not only the teaching context but also students' performance in class, is needed to provide rural students with high quality education and break the gap between private and public schools. Based on that, the idea of bearing in mind elementary teacher's attitudes and perceptions about teaching English was born. Therefore, this study explored the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of a group of 10 primary teachers about the fact that they must teach English without any preparation.

The research questions that guided this study were: How do teachers working in a rural public school perceive teaching the English language? This study springs from its main purpose of knowing elementary teacher's perceptions of teaching English which may affect their performance in class and students' learning process of this language because the elementary teachers who participated in this study are not English language graduated teachers, their major is in elementary education. Despite the enormous efforts of the MEN to implement a variety of bilingualism programs to meet international standards, not all primary teachers have received English training, especially in the department of Boyacá. Gomez Sará (2017) argued "many teachers have pointed out the pitfalls and improvement opportunities of the plans, but their voices have not been heard by the governments'

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<sup>3</sup> *Pruebas saber* is an annual examination conducted by the Instituto Colombiano para la *Evaluación de la Educación* -ICFES which evaluates the performance achieved by students according to the basic competencies defined by the Ministry of National Education.

policymaker. They have imposed their points of view and have focused on political and economic aspects” (p. 151). Based on that, professional development programs are needed to fulfill not only the MEN requirements but also to carry out the goal to give students the best quality of education.

Professional development programs should be a continuous process so teachers can expand their knowledge base and their teaching procedures to have a real impact in the classroom. According to Buendía and Macías (2019) “the design, planning, and implementation of professional development programs should consider aspects such as local contexts, teachers’ knowledge, practical personal theories, beliefs, and socio-cultural issues” (p. 105). From that sense, giving importance to what teachers think and perceive about their profession becomes imperative because teachers re-think their professional process and evaluate their real student’s progress in the classroom. Due to the importance of teaching English nowadays, teachers must be updated not only on how language education has changed because of globalization and cultural patterns but also on career advancement. Therefore, to enhance the English language teaching and learning process to primary teachers, it is necessary to have a deep understanding of their attitudes and perceptions to build a continuous professional development program that impacts early English education in the context of this study.

Since early education plays an important role in ELT, teachers should be considered the most important medium to influence positively early education in our country, especially language teaching. We are convinced that the research outcomes will provide valuable information on strengthening language development programs for primary teachers in the department of Boyacá. Furthermore, this study may contribute to continue enhancing the research of foreign language programs not only for primary teachers but also for language educators and policymakers in general.

## Literature Review

### *Bilingualism Programs in Colombia*

Like many other Latin American countries, Colombia has done many tries to foster English language learning. Those efforts have been in charge of MEN that has been adapting policies and launching different bilingualism plans to insert Colombia in a more globalized world. However, these plans and efforts have had an impact not only on language teachers but also on the academic community in general. According to Gomez Sará (2017) “Although the objectives have become more realistic with each new plan, the constant changes have affected the continuity, consistency, and articulation of the strategies, resulting in a slow work pace and a feeling of low-achievement and frustration” (p. 148). From that perspective,

bilingual policies in Colombia, implemented since 2004, have shown a gap between what the government plans and the reality Colombian students and teachers face in the classroom. Among the difficulties we can list: “(large classes), the lack of appropriate and available materials, or the lack of proficiency on the part of teachers (classes conducted by other professionals, not by foreign language teachers)” (Sánchez Solarte & Obando Guerrero, 2008, p. 190). Researchers such as González Moncada and Quinchía Ortíz (2003), Cárdenas (2006), de Mejía (2006) and González (2007) have provided a deep analysis of the foreign language teaching policies in Colombia. As a result of their analysis, it seems that bilingualism policies need to be readdressed to achieve better results. We are going to review these policies and provide a little analysis of each.

### ***National Plan of Bilingualism 2004-2019***

In 2004, MEN launched the National Plan of Bilingualism (NPB) which aimed at offering Colombian students the possibility to become B1 English language level speakers according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which was adopted in 2005 in the country. Its main aim was:

To have citizens who are capable of communicating in English, to be able to insert the country within processes of universal communication, within the global economy and cultural openness, through [the adopting of] internationally comparable standards. (MEN 2006b, p. 6)

Based on that objective; MEN adopted the Guide 22: Basic Standards of Competence in Foreign Languages booklet (MEN, 2006) to place the Colombian educational system at an international level. However, these standards have generated a lot of criticisms because Colombian real teaching and learning context in public and rural schools is different from the European. González (2007) questioned the validity of choosing a particular model to teach the foreign language in Colombia because of the diversity of contexts, socioeconomic conditions, teachers’ preparation, and students’ motivation to accomplish MEN standards. For example, many students have no internet access or a computer. MEN also adopted ICELT (In-service Certificate in English Language Teaching) and the TKT (Teaching Knowledge Test language) as international examinations for teachers to accomplish at B2 or C1 proficiency levels. Unfortunately, many teachers performed improperly during the massive Quick Placement Test (QPT) by Oxford University Press Testing in 2003 and 2004. From our point of view, the problem was not the English language skills of teachers in Colombia. The main issue in applying this program is justifying the reason MEN chose CEFR and the British Council as its main evaluator framework. As a result, teachers have been exposed to programs they scarcely understand; besides, the Colombian teaching and learning context cannot be compared to the European. To illustrate this, Ayala Zárate and Álvarez (2005) stated:

Imported standards not only deal with language policies of foreign countries but also with foreign curricula, syllabi, teaching-learning methodologies, testing, assessment, evaluation, and instructional materials. They usually come from educational systems belonging to North America or Europe. Sometimes these standards are adapted or adopted because of their popularity or achievements in another context. (p. 12)

The Colombian educational system has adopted a European framework, which is distant from our context. Standardizing language teaching based on international standards represents a challenge considering the geographical, socioeconomic, and cultural conditions in Colombia. Cárdenas (2006, p. 3) postulates that,

The reality established in the CEF would have to be contrasted with the conditions of Colombian educational institutions, namely infrastructure, curriculum organization, use of foreign languages in the academic and cultural domains of the country, working hours and competencies of language teachers.

For the most part, Fandiño-Parra et al. (2012), Mejia (2011), Guerrero (2008), among other academics, have criticized the bilingual program with respect to the lack of readiness to achieve the bilingual goals based on real students and teachers' needs, the use of massive proficiency international tests, and lack of consideration of the socioeconomic conditions among regions. However, MEN has established other alternatives to fulfill its objective as the inclusion of English language native speakers in public schools, immersion programs for English language teachers, the insertion of minimum three hours of English instruction, among others. These strategies highlight a big opportunity to provide Colombian students with a door to the bilingual and globalized world that they deserved.

### ***Program for Strengthening the Development of Competencies in Foreign Languages 2010-2014***

In 2010, the government announced to continue the National Bilingual Program. However, MEN endowed other powerful objectives such as:

- A 100% of English teachers in service reach level B2.
- A 40% of 11th-grade students reach level B1.
- An 80% of English Bachelor students reach the level B2.
- And that a 20% of the students from other careers other than the Bachelor's degrees in languages reach level B2.

At this point, we wanted to highlight that ICFES (the organism in charge of evaluating Colombian students to have access to higher education) has designed an English language test that does not include listening and writing skills in English. This program also set up lines to reach the objectives mentioned before. (1) Training and enhancement to teachers;

(2) Pedagogical aspects; (3) Evaluation and follow-up; and (4) Management for institutional strengthening. Regarding pedagogical aspects, the program designed “*Aprendamos Inglés con las aventuras de Bunny Bonita*”, *Estrategia “My ABC English Kit”*, “*English, please*” 1, 2, 3, 9°, 10°, 11°” MEN (2014a). Concerning teachers’ training, local secretariats of education should have striven for opportunities to re-train language teachers. Regarding follow-up and evaluation, MEN adopted *Teach Challenge* which consisted of a study to characterize the population of Colombian English teachers from public schools.

Despite the multiples alternates that MEN provided to help Colombian citizens to develop communicative competencies in foreign languages; results showed a different situation:

Only 17% of their 11th graders obtained a B1 level in the non-bilingual schools, which account for 24% of the total of 11th graders. In the bilingual institutions 80% of their 11th graders achieved a B1 level or superior, but they represent 1% of the total population of 11th graders in the country. The follow-up evidenced that, in 2013, there was a reduction of 3% in the students who obtained an –A level. (Gómez Sará, 2017, p. 145)

Consequently, factors such as school’s infrastructure, student’s motivation, class size, hours of exposure to the language, lack of consistency of the policies, omission of teachers’ perspectives, teachers training, among others, interfere in the low English language proficiency level of students. In contrast, a positive point of the government implementation to this extent is the fact that many English teachers received extra English training through immersion programs, online courses, workshops, etc. According to the MEN (2014), in a socialization document of *Colombia Very Well*, the government “trained more than 9,500 teachers, held workshops in the 94 education secretariats, accompanied the consolidation of 45 regional projects”. Some of the initiatives held by MEN were:

- ‘Let’s Learn English with the Adventures of Bunny Bonita’,
- English for Colombia-ECO,
- My ABC English Kit: Supplementary Materials for English Learning and Teaching in Primary Schools in Colombia,
- ‘English, please!’ (MEN, 2014a, 2014b),
- Teach Challenge
- Pedagogical principles and guidelines: Suggested English curriculum 6th to 11th grades (MEN, 2016b) and
- Basic learning rights: English 6th to 11th grades (MEN, 2016a).

However, there is no evidence along with the MEN information and in the literature exploration that elementary teachers in rural areas (who teach all subjects including English) are included in those pedagogical interventions established by MEN.

### ***Bilingual Colombia 2014-2018***

Right after the implementation of National Bilingual Program, the government re-structured it by reinforcing the concept of bilingualism. Bilingual Colombia was guided by three components: English teachers continued to be diagnosed, expecting to hire only B2 language teachers to the public sector. Native trainers were selected only to work in 9th, 10th, and 11th grades. For the first time, higher education was included; all undergraduate programs must adopt the necessary strategies to guarantee that students graduate with B2 English language proficiency level. For the pedagogical component, MEN constructed a curriculum following the communicative approach Pedagogical principles and guidelines: Suggested English curriculum, 6th to 11th grades (MEN, 2016b) and Basic learning rights: English 6th to 11th grades (MEN, 2016a).

### ***Law of Bilingualism (Law 1651 of July 12th, 2013)***

In 2013, Juan Manuel Santos, President of Colombia, and the Colombian Congress launched the Bilingualism Law to modify the articles 13, 20, 21, 22, 30, and 38 of the General Education Law 115 of 1994 prioritizing the use of English in public institutions including higher education. The purpose of the Law 1651 of 2013 was “developing communicative skills to read, understand, write, listen, speak, and express correctly in a foreign language” (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2013, p. 1). Besides, Colombian congress added “developing skills to converse, read and write in at least one foreign language” (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2013, p. 1). The relevance of this modification was the fact that the government prioritized teaching English in public institutions leaving behind indigenous languages that also played a second language role in Colombia.

### ***National Plan of English: Colombia Very Well! 2015-2025***

After the presentation of the bilingualism law, the administration of Juan Manuel Santos, re-oriented the bilingualism policies making emphasis on three important areas: teacher education, use of materials, and pedagogical design. A controversial issue presented at that time was the incorporation of more than 300 English language foreign speakers. English speakers named “foreign native trainers” who had the objective to promote authentic speaking opportunities for students and teachers. This initiative was not accepted as MEN expected; many teachers showed their discomfort because of the lack of didactic of the native trainers. Colombian teachers kept the feeling of imposing policies without considering the real context, class size, and student’s background in public schools (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016; Correa & Usma Wilches, 2013).

These programs show the commitment of MEN to foster learning English in Colombia. Nevertheless, many researchers have pointed the multiple weaknesses of these programs and the lack of professional development possibilities, especially for primary teachers. According to Correa y Usma Wilches (2013):

Making changes on the solutions requires going beyond the offering of a series of isolated and unarticulated professional development courses, which try to raise the level of English and pedagogical knowledge of teachers. These changes require for policymakers to begin taking actions that respond not to the often-uninformed views of their international service providers about what could work in our context but to the local needs of each region and community. (p. 234)

From that point of view, to offer language and primary teachers with real possibilities to grow professionally, consideration should be given to teachers' interest and voice, a real contextualization of the public schools in rural and urban settings, real guarantees of materials, equipment and living conditions of teachers, incentives, and motivation.

### ***English Language Education at Primary Level***

MEN has launched a variety of strategies among official schools to foster the use of the English language. Basic Standards for Foreign Languages: English (MEN, 2006) and the Ley de Bilingüismo or Bilingualism Act (Congreso de la Republica, 2013), first to fifth grades (MEN, 2006) policies have influenced the secondary school level to higher education. However, the primary level (especially rural schools) has not had the expected significance. Rural schools' conditions are not the same as in a big city. Miranda (2016) established that "throughout the first years of the BCP implementation, it was proven that the country did not have the necessary conditions to provide primary students the solid bases that they needed to reach the target competence levels" (p. 26). The number of graduated English language teachers hired in rural areas is very low. A low number of hours of English, lack of motivation, lack of didactic, physical, and technological resources makes learning English a difficult process. Cardenas and Miranda (2014) also argued that "Those who are teaching English in primary education do not have university training in language programs, which is especially notorious in the public sector" (p. 58).

Official Colombian teachers have accepted the MEN challenge; those who have had the opportunity to participate in workshops, immersion of just English courses have improved by their English language proficiency level. Nevertheless, students' communication in English is very poor. Múnera et al. (2004) found in a research study that "English that is being taught to children in public elementary school is rather limited, or is composed of basic vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation" (p. 45). This means, despite the multiples strategies to increase the English language proficiency level; the acquisition of the language in rural areas is not

seen. Thus, language policies should consider real teaching context in rural areas, student's real interests, and teacher's perceptions.

Because of this, an analysis of the main elements in rural primary education that put learning English off is imperative. For this analysis, there is a necessity to understand what rural primary teachers face in the classroom, what resources they need to work with, and what professional development paths are the most appropriate to them. Additionally, Correa and Gonzalez Moncada (2016) suggested several actions to support the primary level:

These actions could have included the building of more schools that could host the students who were left out in the switch from two to only one schedule, and the hiring of permanent English primary school teachers who could offer the two additional hours of English a week. They could have also incorporated the splitting of English classes into smaller groups so that students could have real interactions with their teachers and peers, or the improvement of the poor socioeconomic conditions affecting the lives of most students and preventing them from focusing on their education. (p. 10).

From that sense, rural elementary education must be enhanced by all the agents involved including teachers, parents, administrative staff, local secretariats, MEN, and academics from higher education institutions.

### ***Professional Development***

According to the MEN's objective, becoming bilingual is to have citizens capable of communicating in English, with internationally comparable standards that insert the country in the processes of universal communication, the global economy, and cultural openness. It has been the MEN's purpose for the last 10 years and one of the key elements of the Colombian educative system in the professional development of teachers. Villegas-Reimers (2003) notes "the professional development of teachers is considered a long-term process that includes regular opportunities and experiences planned systematically to promote growth and development in the profession" (p.11). The main point here is the fact that very few rural primary teachers have not been involved in the professional development strategies launched by MEN because these programs have been focused specifically on English language teachers. Studies conducted by Cárdenas and Chaves (2013), Cadavid et al. (2004), and González and Montoya (2010) demonstrated that the most part of primary teachers could not have access to MEN's initiatives because they do not have English language teaching degrees. However, rural schools have a huge potential and opportunities to foster not only the English language but also other skills such as language development, learning and teaching, evaluation procedures, research and technology incorporation, leadership, and problem solving. A primary teacher requires a special professional development program because of the multiple challenges that a classroom full of children faces. There are innumerable challenges in a classroom, class

size, students' background, the poor living situation of students, bad physical conditions of schools, reduction in the number of didactic materials, etc. Moreover, Bonilla Medina and Cruz Arcila (2014) showed that:

The cultural reality lived by students in rural areas differs from the teachers' view and does not show them a possible goal that includes the use of a foreign language. Within the classroom interactions, a struggle for the importance of the language comes into play. On the one hand, teachers adopt a defensive view of the language as a life goal. On the other hand, rural students mainly have an ate ambition of fulfilling a personal goal—finishing their secondary studies—and not a professional one. (p. 123)

From that perspective, primary teachers need to understand students' needs, interests, and skills to optimize learning styles under those conditions. There is a widespread agreement of the multiple's advantages of the incorporation of professional development for teachers. Indeed, policy makers are forced to reinforce teacher's professional competencies to provide quality education for students to reach academic success. Providing primary teachers with opportunities to expand their knowledge in pedagogy, content areas, and in this case, English is essential to improve teacher's motivations, commitment, and student's performance in class.

Another important insight to have in mind is the process of reflection that teachers should do in trying to improve their professional practices due to the multiple benefits that being critical of oneself has. Teachers need an ongoing set of activities to reflect upon their teaching practices to assure an effective teaching instruction. According to Olaya Mesa (2018), "In this process of reflection teachers may start creating their teaching materials and transforming their classroom into possible research projects" (p. 157). It means primary teachers can take advantage of the findings they encounter during their classes to make projects that foster the language process acquisition of the learners.

### ***Teacher's Perceptions and Attitudes***

Many types of research support the importance of analyzing teacher's attitudes and perceptions because they are connected to student's performance and motivation to learn a language, and it would become an essential part of designing a professional development program for primary teachers. Pickens (2005) mentioned, "Attitudes are a complex combination of things we tend to call personality, beliefs, values, behaviors, and motivations" (p. 44). Attitudes help us see how teachers act towards certain events or phenomena. When researchers talk about teacher's attitudes it refers to their behaviors in a classroom not only towards teaching but also towards students and colleagues.

Ahen (2009) stated that "Perception involved more process of thinking as a result of the information received from the sensory systems regards certain thing or events. It is the output

process where the judgments or beliefs were produced by an individual and it influenced the way they think and feel” (p. 11). At this point, prior knowledge and experiences construct meaningful information that plays an important role in the perception process. However, people’s perceptions are sometimes far from reality.

Through research exploration on professional development programs for teachers and their attitudes and perceptions on language education, the characteristics of what an effective teacher should have appeared as an important component of their perceptions of education to improve the quality of their teaching. According to Mullock (2003) “having positive relationships with students, and the majority of comments revolved around the teacher taking a personal interest in each student, knowing their strengths and weaknesses, interests, needs and expectations, and being empathetic towards them” (p. 14). It can be inferred that the perceptions of teachers towards students are a vital element of the way teacher’s performance and motivation in class.

In the success of any professional development activity, having a deep understanding of where teacher’s attitudes, perceptions, and experiences come from is essential. Several factors influence teacher’s actions in a classroom: class size, physical, and technological resources, student’s background, teacher’s motivations, relationships with parents and administrators, etc. Those factors are crucial to be reflected in bilingual policies directed to primary teachers because the teaching conditions are quite different from secondary or higher education.

Múnera et al. (2004) developed research called “Elementary English Language Instruction: Colombian Teachers’ Classroom Practices”. This study focused that “Public school teachers consider themselves lacking an adequate level of proficiency in English, background knowledge of the subject matter and previous training” (p. 38). This study shows the reality that rural primary teachers feel about themselves and the fact that movement policies must be made through a reflective perspective allowing the participation of the teachers. They also suggested that “In Colombia, it is important for elementary school English teachers and policymakers to gain an understanding of our reality if we are to attend our real needs and the specific challenges of teaching English as a foreign language in elementary public schools”(p. 45).

Correa and González Moncada (2016), Colombian researchers, provide a critical overview of the bilingualism programs that the Colombian government has launched since 2004. They presented a series of conclusions and recommendations for language policy design and implementation in Colombia such as “to hire English licensed teachers for primary schools and pay them fair wages to incentivize them to stay; to design PD programs that have coverage, articulation, continuity, and appropriate contents; to provide teachers with sufficient physical and technological resources, smaller classes, and more time of instruction” (p. 18). This study focused on the challenges primary teachers have faced along

with the implementation of bilingual policies. Among the challenges they mentioned: lack of enough teachers prepared to teach English in primary schools, poor design of PD programs, lack of opportunities for primary school teachers to attend the PD courses, disarticulation, and discontinuity, inappropriate content, scarce physical and technological resources, large classes, insufficient time of instruction per week, students' lack of motivation to learn English. This study revealed the need to provide primary teachers with real opportunities to learn the language and also learn how to teach it. Correa and González Moncada (2016) concluded: "to design its policies based on local needs, taking into account contextual and historical factors, with the agreement of all stakeholders, using local knowledge and expertise, using responsive materials, and employing accountability measures that go beyond standardizing tests" (p. 18). Thus, the real conditions of rural students and the impact that learning a language would bring to their lives are aspects to consider.

Mora et al. (2019) critically analyzed bilingualism policies in Colombia highlighting that there is a lack of knowledge and reorganization of curricula. They proposed the inclusion of cultural competences in the language learning process to make meaningful contributions to the Colombian cultural diversity. Further, Morales-Llano (2022) conducted a literature review on the bilingualism policies in Colombia. This research depicted three main perspectives: First, the structural in which a textual analysis of the regulations the government has launched and executed in terms of learning English. Second, Colombian academics have focused their critical discourse analysis of the bilingualism policies on "the social inequalities, in addition to endangering the use of minority languages" (p. 214). Third, the theoretical analysis based on the sociocultural perspectives of those who implement and interpret directly the MEN policies which are not aligned to the real needs of the communities.

Regarding the above, the teaching profession has a social and moral responsibility with rural young students. Primary teacher's perceptions and attitudes influence student's performance in the classroom, attitudes, and motivation to learn. Furthermore, professional development programs should be directed to this population with a focus on different methodologies, methods, didactic, reflection, and support of administrators including local secretaries. Teachers have a significant role in developing and enhancing learning a language more actively and dynamically.

## Method

### *Participants*

At the beginning of the project the target population of this study intended to include all classroom teachers serving at 1-5 grade levels in rural schools. However, a participatory survey was implemented at the end of the year 2019 in five rural schools near Sogamoso.

Results showed that for accessibility and disposition to participate in a project of this nature, only ten primary teachers from a rural school in Firavitoba town accepted to get in. There are eight females and two males. Six of them are around 40-60 years old. Two of them are already retired and the other Two are around 30-40 years old. None of these teachers have English language preparation, which means, their majors are in social sciences, Spanish, biology, math, physical education, and the rest of them were primary education graduated teachers. Each of them is a headteacher of a level, and they oversee teaching English at that level too. They have never been trained in teaching English, didactics, pedagogy, and assessment. They have never participated in any of the MEN bilingual programs. However, they are willing to improve not only their English language proficiency level but also their knowledge in pedagogy through the future professional development program implementation.

### ***Context***

The implementation of this project took place in a rural public school in Firavitoba town. It is a small school five kilometers away from the town. This school trains students in the morning. In the afternoon, most of the students dedicate their free time to activities related to farming, milking cows, livestock, onion, and potato crops. The conditions of the school are very low; the infrastructure is old and humid. This school is only equipped with classrooms, chairs, and boards. The parents are primarily peasants and belong to a lower socioeconomic status.

### ***Type of Research***

This qualitative research is based on the exploratory paradigm. Burns and Groove (2001) defined exploratory research “as research conducted to gain new insights, discover new ideas, and for increasing knowledge of the phenomenon” (p. 374). In addition to describing teachers’ attitudes and perceptions towards the incorporation of English into their teaching practices, the purpose of this study is to have a better understanding of this issue to design a professional development program that suits the real needs and interests not only of primary teachers but also to enhance English language learning of the students.

### ***Data Analysis Procedure***

All the data gathered from interviews were transcribed. Data analysis started by reading the information collected through the three instruments. We started the analysis by coloring key ideas, then we grouped and contrasted common ideas into subcategories that were named. Finally, data were reduced into broader topics and categories emerged. The information collected was analyzed using triangulation which is widely used in qualitative studies. According to Carter et al. (2014) “Triangulation also has been viewed as a qualitative

research strategy to test validity through the convergence of information from different sources” (p. 545). For the application of this technique; clearly, more attention should be paid recording what happens in each classroom when primary teachers had to teach the English language.

After that triangulation, an open content analysis was implemented to classify the data that were summarized into core categories (see results section). These core categories were supported by previous research studies. Forman and Damschroder (2007) established:

It is a generic form of data analysis in that it is comprised of a theoretical set of techniques which can be used in any qualitative inquiry in which the informational content of the data is relevant. Qualitative content analysis stands in contrast to methods that, rather than focusing on the informational content of the data, bring to bear theoretical perspectives. (p. 40)

These categories appeared as the most important factors that should be considered to design the professional development program for the population selected. The first step was the identification of the teacher’s needs. Second, establishing the foundations of the program. Third, structuring the program by setting realistic goals and objectives. Fourth, building a teacher community to receive help from other teachers and share experiences to enrich the professional practices in the classroom. Finally, implementing and evaluating the program (This professional development program will be implemented the next year for further research).

### ***Data Collection Instruments***

Data were gathered through surveys, interviews, and classroom observation.

**Surveys:** Ponto (2015) stated that “Survey research can use quantitative research strategies (e.g., Using questionnaires with numerically rated items), qualitative research strategies (e.g., using open-ended questions), or both strategies (i.e., mixed methods)” (p. 168). For this study, surveys were used to explore teacher’s attitudes and perceptions towards the incorporation of English into their teaching procedures.

**Interviews:** Fox (2009) mentioned that “The interview is an important data gathering technique involving verbal communication between the researcher and the subject. Interviews are commonly used in survey designs and exploratory and descriptive studies” (p. 5). This study used semi-structured and structured interviews to understand in what aspects teacher perceptions do and attitudes vary.

**Classroom observation:** Vidhiasi (2018) stated that “Classroom observation and research also have some methods; those are the formal experiment, stimulated recall, observation schemes, and interaction analysis. Those methods are the most common methods used by researchers who are interested in teaching and learning development” (p.

7). The method selected to use classroom observation as an instrument to collect data is stimulated recall. This method is based on what happens during a lesson. The researchers used transcripts of the class, and the teachers explain them. This type of observation was vital for this study because student's comments were allowed too.

## Findings

The coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) resulted in the development of preliminary categories, from which emerged subsequent categories that produced the core categories. Data analysis as shown in Table 1 revealed the substantial need to understand what primary teachers in Firavitoba face day to day during the English classes and how they perceive their teaching practices as is explained in the first core category "Teacher's perceptions and challenges on teaching English" and the factual need to improve not only their English language skills but also their didactic and methodological procedures to teach the language as it is developed in the second core category "expanding training opportunities".

**Table 1.** Establishment of core categories

Preliminary Categories	Categories	Core Categories
Classroom size	Training in language and teaching	Teacher's perceptions and challenges on teaching English
Insufficient preparation to teach another language	Challenges towards teaching English	Expanding training opportunities
Ineffective ways of teaching	Perceptions on students' performance	
Current policies are not helpful	Perceptions on teacher's needs	
Inadequate English level		
Lack of confidence and motivation		
Poor possibilities to improve teaching English		
Training in language teaching methods /techniques		

Preliminary Categories	Categories	Core Categories
Real challenges primary teachers face daily		
Little support by parents		
Students' performance Lack of resources		

Source: Own

### *Teacher's Perceptions and Challenges on Teaching English*

The findings presented here report on the ways primary teachers perceive the incorporation of English in their teaching practices. The first finding of the study revealed that primary teachers are worried about the number of students in English classes. Those descriptions offered by the teachers suggested that there are conditions inside classrooms that must be implemented for a better learning atmosphere. All participants agreed that large classes with 45 and 50 students and the lack of more hours of instruction is challenging. These aforementioned factors are the most highlighted difficulties they face to teach effectively not only the English class but also the others. Khan and Iqbal (2012) claimed: “that effective teaching was not possible in overcrowded classes and most of the teachers were facing instructional, discipline, physical and evaluation problems; this problem is magnified when dealing with language education, where acquisition of a foreign language is the expected outcome” (p. 162). From that perspective, it can be stated that to achieve positive learning results teachers should deal with and manage lessons using different strategies which are not familiar to them. For example, the population of this study did not know anything about language acquisition, formative assessment, task, and project-based learning, CLIL, among other strategies to include in the daily teaching practice. They focused only on grammar and vocabulary translation because they see language as a subject but not as a socio-linguistic practice for communication. From the following excerpt, the reader can appreciate a perception during the intervention.

*I have a degree in social and teaching management in the area. However, I know that there are different methodologies used in each approach. In the case of English, I don't know much about the subject, and the large number of students in the classroom makes the process difficult. (S, T5)<sup>4</sup>*

The second finding showed that current programs and standards by MEN are not helpful; this group of primary teachers has not received any training from MEN or the local secretariat of education. González Moncada and Quinchía Ortiz (2003) points out that

<sup>4</sup> Author's translation. Participant's interviews and surveys were conducted in Spanish.

teachers also face challenges such as “improving their language proficiency, being prepared to teach in diverse contexts, teaching with and without resources, implementing classroom-based research, having access to professional development, networking, and educating teacher educators” (p. 88). To elaborate on this point, it can be said that there is a need to re-structure bilingualism reforms and curricula as well as give elementary teachers more space to train not only in English but also in pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment. It means, policy makers should understand the difference in terms of socioeconomic conditions between the rural and urban areas, the ideology of rural students and their specific learning needs. Many rural parents do not even know how to read which make schooling harder for them. Bonilla Medina and Cruz-Arcilla (2014) established “Due to the fact that rural language contexts do not offer ideal conditions to learning a second language, teachers highlight the fact that very little is known about the national policies in their context and consequently progress goes more slowly than expected” (p. 128).

Another key point found during data analysis is the use of the mother tongue when teaching considering it as the only resource they have (teachers just translated the vocabulary to be learnt during the lesson; explanations, feedback, and classroom management was conducted in Spanish). Besides, the poor use of didactic strategies (teachers just used activities focused on vocabulary from websites) to foster oral and speaking production, and the lack of extra training to foster their pedagogical practices in the classroom. In this regard, the following quotes pinpointed:

*I have found a lot of material on the internet on topics in English. The problem is that I don't know how to apply it or use it in class. (S-T1)*

*I try not to focus too much on grammatical issues, because I don't know much about the subject and it's not my background. Instead, I translate the vocabulary that I am going to teach them about the topic that we are going to work on. (I, T4)*

*The teacher focuses on teaching vocabulary. It seems there is a lack of information about how to pronounce certain words. Likewise, there are some words with spelling mistakes. (CO)*

*With Beautiful Teacher*

The quotations above show how teachers combined vocabulary (translation) and Spanish explanations and directions as the only strategy they know to teach a subject they were not prepared for. Basically, it indicates the need for training on methods and methodologies to teach the English language.

The third finding showed little support from school's administrative staff. The ten teachers indicated insufficient equipment and facilities to support the teaching practice. There are not computers for students or teachers, there are not TV sets or video beams, there is not a place to make copies, there is no Wi-Fi, and the library is too small with no updated

books. The participants also emphasized that funding is needed to obtain updated teaching books and didactic and digital material. Braslavsky (2018) affirmed, “There is no educational quality without an environment rich in materials that can be used as learning materials” (p. 95). Besides lacking material, inevitably and unfortunately, teachers felt guilty for student’s performance making feel more frustration as educators. A teacher said during the interview:

*The problem is that the government does not hire English teachers because we don’t have the resources, the material, or the training to give good English classes. I studied to be a social teacher not to teach English, that is why students do not have a good level and their results are bad. I felt anxious, it is not motivating to teach something you don’t know. (I, T4).*

Lastly but no less, confidence and motivation appeared as the most significant perception; teachers know they have insufficient training to teach English so their attitude and frustration to teach without enough knowledge affects students` development too.

*I felt terrible when I must teach the class. I felt boring, frustrated because I am not an English teacher. Sometimes I just gave them an image to color because I don’t know what else to do. (I, T7)*

Additionally, work satisfaction highly influences teaching performance inside the classroom. According to Erkaya (2013):

What would increase the teachers’ motivation the most would be their colleagues; that is to say, what they needed was supportive colleagues, colleagues that would be there for them when they needed them, that would guide them if they needed guidance that would work with them when and if necessary. Moving to the main campus (working conditions) would also boost their motivation. (p. 59)

Considering this, it can be stated that the feeling of support by colleagues, parents, and administrators, the feeling of playing an important role among the academic community, and taking responsibilities become a vital factor to enhance teacher’s development and motivation in their daily teaching practice.

### ***Expanding Training Opportunities***

Surveys, interviews, and observations aided the identification of primary teacher’s needs. Data revealed a high interest in further qualification in English language didactics as well as English language training. Linked to the previous core category the possibilities to teach English and improvement of techniques or methods to facilitate and enhance the teaching procedures in rural contexts is highly needed. Class observations and interviews indicated the lack of confidence to teach English. However, the participants are aware of their interests, needs, and weaknesses when trying to teach the language. They are interested in learning English and taking some certifications to start communicating in English during their classes. They claim the local government to equip the institution with WiFi and computers

so their students can also foster the ICT skills. They also accept that sometimes they become conformist because they understand the difficult conditions of their students. For instance, in an interview a teacher said:

*I would like there to be training not only for the fact of orienting the language well, but also for complementing it with my area of knowledge, and thus being able to promote interdisciplinarity (I, T2)*

Furthermore, teachers also explained the poor support given by the local secretary to overcome the low English level in the department, especially in this rural context. In most cases, primary teachers do not have resources that could contribute to a significant improvement in the classroom.

*The presence and support of secretaries or the MEN itself with bilingualism projects or immersions that facilitate the process would be important. Unfortunately, the bilingualism programs that have been created have been focused on secondary education and primary education has been left aside, even more so in the rural sector. (S, T3)*

*It is paramount to have enough sources (material, books, audios) and even the presence of English teachers to improve speaking and listening skills (CO)*

At this point, rural education needs support in the Colombian education system and the participants affirmed that an urgent pedagogical implementation is needed not only for English purposes but also to promote a meaningful and contextualized advancement of educational goals. Besides that, “the complex economic situation experienced by some families in Colombia requires that minors also participate in the production chain in many cases” (Soler et al. 2019; p. 68). It means a way of making some money to survive. In addition, violence, lack of job opportunities, and inadequate infrastructure of schools make rural areas a difficult setting to work on. Basically, those areas need improvement and support not only by MEN but also by academics, politicians, and the community in general.

During class observations, technology also appeared as a significant opportunity to expand. Throughout online sessions, teachers showed enthusiasm to teach. However, it was evident the lack of expertise in using online tools as a complementary teaching strategy. 50% of the teachers did not know how to share a video, download worksheets, or edit a Microsoft Word and Adobe PDF document. Although technology is widely used for teaching purposes, it needs training to select appropriate material and resources to implement with learners. This can be evident in the following extract where a teacher affirmed:

*I believe that the use of technologies with software specialized in language learning would help us to learn ourselves and thus be able to better guide the area and would even help us create evaluation strategies. (S, T7).*

In sum, participants agreed that the lack of a pedagogical intervention based on what they need and their context of teaching is affecting not only their motivation to work and the students' performance in class but also the evaluation process of their school.

## Conclusions

The present study attempted to find primary teachers' perceptions and attitudes of primary teachers towards the fact that they must teach English without having enough preparation. Teachers' perceptions and attitudes profoundly influence their teaching practices. For instance, Coloring activities were done when teachers felt frustrated. In contrast when they feel confident and motivated in a topic, optimal classes were addressed. The study discovered that most primary teachers face frustration because of the lack of resources, class size, and lack of parents' support, English teaching training and inadequate curriculum. Consequently, low students' performance in class. Besides, the sense of inequality to bridge the gap between the private and public sector is notorious. Rural teachers should be engaged to construct local policies based on the rural scenario.

The participants understand that the implementation of bilingual policies in rural context go slow because of the socioeconomic and geographic conditions, cultural believes among others. As it was found in this study, teaching in rural areas must be re-considered and re oriented understanding each context needs. Teachers in rural areas do not have access to audio materials and those teachers do not often use English in class, both of which result in a lack of development of students' listening and speaking skills. Self-esteem and self-realization and motivation appeared as a paramount factor that affects teacher's performance which in turn is related to student's motivation and achievement in the English language. A constant dialogue among the local government plays a key role in achieving MEN's expectations.

MEN, local secretariats, and higher education institutions must provide teachers with opportunities to participate in professional development projects to foster not only language but also language teaching didactics, the incorporation of ICT skills, assessment, the inclusion of critical pedagogy, classroom research and collaborative support related to teaching the language in rural areas. If teacher learning and professional development are to be supported in rural schools, particularly in Boyacá, then in-school support should be built into structures that continuously and purposefully bring teachers together to enhance their professional development. To this regard, the secretariats of education supported by MEN should invest in rural public schools, train teachers regularly, provide rural families and students with academic and emotional support, and design improvement plans annually to reach the academic standards established by MEN.

The limitations of this study relate to the nature that observations, interviews, and surveys were applied online because of COVID 19 pandemic. On the other hand, although teachers were committed to participating, they always dealt with time, connection, and motivation issues. However, this study hopes to inform participants on a future suitable professional development program that will be implemented with them.

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## **The Issue of Readability in the Chilean EFL Textbook**

### **El Problema de la Lecturabilidad en el Texto Escolar de ILE Chileno**

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#### **Abstract**

At the end of high school in Chile, it is expected that students achieve a B1 English language proficiency level. In the present article, we measure the level of readability of the texts used in the new EFL Chilean textbook and compare it with the readability level of the texts used in the Cambridge B1 preliminary exam to check its appropriacy. The results reveal that, even though the classic readability indices show a similar level of difficulty in the texts, the index RDL2, which is specific for second language learning, shows that there is a statistically significant difference. This finding indicates that the texts in the Chilean EFL textbook are more difficult to read than the ones students are supposed to read. Implications at a local and international level are then shared.

*Keywords:* ESL, readability, reading comprehension, textbook

#### **Resumen**

Al finalizar la enseñanza media, se espera que los estudiantes chilenos alcancen un nivel B1 de competencia en inglés. En el presente artículo medimos el nivel de lecturabilidad de los textos usados en el libro escolar de ILE y los comparamos con el nivel de lecturabilidad de los textos B1 usados en el examen *B1 Preliminary de Cambridge* para confirmar su pertinencia. Los resultados revelan que aun cuando los índices clásicos muestran un nivel similar de dificultad, el índice RDL2, específico para el aprendizaje de segundas lenguas, muestra una diferencia estadísticamente significativa. Este hallazgo indica que los textos usados en el contexto de ILE chileno están por sobre el nivel de dificultad del

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que se supone los estudiantes deberían leer. Finalmente, se comparten las implicancias a nivel local e internacional de estos hallazgos.

*Palabras clave:* ILE, lecturabilidad, comprensión lectora, texto escolar

## Introduction

The globalized world requires citizens able to communicate in oral and written form with each other. One of the main ways in which people nowadays interact with the world is by means of reading since it helps people access the general as well as specific knowledge in the current society (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009; Oxford, 2017). To participate in the global conversation and thus be part of this modern world, several countries have created policies that favor actions which they believe may have a positive impact on the development of world citizens. Chile has not been the exception (Yilorm, 2016). In fact, in the case of Chile, English language learning has gained significant relevance in the last couple of decades which has resulted in initiatives such as the program ‘English Opens Doors’ whose main purpose has been to promote the professional development of Chilean EFL teachers (British Council, 2015). In addition, the Ministry of Education has worked on aligning the schools’ standards with the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR): at the end of primary education students should reach an A2 proficiency level while at the end of high school students should reach a B1 proficiency level of English (Gobierno de Chile, 2014).

One of the main problems in Chile is the distribution of wealth, which generates inequality in different areas of life. One of them is education (Mieres-Brevis, 2020; OECD, 2021). In Chile, there are currently three types of schools: private, subsidized, and public. Private schools are financed by private entities and request high monthly fees from parents; thus, they tend to be the choice for high-income families. Subsidized schools are partially financed by the government and mainly run by religious congregations or foundations; these schools are more accessible to parents than private schools. Finally, public schools, which are run by the government, are for free. These schools have shown to cater to different kinds of population and get different results in terms of learning. Private schools significantly outperform subsidized as well as public schools (Carrasco-Bahamonde & Carrasco-Bahamonde, 2018). Solving this inequality has been one of the main concerns of different Chilean governments (Glas, 2008). For example, in the case of English language learning, to bridge the gap between private and government funded schools, the Ministry of Education created the English Opens Doors Program in 2004. This program oversees standards for English language learning as well as develops strategies and initiatives that contribute to EFL teachers working in government funded schools.

Despite government efforts, standardized national evaluations of EFL have consistently showed that private schools score significantly higher than subsidized and public schools (Toledo-Sandoval & González-Hermosilla, 2016). For example, in 2012, the national standardized EFL exam for 11<sup>th</sup>-grade students showed that whereas 81% of students from private schools got the expected results, only 15% from partially governmentally financed schools and barely 7% of students from public schools did (Quality Education Agency, 2012). In 2014, the gap between students of low and high socioeconomic status kept on showing this tendency since 88.6% of students of low socioeconomic status achieved a proficiency level lower than A1. On the other hand, in the case of high socioeconomic status, only 4.1% did not achieve an A1 proficiency level (Quality Education Agency, 2015). In 2017, the results were similar. Only 9% of low socio-economic status students achieved the expected standard in contrast with high socioeconomic status students who achieved the standard in an 85% of cases (Quality Education Agency, 2018). During the pandemic, national evaluations have not been carried out as usual, but considering the general results, it is likely that this difference is still present or made even bigger.

A pedagogical resource of particular importance in public education in Chile is the textbook. The textbook is understood in the corresponding literature as a fundamental venue of pedagogic discourse which helps students get familiar with the contents of the subjects covered in a school curriculum (Bernstein, 1990; Ibáñez et al., 2019). From a systemic functional linguistics perspective, this is viewed as a macro-genre whose main purpose is to develop both declarative and procedural knowledge relevant to different knowledge domains (Martin & Rose, 2008; Rose, 2014). Considering the strategic importance of the school textbook in students' learning, the Chilean government makes the yearly effort to provide all students with one textbook for each of their subjects in governmentally financed schools. These textbooks are exclusively produced for these types of schools and their commercialization is absolutely forbidden.

Although this pedagogical resource could be one of the key elements to bridging the gap between private and public/subsidized schools, little is known about the effectiveness of this material in the Chilean classroom, and the few studies conducted appear to question its appropriacy from the teachers' perspective (Díaz Larenas et al., 2015; Lizasoain & Vargas Mutizabal, 2023). To complement these findings related to perceptions, the present study seeks to explore the school textbook from a textual perspective, specifically, the aim of this study is to compare the level of readability of the texts used in the reading comprehension sections of the textbook provided by the Ministry of Education for 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade with the level of readability of the texts encountered in B1 exams. The findings of this study should contribute to the incipient discussion on the appropriacy of the EFL textbooks distributed by the Ministry of Education as well as how the teacher can adapt them to their lessons.

## Literature Review

### *Traditional Readability Formulas*

Easily put, readability is the degree of difficulty with which a text can be read and understood (Campos et al., 2014). Since the inception of the concept, one of the main concerns has been to identify the textual features that tend to make readers struggle with building meaning from texts. Zamanian and Heydari (2012) indicate multiple benefits of readability formulas such as the capacity to help textbook writers lower the difficulty of the material they design and the predictive power they have over finding out potential difficulties readers could face ahead of time. Despite the importance of these advantages, one application still tends to be deemed as the most relevant: text simplification with pedagogical purposes. That is, matching the difficulty of a text with a reader of a particular level. Crossley et al. (2017) indicate that this is an effective way to address the scaffolding of literacy challenges since it helps make texts accessible to students that otherwise would not be able to read and understand a particular material.

To do this matching as objectively as possible, readability formulas for texts written in English have been designed since the first half of the twentieth century. A readability formula is an equation whose main purpose is to estimate the difficulty level of a text objectively. To this date, more than two hundred readability formulas have been created (Crossley et al., 2017). Nonetheless, a selected few are used on a regular basis. These are characterized by usually considering surface text level variables, such as the number of words or the length of a sentence. These formulas are usually referred to as ‘traditional’ readability formulas (Crossley et al., 2011, 2017; McNamara et al., 2014). Some of the most famous traditional readability formulas are Flesh Reading Ease (Flesch, 1943, 1948), Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (Kincaid et al., 1975), and Dale-Chall (Dale & Chall, 1948).

Flesch (1948) presented a review of a previous formula he had designed (Flesch, 1943) as well as material for its application and interpretation. This revised version is still widely used and incorporated in websites for readability analysis and even in Microsoft Word. Flesch Reading Ease formula took into consideration the following two elements for the readability formula equation: word length ( $wl$ ) and sentence length ( $sl$ ):  $RE$  (reading ease) =  $206.835 - 846w/l - 1015s/l$ . The interpretation of the result of this formula requires the use of an interpretation table that goes from 0 to 100. The lower scores indicate a higher degree of text difficulty.

Kincaid et al. (1975) revisited this formula and analyzed its application to readability texts used in the US Navy. After conducting a study with 531 subjects, the researchers concluded that a new formula could be used to approximate the text difficulty to grade levels in a direct manner.

GL (grade level) =  $0.4 (\text{words/sentence}) + 12 (\text{syllables/word}) - 16$ . Even though this formula was generated for the US Navy personnel, it is still implemented in different studies that have expanded the scope of its application to EFL (Brown et al., 2012; Lin, 2010).

A third traditional readability formula is that of Dale and Chall (1948). These researchers designed a formula based on two counts which were average sentence length and number of unfamiliar words. They operationalized unfamiliar words as those that were outside of the Dale list of 3000 familiar words. In their instructional article, the authors explain step by step how to calculate the readability of a text. In addition, the authors include a table that helps get grade-levels based on the raw scores the formula gives.

As it can be noticed, these three traditional readability formulas share in their essence the consideration that surface text features related to words (number/length/familiarity), syllables (number per word/sentence), and sentences (number/length) were considered the main deciding factors when determining text difficulty.

More recently, researchers dedicated to the study of readability formulas have advocated for the inclusion of variables that go beyond the surface text level. One of the main instruments of easy access to measure different indices that may impact on text difficulty is Coh-Metrix (Crossley et al., 2008). Coh-Metrix is a discourse technology that uses theory from psycholinguistics and cognitive accounts of text processing to deliver indices that explain the difficulty of a text. To do this, this computational tool makes use of computational linguistic resources such as Part of Speech tagging, parsers, lexicons, and latent semantic analysis (LSA). 106 are the indices that Coh-Metrix offers to examine the readability of a text. These indices include classic standards of readability such as number of words and number of sentences, but also delivers other types of indices such as content word overlap and adjacent sentence similarity (McNamara et al., 2014). This tool has been used to estimate text difficulty level not only in education (Crossley et al., 2017) but also in other areas such as health (Wolfe et al., 2022).

### ***Readability Formulas in EFL/ESL***

In the case of EFL, some researchers have investigated the connection between traditional readability formulas and the ways in which readability is assessed in EFL/ESL contexts (Brown, 1998; Crossley et al., 2008; Greenfield, 1999; Hamsik, 1984). Like what happens with most traditional readability formulas, the concern around EFL/ESL studies has been with surface level text indices that appear to impact the difficulty of the students' reading experience. This concern has translated into the application of traditional reading formulas with EFL/ESL readers.

In a seminal study in SLA, Hamsik (1984) sought to determine if the readability formulas Flesch, Dale-Chall, Fry Graph, and Lorge measured text readability for ESL students in a

similar way they did with native speakers. As a measure for reading comprehension, the researcher used the Miller-Coleman Readability Scale whose results then they correlated to the readability formula results of those passages. The findings of the study confirmed that there was a correlation between the results of the cloze scores and the readability formulas scores. That is, the four readability formulas could be said to measure the difficulty of the texts appropriately for ESL students. Even though these findings were published years ago in a dissertation, they are still cited and sometimes taken for granted (Maarof, 2016). Conversely, other researchers have questioned them due to the small size of the sample (Crossley et al., 2008; Greenfield, 1999).

Brown's (1998) article on the design of a readability index for EFL learners can be considered one of the pioneering works on specific formulas designed for EFL learners. The researcher tested the application of traditional readability formulas by using cloze procedures on fifty library passages which were then read by 2300 Japanese EFL students. The results of this study showed minor correlations which indicated traditional readability formulas, such as Flesch and Flesch-Kincaid, were not appropriate for EFL learners. To respond to this dilemma, the author developed an L2 readability measure that considered the average number of syllables per sentence, the average passage frequency, the percentage of words over seven letters long, and the percent of function words present in the text. This measure is known as Brown's EFL Readability Index. The following diagram shows the formula (Zamanian & Heydari, 2012):

$$\begin{array}{r}
 \hline
 38.7469 \\
 + (.7823 \times \text{syllable/sentence}) \\
 + (-126.1770 \times \text{passage frequency}) \\
 + (1.2878 \times \text{percent long words}) \\
 + (.7596 \times \text{percent function words}) \\
 \hline
 \end{array}$$

Another similar research effort was that of Greenfield (1999) who investigated the validity of the readability formulas of Flesch, Flesch-Kincaid, Coleman-Liau, and Dale-Chall with ESL Japanese students. The task used in this study was cloze testing following Bormuth's (1971) readability study. The difficulty of the passages was compared with the difficulty measured by each of the traditional formulas selected. The Pearson correlations between traditional formulas and cloze scores ranged from 0.6 to 0.86. These results indicated that the traditional formulas were probably valid for Japanese EFL students. To explain the difference with Brown's (1998) results, the author has mentioned that Brown's selected texts lacked variety in terms of difficulty, thus, the readability formulas were not able to discriminate as they were intended to (Greenfield, 2004). Despite the positive results, the author designs an improved, easy to use readability formula, the Miyazaki Index. The Miyazaki EFL Readability

Index is as follows (Zamanian & Heydari, 2012), 164.935- (18.792 x letters per word) – (1.916 x words per sentence).

More recently, another formula for ESL has been designed: the RDL2 index. The RDL2 index considers content word overlap, adjacent sentence syntactic similarity, and word frequency (Crossley et al., 2008, 2011). The formula was designed using a similar procedure than the one used by Greenfield (1999) but shows a higher correlation (0.93):

$$\begin{array}{r} \hline -45.032 \quad + (52.230 \times \text{CRFCWO1}) \\ \quad \quad \quad + (61.306 \times \text{SYNSTRUT}) \\ \quad \quad \quad + (22.205 \times \text{WRDFRWQmc}) \\ \hline \end{array}$$

The main difference and advantage of this formula lies on the fact that it goes beyond surface level variables of the text, such as number of words or sentences. Specifically, it also considers features related to text cohesion, which has been a characteristic given prominence to in psycholinguistics as well as in cognitive models of reading that explain reading comprehension. Crossley et al. (2011) examined if this formula classified text level in a better way than traditional formulas. The findings of their study showed that the RDL2 index outperforms traditional readability formulas in terms of the degree of accuracy with which it predicts text difficulty.

These readability formulas have been used to assess text difficulty for ESL/EFL learners in recent years. Carcamo (2020) used traditional as well as the RDL2 index to measure the readability of the texts included in the official Chilean EFL textbooks that the Ministry of Education distributed in subsidized and public schools. The main objective of this study was to determine if there was a progression in terms of text level during the four years of high school. The results of this study revealed that there was not a clear progression in terms of difficulty in the text used. In fact, the average of the text difficulty in second and fourth year of high schools was not statistically significant. Some of the studies conducted in other countries have used the RDL2 index to measure text difficulty and compare it to other variables such as student's perception (Hakim et al., 2021), analysis of the readability of the textbooks used to teach preservice EFL teachers (Odo, 2018), and evaluation of the quality of the material used to prepare students for high college entrance examinations (Cheng & Chang, 2022).

All in all, research focused on EFL textbooks in Chile is quite limited. In fact, even though research in Chile has increased, little to none of it has centered on this object of study. This is quite alarming considering that EFL teachers in Chilean public and subsidized schools appear to be dissatisfied with the material provided by the Ministry of Education (Lizasoain & Vargas Mutizabal, 2023). To understand in further depth why this may happen, it is necessary to examine the EFL textbook provided by the Ministry of Education.

## Method

### *Research Design*

The current study, which was conducted in the first half of 2022, takes a quantitative approach to textbook analysis focusing on the pedagogical value of the material provided to the students (Nicholls, 2003). Pedagogical value is understood in this research as whether the material is appropriate to the expected standard the Ministry of Education has set and therefore offers useful exposure to the foreign language being learned. In the case of this study, students that finish high school in Chile are expected to be at a B1 English language proficiency level. Consequently, the textbook should take into consideration texts of said difficulty.

### *Corpus*

The compiled corpus consisted of all the texts used in the reading comprehension sections of the textbook *Get Real*, which was specifically designed to be used in the last two years of high school in public and subsidized schools of the country. It is worth mentioning that this textbook is provided to all the schools financed by the state, so that all EFL teachers and students have access to it. The textbook consists of eight units. Each unit has sections that consider reading comprehension, listening comprehension, project work, language focus, and literature in a relatively consistent manner. Regarding reading comprehension, every unit has two reading comprehension sections, except for Unit 1 which has three. This resulted in 17 texts that were part of the corpus. To create the B1 corpus, we opted for the use of B1 preliminary exam booklets, which were edited by Cambridge University Press (2019, 2020), the official source of this international exam.

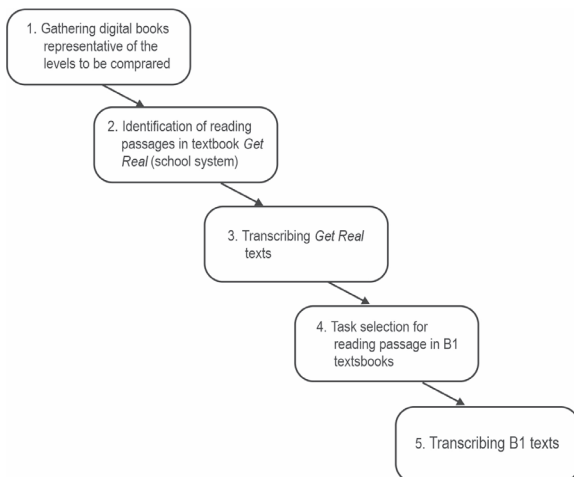
### *Procedure*

We started by examining the textbook *Get Real* as to identify all the reading sections included in it. A reading section was classified as one that was preceded by a pre-reading and followed by a post-reading. Then, each one of the reading passages was typed onto a separate document.

In the case of the selection of the B1 texts, the process was less straightforward due to the reading exam having six parts. To decide which task out of the six, we followed two principles: (1) That the text was completely presented in the activity (not a gapped text) and (2) that the texts were like the ones identified in the EFL textbook. The narrowing down process, consequently, had the following steps.

1. Part 4, Part 5, and Part 6 were ruled out because they presented the reader with gapped texts. Therefore, to assess text readability, one would have to do the exercise, complete them, and then conduct the analysis. Parts 5 and 6, in fact, go beyond the scope of reading comprehension and tap on grammatical competence. These two tasks used to be included as part of the Use of English exam in previous equivalent versions of this exam for this reason.
2. Part 1 and Part 2 presented the reader with very short texts, such as short descriptions and warning signs. Therefore, they were also ruled out.
3. Part 3 resulted in being the most logical option because it presented the reader with (a) a complete text, (b) it complied with the requirement of visual similarity. Additionally, the task itself was appropriate in terms of what measured with what the school curriculum objectives aim at (e.g., understand specific details, understand global meaning, identify author's attitudes and opinions, and infer information).

Specifically, nine texts corresponding to Part 3 of different exams were typed onto a separate document for analysis. The number was lower than the one extracted from the *Get Real* text because of the difficulty accessing more booklets of the latest versions of this exam, but it presents no reliability issue for the analysis because of all the measures Cambridge takes to control the equivalence in terms of complexity of the texts used in their official booklets as well as exams. Suffice to say, the size of the corpus is in line with the ones compiled in previous studies (Carcamo, 2020; Gupta, 2013; Leander, 2016; Tabatabaei & Bagheri, 2013). Figure 1 displays visually the procedure followed.



**Figure 1.** Procedure for the selection of texts

For the data analysis of the readability of the text, Coh-Metrix was used. This is an online tool which has been designed to gauge the difficulty level of written texts in an objective manner (McNamara et al., 2014). We used three indices to measure the text readability of each text. These indices were Flesch Reading Ease (FRE), Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (FKGL), and RDL2. The first two are traditional readability formulas whereas the latter one is a readability index designed to gauge the difficulty a text can have for second-language texts.

## Results

We started by conducting descriptive statistics over two general indicators of readability: number of words and number of sentences.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics number of word number and sentence number

	Grade	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean
Number of sentences	ChilTbook	17	38,6471	16,23246	3,93695
	B1Tbook	9	24,6667	4,38748	1,46249
Number of words	ChilTbook	17	523,5882	117,48248	28,49369
	B1Tbook	9	385,1111	15,88588	5,29529

Table 1 displays information about the mean in terms of number of words and sentences for the Chilean EFL textbook (ChilTbook) and the texts from the B1 Preliminary (B1Tbook). It is immediately noticeable that the average length of the texts in the Chilean textbook exceed the length of the average of those included in the B1 Preliminary. To ensure that this difference was statistically significant, we proceeded to check the normality assumption using the Shapiro-Wilk test. After confirming the assumption was not violated, we conducted an Independent Samples T-Test.

As it can be observed in Table 2, there is a statistically significant difference in both initial indicators: number of words ( $p=.008$ ) and number of sentences ( $p=.002$ ). Now that we had an initial understanding of overall difference between the selected texts, we proceeded to examine readability indices. We conducted descriptive statistics to examine the overall mean in terms of text difficulty for each group of texts: the ones in the Chilean textbook *Get Real* and the ones in the *B1 Preliminary* booklets.

**Table 2.** Independent Samples T-Test for word number and sentence number

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Standard Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Number of sentences	8,468	,008	2,513	24	,019	13,98039	5,56250	2,49995	25,46083
			3,329	19,960	,003	13,98039	4,19982	5,21861	22,74217
Number of words	12,801	,002	3,486	24	,002	138,47712	39,72323	56,49240	220,46185
			4,778	17,084	,000	138,47712	28,98155	77,35416	199,60009

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics of readability scores

	Grade	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean
FleschRE	ChilTbook	17	66,1917	10,93578	2,65232
	B1Tbook	9	75,0662	6,90661	2,30220
FleshKin	ChilTbook	17	7,6599	1,93003	,46810
	B1Tbook	9	6,7647	1,46995	,48998
RDL2	ChilTbook	17	17,2481	7,04688	1,70912
	B1Tbook	9	20,1014	2,45363	,81788

At first glance, it can be noticed that there are different means for each of the three indices. Whereas the Flesch Reading Ease and the RDL2 index show a higher score for B1 texts, the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Index shows the opposite. This is because whereas in the case of the Flesch-Kincaid index the difficulty of the text increases with the scores, the other two indices work on an opposite direction, thus, texts are more difficult to read when their scores are lower. Consequently, it can be asserted that all three scores show the same tendency that is that the EFL Chilean textbook texts have a higher degree of difficulty than the texts representative of the B1 Preliminary exam.

Before conducting inferential statistics tests, we checked the normality assumption with the Shapiro-Wilk test.

**Table 4.** Normality test

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
FleschRE	,956	26	,312
FleshKin	,954	26	,290
RDL2	,968	26	,575

Table 4 shows that all three readability mean scores complied with the normality assumption. We proceeded to conduct three Independent-Samples T-Test to check if there was a statistically significant difference when looking at the three readability formula indices.

Table 5. Independent-Samples T-tests

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Standard Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
FleschRE	Equal variances assumed	2,170	,154	-2,201	24	,038	-8,87452	4,03119	-17,19448	-5,54555
	Equal variances not assumed			-2,527	23,038	,019	-8,87452	3,51211	-16,13921	-1,60982
FleshKin	Equal variances assumed	1,112	,302	1,213	24	,237	,89522	,73784	-,62760	2,41804
	Equal variances not assumed			1,321	20,661	,201	,89522	,67765	-,51543	2,30587
RDL2	Equal variances assumed	4,644	,041	-1,168	24	,254	-2,85339	2,44271	-7,89488	2,18811
	Equal variances not assumed			-1,506	21,873	,146	-2,85339	1,89473	-6,78414	1,07737

When examining the results shown in Table 5, it is noticeable that not all three readability formulas reveal the same. Whereas the Flesch Reading Ease and the Flesch-Kincaid formulas show no statistically significant difference, the RDL2 shows the opposite ( $p < .05$ ). In other words, although traditional formulas state that there is no statistically significant difference between the readability level of the texts in both groups, the RDL2 index, which is specifically designed for ESL learners, shows that the texts in the textbook *Get Real* are indeed more difficult than those in the B1 Preliminary booklets. To estimate the effect size, we made use of the software *G\*Power 3.1.9.4* (Faul et al., 2009). The results showed a medium effect size ( $d = 0.58$ ) for the difference perceived with the RDL2 index.

## Discussion

School textbooks are one of the most important pedagogical resources in the ESL classroom (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994); however, if the text is not understandable and appropriate for the students, language acquisition might not occur (Hakim et al., 2021). This is one of the reasons why there has been a constant and growing interest in finding suitable texts for learners (Pitler & Nenkova, 2008). In this context, the present study has brought about two key findings that will be discussed: the readability of the Chilean EFL textbook *Get Real* and the relevance of using specific ESL readability indices.

The findings of this study indicate that the readability of the texts used in the Chilean EFL textbooks is of a higher difficulty than the text difficulty of the standard the government expects students to achieve at the end of high school. The questionable level of difficulty of Chilean EFL textbooks has been mentioned in previous studies with the book that was previously used during high school for English lessons in Chile (Carcamo, 2020).

Additionally, these findings support other studies that have questioned from other avenues the appropriacy of Chilean EFL textbooks provided by the Ministry of Education. For example, Lizasoain and Vargas Mutizabal (2023) conducted a survey with 484 EFL teachers in Chile to gather information about the perception of the EFL textbook they were using. Their results showed that EFL teachers using the Ministry of Education books indicated that these books were not appropriate for the public classroom diversity and that they did not match with the national curriculum. In contrast, EFL teachers who had the freedom to choose textbooks based on their needs and school educational projects felt more satisfied. The inappropriacy of the EFL textbook was also reported for the previous edition of this material. Díaz Larenas et al. (2015) reported that EFL teachers perceived the EFL textbook provided by the Ministry of Education as inappropriate because of being at a higher level of difficulty in terms of the students' background knowledge, thus, the authors suggest it is of the utmost important for teachers to be critical with the textbook and adapt it

in a way in which it can be productively used with the students as well as complement it with material that is appropriate for the students' level.

Comparing these findings to similar international studies, some noticeable similarities and differences emerge. For example, Owu-Ewie (2014) studied the readability of the English textbooks used in Junior High School in Ghana. The findings of this study revealed that alike what has happened in the present study, the texts used in Ghanaian textbooks were deemed to be too difficult considering the age of the students. Unfortunately, even though there is a clear similarity in the findings, these results are not completely comparable to those of the present study. The reason for this is that the researcher used traditional readability formulas only and no specific ESL ones because the researcher estimated that the policies implemented in Ghana gave the students a status closer to that of a native speaker than that of a second language learner.

In Indonesia, Hakim et al. (2021) examined the readability level of this country's English textbook using Coh-Metrix. In addition, the students' perception about the texts was measured with a questionnaire. The findings of this study showed that the texts were somewhat appropriate because they were a tad below the students' level. Thus, the authors stated that they had potential for the development of their linguistic competence. These positive results are in line with other studies done in Indonesia (Hakim et al., 2021; Handayani et al., 2020; Rahmi et al., 2022).

The findings of the present study are more in line with the results obtained in Ghana. The texts in *Get Real* might make students face linguistic challenges that exceed their proficiency level. Thus, leaving teachers with the responsibility to detect this issue beforehand and prepare accordingly. If text difficulty is perceived even unconsciously by students, it may easily demotivate them and generate a negative perception towards foreign language learning (Rahimi & Hassani, 2011).

The biggest concern when examining the results has to do with students' previously proved level of English competence in the types of schools in which this textbook is distributed. The Chilean Quality Education Agency has consistently stated, based on standardized exams, that students in subsidized and public schools in their majority do not achieve the B1 proficiency level at the end of high school (Quality Education Agency, 2018). Therefore, it is evident that these students struggle with texts that are above the standard they try to achieve during their last years of high school.

Our second finding is the evidence that the ESL readability formula does not necessarily deliver a readability level equivalent to those traditional formulas would give. In all studies reviewed in this discussion (Handayani et al., 2020; Owu-Ewie, 2014; Rahmi et al., 2022) only traditional formulas have been used, or traditional formulas are accompanied by a specific ESL readability formula such as the RDL2. The fact that researchers still do not dare to use

specific ESL readability formulas should start being a concern considering ESL formulas have been validated and used empirically. In fact, the present study has also made use of traditional formulas which is also an example of the research community's anxiety toward using indices specifically designed for their field.

## Conclusion

Text readability is a variable that has been of interest for researchers in our field for almost a hundred years. Even though it has been understood in different ways (Crossley et al., 2017; McNamara et al., 2014) and challenged in different manners (Bailin & Grafstein, 2016), when it comes to considering practicality is still one of the strongest predictors of the difficulties particular groups of readers can encounter when trying to understand a text. The present study made use of readability indices to evaluate the appropriacy of the new EFL textbook that the Chilean Ministry of Education is providing teachers and students of public and subsidized schools with. Specifically, we compared the readability levels of the texts in the school textbook *Get Real* with those of *B1 Preliminary* booklets. The choice for the latter as a standard was sustained in the fact that the Ministry of Education expects students to achieve a B1 proficiency level of English at the end of high school.

The findings of the study revealed that based on traditional L1 readability indices the texts of the Chilean school textbook had the same text difficulty than those used in the B1 Preliminary. However, when examining the RDL2 readability index, we found that there was a statistically significant difference which showed that the texts in the Chilean school textbook were more difficult. Therefore, this study has provided evidence that traditional readability formulas do not necessarily replace ESL specific readability formulas since when used in empirical research they may bestow contradictory results. The literature indicates that specific ESL/EFL readability indices are more appropriate to be used when analyzing readability in such contexts. Therefore, researchers should rely on indices such as the RDL2 when doing this type of research endeavor even when it might be harder to have access to them when compared to traditional ones.

The present study has implications for both teachers and government. In first place, EFL school teachers should be alert that the reading material they are working with in the text *Get Real* exceeds the text difficulty for which they are preparing their students. This challenge might be addressed by teachers in different ways. For example, teachers could emphasize the pre-reading section assigning to it a decent amount of time for students to process the information (Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour, 2021). Also, teachers could teach pertinent reading strategies that help students deal with the texts successfully without getting frustrated along the way (Uribe-Enciso, 2015).

Additionally, combining this finding with those of previous (Carcamo, 2018, 2020; Díaz Larenas et al., 2015; Lizasoain & Vargas Mutizabal, 2023), three suggestions can be made to the Ministry of Education, so that it improves the process of text design and licensing for the Chilean classroom: (1) Confirm the suitability of the textbook with the learning objectives provided by the Ministry of Education in their school programs, (2) corroborate that the text readability is in line with the international standards the students are expected to achieve, and (3) make sure tasks are at the appropriate cognitive level of difficulty. Following these three guidelines could help facilitate the process that it is expected from teachers of adapting the textbook to their classrooms and thus improve EFL teachers' perceptions of this material.

A potential limitation of the present study is that we did not use texts from all tasks used in the B1 preliminary exam. Although the decision for this is sound and well supported by the fact that the texts in the other tasks were either too short or incomplete, it is still valid to mention that these texts have their own level of readability which might be more in line with the one in the texts in the EFL Chilean textbook. It might be of interest to revisit these other texts as well as the nature of the tasks in a future study to gauge how these factors might impact the level of difficulty of the activity of reading itself. Furthermore, a second limitation was the discrepancy we faced in the number of texts we had to compare due to the lack of access to new editions of the *B1 Preliminary* textbook. Consequently, we recommend conducting similar studies with larger corpora to confirm these findings.

Future studies might investigate two issues that warrant further attention. First, researchers should conduct experimental studies with ESL/EFL students in which they can be exposed to texts of different readability levels. Understanding how readability impacts comprehension levels is of paramount interest as to make it an inherent part of the process of text evaluation when preparing EFL/ESL school textbooks. Additionally, the findings of readability studies of this type might be nurtured with complementary qualitative studies with teachers who use these textbooks as to deepen the comprehension of how they are eventually used and supplemented in the classroom.

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## Publication Ethics and Publication Malpractice Statement

The purpose of this declaration is to clarify the expected duties and ethical behavior for all the parties involved in the process of submission, evaluation, and selection of manuscripts sent to the *HOW* journal.

### Duties Expected of the Editor

- The Editor is responsible for maintaining the quality of the contents of the journal and, as such, has the final say on whether to accept or reject a manuscript.
- The Editor ensures that all submissions comply with the editorial policies and the guidelines for authors found on the journal website and in the print version.
- The Editor guarantees that all authors are treated fairly and their manuscripts evaluated without regard to the authors' race, gender, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, political philosophy, ethnic origin, institutional affiliation, or citizenship.
- The Editor is expected to be in constant communication with authors and reviewers about the status of a manuscript or about any other issue that may arise along the process of submission, evaluation, and selection of manuscripts and which requires the attention of some or all of the parties involved.
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*HOW* is an academic publication led by ASOCOPI, the Colombian Association of Teachers of English. The journal is indexed in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Latindex, Redalyc, SciELO Colombia, and Publindex-Minciencias.

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The deadline for submissions of manuscripts for the first issue (published in January) is **April 1st** of the previous year. Submissions for the second issue (published in July) will be received until **October 1st** of the previous year.

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**Research Reports:** In-progress and final reports of studies carried out by teacher-researchers or student-teachers studying in BA programs. The abstract of the paper should explicitly indicate this and the structure of the article should include the main components of a research report: introduction, method, results, conclusions, references, among others.

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### ***Unpublished Master's Thesis***

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