Research Reports

Not Easy Being "Me": Deconstructing Foreign Language Teachers' Self Through Collaborative Autoethnography

No es fácil ser "yo": Deconstruyendo el yo de los profesores de lenguas extranjeras a través de la Autoetnografía colaborativa

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Abstract

In this article, we, three pre-service Foreign Language teachers, used an introspective view of our memories and experiences to extract relevant aspects that defined our teacher self, teaching methodology, and vocation in Southern Colombia. We used a collaborative autoethnographic approach with virtual cumulative collaboration and an analytical/evocative typology. Our stories are evocative, but our experiences were extracted using instruments such as memory collection, self-reflections, reflective journal writing, autobiographical essays, and focus group discussions. We found tacit structural/sociological policies and factors which influenced our learning processes throughout our student selves. Factors concerning acculturation/cultural integration, affective teaching environments or lack thereof, and family dynamics influenced our selves. From retelling our stories, we can see that these policies/factors had an adverse effect in our learning, but a positive effect on our teacher selves and vocation. We can safely say that negative learning/family experiences influenced our teacher selves for the better in our stories.

Key words: collaborative autoethnography, narratives, reflections, teaching methodology, teacher self

Resumen

En este artículo, nosotros, tres profesores de lenguas extranjeras en formación, utilizamos una visión introspectiva de nuestros recuerdos y experiencias para extraer aspectos relevantes que definieron nuestro yo docente, metodología docente y vocación en el contexto surcolombiano. Utilizamos la autoetnografía colaborativa virtualmente iterativa con tipología analítica e historia s evocativas. Extrayendo recuerdos mediante instrumentos como la recolección de memorias, las autorreflexiones, el diario reflexivo, los ensayos autobiográficos y grupos focales. Encontramos políticas y factores estructurales/sociológicos tácitos influyentes en nuestro aprendizaje durante la niñez. Factores relacionados a la aculturación/integración cultural, los entornos afectivos de enseñanza o la falta de ellos y la dinámica familiar influyeron en nuestros yo. Rememorando nuestras historias, podemos ver que estas políticas/factores tuvieron un efecto adverso en nuestro aprendizaje, pero un efecto positivo en nuestro yo docente y en nuestra vocación. Podemos afirmar que en nuestras historias las experiencias negativas de aprendizaje/familiares influyeron en nosotros como docentes para bien.

Palabras clave: Autoetnografía colaborativa, Auto-reflexiones, metodología docente, narrativas, yo docente

Introduction

Our path to becoming English as a foreign language teachers began more than four years ago even though we seldom considered the profession. After completing language, teaching, and methodological theory courses followed by forays into teaching, we now see ourselves as certified teachers. In this paper, three students from a Southern Colombian teacher education program delve into past experiences which might shape our teaching. We believe that from intitial discussions on our memories, some childhood experiences seemed to shape our development as well as our methodological selves. Upon revisitng our childhoods, we recognized that our memories as well as our surroundings, played an important yet latent role in our teaching methodology.

When inquiring about the Colombian EFL teacher future, a surmised identity from a panoramic view of the field was found in an article from the Revista Dinero. As shown in Bonilla-Mejía et al. (2018, as cited in Perez-Martinez, 2019), the teaching context in Colombia tallied 318,665 official teachers in Colombia, of whom 299,017 were teachers and the remainder of which were in administrative positions. The typical Colombian teacher also had 26.2 students per class, a median age of 47.3, and 64.9% being women with a large number of bachelor degree holders (91.9%). These figures yield little to what a teacher truly is and much less to how a teacher is made and what experiences shape their teaching self. Studies on teacher identity have been prevalent for years (Holland & Lachicotte 2007; Vyran et al., 2003) as well as utilizing the Meadian approach to identity (constructed via social interactions with others) (Martel & Wang, 2014). We wish to diverge from how external factors shape professional identity and deviate from professional identity (Duff & Uchida,1997; Park 2014). Thus, we believe pertinent questions to our teaching selves are:

- What recalled experiences, environmental factors, especially those related to childhood stressors or trauma, shape our teaching selves?
- How might these lived experiences shape our teaching methodology or our methodological self?

We consider that experiences prior to viewing ourselves as professional teachers can be used to reflect on our teacher self, allowing a narrative voice as both reseaserchers and participants. Considering the scope and criteria we have chosen to approach this study, two related studies which supported our scope were found. Despite Salinas and Ayala (2018) exploring professional EFL teacher identity construction during teaching practice, which differs from our purpose, they utilized a socio-cultural theoretical lens within a qualitative case study involving personal narratives, interviews, and a focus group. They found that

dynamism in identity can undergo different factors like perspective (social and personal) and social symbols. These influencing factors include anything from personal biography, gender, culture, and working conditions. They are related to both professional and personal identities, thus, elucidate the importance of analyzing these factors in our own narratives.

Correspondingly, Trejo and Mora (2014) used autobiographical narratives to construct the social and educational aspects of English language teacher identity. By using autobiographies, there was a more reflective look at the experiences, and through their three interviews focusing on personal background, beginnings as teachers, and participation in professional training all contributed to their identity. A relevant finding in their study was the use of autobiographical narrative as a research strategy that was beneficial to understanding the professional development process of these two teachers. The study by Priestley, Robinson, and Biesta (2011), where teachers' agency depends on experiences from the past, the present, and a vision of the future is a concept worth considering as a means to frame our narratives in these distinct moments in time.

Thus, we focused on how our teacher self came to be by asking introspective questions via autoethnography and had a broader reference point, as many studies focus on the beginning of the teaching practicum or when student-teachers become novice teachers (Danielewicz, 2001; Menon & Christou, 2002; Schempp et al., 1999). We hoped to see factors ingrained in our choice for professional development, how the process evolved since joining the teacher education program, our conceptions of what it means to be a teacher, and other influences our past experiences had in our teacher self and methodological self. Better yet, did we see ourselves as teachers? The need to inquire on these factors were the focus of our introspective analysis. Through introspective research, we attempted to understand ourselves better and thus take a more personal look at what it means to be a teacher. By examining the factors above, we may extract pivotal experiences in the past which are relevant to our methodological selves, explain how these socio-cultural experiences shaped us, and discuss how negative socio-cultural experiences may become stressors and influence our students.

Our stories are mostly exploratory and reflective in nature, but we must define the following terms to understand better and conceptualize them.

Conceptual Framework

self

Before delving into the concept of self, we must clarify certain terms like ego, person,

identity, etc. These are used interchangeably and synonymously, but these terms all have different connotations (Spiro, 1993). Regarding the self, we also have different seminal viewpoints like Mead's sociological self (1934), Mauss' moi' (1938) and a more recent concept we would like to use, which derives from Damasio's selves, as we believe the self is the encapsulation of internal aspects such as character, memories, and experiences unique to each individual. Originally a neuroscientist, Damasio found three distinct selves working in tandem to eventually construct an identity. The protoself uses neural maps created as it interacts with its surroundings. From these interactions internal states and feelings arise which help the core self distinguish "me" from "other," These feeling clusters eventually lead to memory maps and the autobiographical self (Damasio, 2010). The former being the self we wish to use in our study as the autobiographical self uses maps in memory and re-lives the experience and feelings(from the core self) within specific moments in time to tell an own or lived story. In essence, this neurological system was made to ensure homeostasis (organisms' survival and even success). This biological homeostatic finding plays into culture. We may view culture as being collective homeostasis, like norms, policies, and so forth are usually enacted to ensure the population's survival (Damasio, 2018).

Thus as we spoke about the internal process of the self, we must now mention the influence our environment has on the self. To do this, we can use environmental psychology or community psychology, where the influence is bilateral and mutual between the self and the environment. The concept of ecological systems theory from Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) is important and relevant to our stories. In this theory, the individual (or self) has five system levels they must adapt to ranging from a micro-scale to a macro scale. Micro involves family, school, peers, and even neighbors; macro includes culture, laws, values, and policies. The self adapts to each system undergoing stress-positive or negative stress. An example of this is the Yerkes/Dodson law of arousal (1908) - which eases the transition as well as promotes the creation of coping mechanisms to assimilate into the new environment. Thus, some stress is a natural occurrence as the system regulates equilibrium, but certain systems promote prolonged negative stress —the deviation amplifying systems— which we must self adapt to (Maruyama, 1963).

Stress, Physiological Stress, and Psychological Stress

Stress is pertinent in the self as stressful events are memorable and accessible, often defining our stories through emotional and

physical experiences lived. Hans Selye (1956), in *Stress of Life*, was one of the first proponents of stress being a physiological response to exceeding environmental demands on the body's capacity to cope (general adaptation syndrome). The body responds to stress stimuli in one of two ways, through the sympathomedullary pathway for acute stress — releasing adrenaline and noradrenaline— or the pituitary adrenal system for chronic stress. The cortisol secreted during chronic stress offers high bursts of energy and a high pain tolerance, but it diminishes cognitive function, raises blood pressure, and lowers immune response. Prolonged exposure to stress has physiological repercussions like enlarged adrenal glands, gastrointestinal ulcers, and shrinkage of the thymus gland. The autonomic nervous system reacts to all stress stimuli the same and psychological stress (Lazarus, 1966) is no exception. Stress is perceived to be personally significant, taxing, and maybe even excessive to the individual's coping resources. Cox and Mackay (1976) also define physiological stress as a perceived phenomenon which results from personal demand and the individual's ability to cope with stress which is the imbalance manifested. We also find traumatic stressors from childhood which are relevant since trauma is directly proportional to a difficulty to adapt and are represented in our autoethnographic selves.

Collaborative Autoethnography

An appropriate methodology to jointly revisit our childhood experiences along with their specific cultural contexts is Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE). According to Chang (as cited in Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016), multiple authors and multiple perspectives are used to later be examined and challenged while generating a mix of voices and perspectives to reach a consensus. CAE allows researchers to examine and retell or remember experiences within larger scopes to identify phenomena related to our teacher selves. Our roles as students, language learners, and sons/daughters, along with our developing personalities are all meshed together to form our "teacherhood." Using autoethnography in general allows the researcher to counteract a normal positivist view on research as knowledge now comes from introspection and self-reflection. As the paradigm shifts, narrative inquiry becomes acceptable knowledge and allows a unique voice (Wall, 2006). We focused on an interpretive autoethnography that allows us to analyze specific moments in our lives, almost like studying a snapshot frozen in time (Ulmer,1989, as cited in Denzin, 2008). The writing typology of each account is a mix of analytic and evocative. Analytic autoethnography emerged as a means to grant a more traditional flavor to autoethnography. It is traditional in the sense that it resembles other

forms of qualitative research, while evocative autoethnography centers on feelings, and immersing the reader within the memory through the senses.

Methods and Research Process

Researchers shape collaborative autoethnography as they often fit with many revisions, but the core methods involve reflection and introspection. The main components revolve around a structured qualitative view of autoethnography involving theoretical analysis, analysis beyond the self, visibility, analytic reflexivity, and complete research from members (Anderson, 2006). From this standpoint, we used instruments like memory collection, self-reflections, reflective journaling, autobiographical essays, and focus group discussions to gather our initial empirical information. These instruments served as reference points to select, re-live, and further extrapolate relevant memories. As this is a collaborative effort, we extracted relevant interactions within socio-cultural systems from our experiences and analyzed our findings iteratively during meetings. This allowed each member to interactively shed light on unique experiences while maintaining regular meetings (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2016). Denzin (2006) highlights the many shapes autoethnography may take, depending on the purpose we give to our stories. We chose the evocative autoethnography for our stories as it allows researchers to place themselves in the spotlight, blurring the lines of researcher/participant allowing us to write personal accounts (Castañeda-Trujillo, 2020; Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2016).

Combining typologies and using iterative collective efforts, we could write our stories while maintaining an ethnographical frame to examine our experiences. These unique experiences became pivotal as each one set the foundation for each account. Using CAE would provide a medium to both (re)tell our stories in a very personal manner while still allowing us to pinpoint memories and experiences that shaped our methodological selves and ultimately influence who we are as teachers.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The study was conducted in two stages: Stage one (March-May 2020) involved data collection while stage two (May-July 2020) focused on data analysis, interpretation, and writing. The first stage collected the following instruments:1) an autobiography, 2) pre-service experience journals, 3) virtual/personal weekly focus groups, and 4) document compilation. The first instrument consisted of a document chronicling experiences, memories, and anecdotes, all tied to our context, making a critical and personal reflection of our identities

as teachers. These touched upon family background, experiences in education (elementary to higher education), and initial instances and opinions as pre-service teachers. The pre-service experience journals focused on experiences that shed light on our selves as teachers, mainly for field information such as classroom methodologies and feelings. The participants transitioned from students to teachers. The focus group sessions lasted from 30-60 minutes and were scheduled on an "as needed" basis, meaning we would meet if questions arose and clarifying any issues. These meetings served to discuss personal findings, information, and other relevant items that may shed light on our teaching methodology. During stage two (May-July 2020), the focus was on data analysis, interpretation, and writing. Participants coded the information individually until specific themes emerged. Once individual themes were established, we analyzed the information collectively, creating shared/common themes. These were the themes that emerged: a) The manner in which we teach is shaped by other aspects of the self (experiences as family members or as students), b) Pre-service teacher practice helps adjust emerging teacher methodology, c) Vocation is an integral part, and it emerges innately. We must mention the change in concepts as we shifted from identity to the self as the concept of self better fits our needs.

Ethical Considerations

As this was mostly an introspective study, data collected revolved around our memories and interpretations of our stories, thus, extra permissions or forms were not needed; however, those indirectly involved were protected (Ellis, 2007).

Finding Our Selves From our Memories

Childhood Experiences

Even though we share a common origin, having been raised in the same Southern Colombian town and belonging to the same social class, we were still tasked with developing as children and adapting to our environments. As a result, each of us was shaped by a macro, meso, organizational, or micro ecological level.

> I now had to catch up to the other students; I had the urge to adjust to my new environment […]. I remember feeling everything revolved around a language that made me feel alien. This feeling was part of cultural integration and, more specifically, my school integration […]. I eventually assimilated the social aspect of the school culture and gained my classmates' acceptance. I managed to merge my old identity/ personality and implemented Spanish, a language my peers seldom used. As we were young children, mostly 8 years old, we often bonded over our lunch period drawing sessions and Friday afternoon children's movies[…] Learning the language came later, but this also

> was part of integrating the culture. (Juan, story snippet)

In one experience, we would encounter the process of acculturation as a result of migrating to a different country. At first glance, this change should be strictly cultural, but there are also psychological effects such as language acquisition and cultural integration (both school culture and culture in general) which are extrinsic factors. Still, in order to fully adapt to our new environment, we must undergo changes within ourselves. Some of these changes involved understanding school culture, readjusting schemas both linguistically and culturally to become accepted by the new environment, and utilizing support systems in the forms of family, friends, and other immigrants who have successfully undergone cultural adaptation. However, a negative aspect to this integration was the speed at which it took place. Having a hidden educational policy that enabled a result-based regulatory system where school funding was directly proportional to school forced student performance rather than naturally occurring processes.

> [I remember] I was 3 years old and that was my first experience studying. It turns out that I only went to school for 15 days because I said that the teacher "pinched" me.
>
> […] when I came to that school for the first time, all the other kids knew each other (They have been studying together since preschool), so it was awkward, but that is basically the stuff you had to deal with when you are new in a place. But then, once the class started, I realized I was way behind those kids, especially in Maths and English. The only subject I was very good at was Spanish. As a result, I did not want to be there. I felt anxious in Math class, especially when the teacher started a quiz (I actually remember the smell of my notebook). After that, I just remember crying. (Laura, story snippet)

In another experience, the concept of school culture is relevant again, but it takes center stage as the simple fact of having to adapt to the school itself since it was a negative experience. Within the revisited experience, there was an instance of bodily punishment in preschool, an event that set precedence to similar methodological inadequacies to come. Within the same experience, we see the difficulty of traversing from public to private schools, which should be a seamless process, but even here, we see the need to adapt to established social groups, learning new school culture, and adapting to general group dynamics as a perceived outsider. This sense of "me" versus "them" created by classmates and enabled by the teacher through faulty methodological constructs and an ineffective environment created trauma which would become chronic and induce anxiety. Thus, establishing the relationship between schooling and learning to stress and discomfort.

> For as long as I can remember, the relationship between my family members was always conflictive. My earliest memories of my

> childhood involve my parents yelling and fighting each other and breaking everything along with the house while my brother and I were crying in a corner. The situation forced me to look for a kind of mental and emotional shelter to escape the conflict, and I found it in my interest, making art and toys my refuge. (Franz, story Snippet)

In our last revisited experience, we see an adaptation that does not occur in school but at home. In this instance, the repercussions of a declining relationship and an unstable home can also create a negative experience. The constant arguments and altercations within a divorcing couple can affect the rest of the family and young children to a greater extent, as when conflict reaches our home, there is seldom anywhere left to go. As a result, we have art, crafts, and toys as a coping mechanism and a psychological refuge. This as well as having humble lives means they should work in tandem to influence this specific teaching methodology and establish a very unique teaching identity.

As shown above, even though our context, place of birth, and chosen program are the same, each has particular experiences which shape our teaching methodology. In this case, negative childhood experiences became fundamental, though indirect, in shaping the manner in which we teach. Similarly, it becomes the first construct we all share which is the need to adapt to the experience or situation itself. The American Psychological Association (2015) defines adaptation as an adjustment to a sensory organ either to intensity or quality of stimulation resulting from a change in experience as well as reduced responsiveness from overstimulation. We may use another definition which sets the focus on psychology and mental health. The glossary of psychiatric terms defines adaptation as fitting behavior to meet the environment, often involving modifications (Shahrokh, 2011). Pertaining to childhood development, Jean Piaget, while discussing his cognitive development theory shed light upon adaptation (seen as behavior in children) and its two main components. With assimilation, we observe outside stimulus and implement it into our established mental categories or schemas (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). Through accommodation, we have an outside experience that modifies our existing schemas while also establishing distinctions within the categories (Block, 1982).

We all share high-stress events or difficult situations as the external stimulus that enabled us to adapt, even though we lived through different circumstances during childhood. We saw our stressors, or external stress inducing agents, as school policies that required language learning, anxiety, and fear within the school and the turbulent family dynamics.

Coping with Stressors

The three of us used different forms of adapting to our environments, each according to our individualities. From our stories, we can see how two of us learned to cope via resilience and one of us accepted our stressful environment:

> I was "failing" in everything else. Thus, I would have to spend my summer vacation under language reinforcements, which at the time were difficult as all the other children my age were enjoying their leisure time. It would take approximately three more months and I would become proficient enough to understand my surroundings. (Juan, story snippet)

> I just remember crying. Furthermore, crying was the result of stress and despair I felt because I did not feel at the level of the other kids, I got bad grades and I felt disappointed. I cried because I did not feel good in that space and all I wanted [to do] was leaving. (Laura, story snippet)

> The situation forced me to look for a kind of mental and emotional shelter to escape the conflict and I found it in my interest, making art and toys my refuge. I seemed to have acquired this as a form of conflict resolution […]. I could spend hours drawing landscapes, characters and crafting huge detailed city models made out of cardboard boxes that were about to be discarded, as well as playing with my toys to escape from that toxic reality. (Franz, story snippet)

These adaptations are also known as coping mechanisms or coping styles and strategies children undergo after traumatic events. Endler (2001) defines a coping style as confronting a stressful situation and addressing it. As such there are three basic styles which are task-oriented, emotion-oriented, and avoidance-oriented. A common factor we all share is that our specific traumatic events, though emotionally charged, were all met with a task-oriented coping style. In this style we aimed to solve or minimize the problem. Dubow and Rubinlicht (2011) mention coping strategies which fit into the pre-established coping styles. These usually involve problem-solving, information-seeking, cognitive restructuring, emotional expression, avoidance, distancing, wishful thinking, seeking social support, and denial. It is crucial to consider that these strategies seldom function in isolation, nor are they mutually exclusive.

Fundamental Experiences Turned Stressors

> I remember the first obstacles I had to face (and they happened in tandem) were getting used to a new culture through education: new education policies, a different academic calendar, and a new way of learning overall. I had to adjust to school, the learning medium, and the other subjects, known as the common core […] The curriculum and assessments are governed by the New York State Department of Education for schools from elementary school to high school, and all students take state-developed tests for

> each subject of the common core. I [also] had to get acquainted with standards and a national policy as I continued my integration. This policy in particular was called No Child Left Behind (NCLB) which forced me to accelerate my learning. (Juan, story snippet)

On a macro scale, cultural integration as an immigrant student with an underlying influence of school policies like The No Child Left Behind Act (or perhaps the internal decree in the EFL program which has the same effect on the program's students) acts as an indirect influence toward adaptation, especially language adaptation and to a greater extent, cultural integration. However, before delving into cultural integration, we must define acculturation and its subsets. Acculturation happens between two cultures and is often seen as black and white, dominant vs. non-dominant dynamic (Gordon, 1964). However, acculturation deals with degrees of wanting to keep/change individual culture (a) and degree of contact with the other culture (b). Assimilation happens when there is little need for ones own culture and higher contact with the new culture. Separation occurs when there is a strong need to maintain own culture and limit contact with the new culture. Integration happens when there is a high need to maintain own culture and high contact with the new culture. Lastly, marginalization occurs when there is little need to keep own culture and little contact with the new culture. Berry (2011) showcases these four categories or modes of acculturation as being modes of coping with culture and a way of psychological adaptation. Integration, which is what happened to Juan, is the most common, and it is also related to high self-esteem. Thus, acculturation (integration) does not necessarily carry a negative connotation.

We also find a stressor pertaining to the adaptation to the academic domain and peer rejection, all of which fall within the microenvironmental system.

> I might present certain levels of anxiety because I felt that the things and activities I did in class were not enough compared to one of my classmates [...] [I felt] stress and despair because I did not feel at the level of the other kids, I got bad grades and I felt disappointed. (Laura, story snippet)

Skinner and Wellborn (1997) establish the importance of adjusting to the academic domain as children who fail to do so will have faulty interpersonal interactions, few friends, and self-defeating attitude toward their scholastic competence and ability. These difficulties in adapting come forth as early as third grade and further interfere in cognitive development, motivation, and social function. There are diverse factors that influence academic adaptation, but the most relevant to our CAE are school climate and teacher personality, methodology, motivation, and ability. Thus, some coping responses we encounter while adjusting to school (as a threat) range from confusion, self-doubt, general

discouragement, and escape. Based on the experience observed, these coping responses have led to chronic anxiety that triggers when in a communicative environment due to constant self-doubt stemming from a past negative coping strategy.

Also, within two of our stories, we find perceived peer rejection. Zakriski, Jacobs, and Coie (1997) mention the negative effect this adaptation has in adolescence and adulthood. Peer exclusion can lead to aversive interpersonal interaction and large amounts of distress from their perceived status, thus making any kind of unacceptance stressful even when non-aggressive. Peer rejection may lead to poor school adjustment, which would in turn indirectly set the same coping mechanisms as school adaptation. Peer rejection requires an adaptive coping that uses personal control, awareness, behavior analysis, and motivation to change one's behavior. Thus, children who undergo ostracism endure, internalize, and become used to their stressors and adapt. In one of our stories, we also see the change within family dynamics as the child undergoes adaptation to divorce and stressful situations during the event. Grych and Fincham (1997) mention the phenomenon of adapting and coping to divorce. However, the separation itself was not influential in Franz's story, but a relevant factor leading to separation are altercations. In our revised experience, fear and sadness were felt as a result of verbal and physical altercations. We must note that high levels of interparental conflict during and after the divorce also increase boys' externalized behavior. Even the simple fact of witnessing conflict increases emotional distress. A possible coping mechanism for children from divorced parents is resilience, either through a support group or individually. In this experience, individual resilience was used using instruments like hobbies, artistic interests, creativity, and inventiveness to cope with the divorce process and intraparental arguments.

High Stakes Testing and Educational Credits

As we adapted and eventually developed and grew older, the three of us would adapt to policies, laws, and education systems in our culture or the Colombian macro system.

> It is important to say that in eleventh grade, I felt anxious again, but I think it was worse because it was anxiety, along with the fear of failing a test that would define my entire future. Due to our education system, students from eleventh grade are required to take a test called Prueba Saber 11 which is implemented by the Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación (ICFES). However, this has always been a requirement in order to enter a public university in Colombia.[…] Despite the fact I was one of the best students and had taken the PRE - ICFES course, I got an average regular

> score (300) [as I had anxiety] and I felt very disappointed in myself. (Laura, story snippet)

Testing and cultural aspects of higher learning also played a role in our adaptation processes. We all, to some extent, experienced stress from high-stakes testing. In this case, the high stakes test was in the form of the national tertiary education entrance exam (known for its acromym as ICFES Saber 11). The ICFES Saber 11 exam within Decree 869, article 5 enacted by the National Ministry of Education in 2010, enables higher education standardized testing as an admission requirement (Ardila & García, n.d). This makes summative assessment via standardized examinations prevalent in our secondary education context. Therefore, we can establish the ICFES Exam as being pivotal both in the graduation from secondary education and the beginning of higher/tertiary education. The ICFES exam also measures schools and relevant stakeholders' (mainly teachers) quality, improves funding for high-scoring institutions, establishes school rankings, and enables scholarship programs. The stakes increase even more for the ICFES exam considering it allows well-performing students an opportunity to finance their higher education either through their own payments, subsidies, or the use of ICETEX, a student credit financing institution with the study now pay later system as well as other means of payment (Franco, 1991). We are also under the cultural belief that we should enroll in higher education in an effort to "become somebody." Perhaps the positive return on investment for college education (called IRR) (Garcia-Suaza et al., 2014) and the fact that higher education generally pays off for both the average and marginal student through increased earning potential (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013) raises the stakes even higher. The ICFES Saber 11 exam also serves as an admissions test for higher education institutions, and as such, these test results determine what degree to major in. Thus it may turn into a major source of stress. As far as addressing test stress, Kruger et al. (2007) suggest that external pressure to succeed can lead to extra amounts of stress. Test stress can be mitigated by voluntary engagement coping (acting toward the stress) in conjunction with social support systems. Prevention and special attention to language learning students, students with disabilities, and children from impoverished families should be given extra care.

> I was so determined to get better at the language that a few years later, my parents -with great effort- paid me a Basic English course on an institute following a saying that we have in Latin America, which goes: "English opens doors." […]I completed the [ICFES] exam, but my scores were only viable for a Foreign language program and not much else as in any math intensive programs or anything in medicine. As a result, becoming a teacher was my only option. Nevertheless, my family's

> socioeconomic background, as many families in Colombia could not cover the cost of the tuition. (Franz, story snippet)

Universidad Javeriana's Economy Lab, as reported by El Tiempo, found education students having the lowest entrance and exit exam scores- Saber 11 and Saber Pro.This is not to demean the profession, but it bears relevance as culturally and contextually, the teaching profession and our EFL program represented our one and only opportunity to higher education. It may seem that the colloquial Latin American saying "English opens doors" is very relevant in our higher education story. The study by Sayer (2018), which focuses on the doors English opens as the perceived social and economic opportunities a foreign language provides, states that language policies seem to want to breach the gap within social strata. Still, the execution of such programs and their success are determined by teacher methodology.

Our Selves in Higher Education

> In 2016, I enrolled in the English teacher education program. Along the way, I noticed that many of my fellow students were going through a similar language and cultural process. I would see in their faces how they were adjusting[...]My classmates reminded me of how I felt when I was eight years old. Only now, I was in a position where I could lend support. (Juan, story snippet)

> Once in my second year in the program, I could understand and speak the language without much effort than how it was at the beginning. During those days, I managed to improve my learning style when it came to study for exams and presentations. I used to take notes using symbols and drawings as a tool for understanding things better. (Franz, story snippet)

> I have had the opportunity to teach for three years now and I have always tried to be aware of this issue(anxiety). As a matter of fact, creating a comfortable atmosphere is one of the strategies that has helped me with my students a lot. So I want to create a space where my students feel comfortable enough to participate, to make mistakes. (Laura, story snippet)

Once enrolled in the EFL program, we would once again need to adapt to a new environment as we would all internalize a sense of responsibility, implement new schedules, grow our social circles, and most important of all, learn English and begin the shift to become teachers. In a study done on first-year German students, perceived changes in personal, organizational, content, and social requirements were recurring challenges the students adjusted to (Trautwein & Bosse, 2016). Our adjustment to higher education, along with the experiences we would all have as tutors, practicing students, and part-time teachers, would help us turn our initial coping

mechanisms into our teaching methodologies and eventually what we would call our sense of vocation. As Hansen (1994) called it, vocation is “a summons, a bidding, an invitation to a particular way of life” (p. 99), which in this case is our initial sense of vocation as teachers.

Discussion

From here onward, we will discuss the fundamental tenets in our teaching. Tenets which developed innately as a byproduct of the manner we coped with our experiences and would eventually become our teaching methodology and latent vocation. While discussing our memories we perceived that in a way, we wished to prevent similar stressors from happening to our students. First however, we must mention that being aware of what experiences we adapted to and how we coped is an integral part of our teaching methodology. Therefore, the following are fundamental tenets in each of our teaching methodologies which also reflect our remembered experiences.

The first tenet acknowledges the fact that language acculturation is present while students learn English. Through direct means or perhaps indirect means like cultural factors from the teaching materials or even the simple fact culture and language are interwoven (refer to Big C and little c and globalized culture for a deeper understanding). Thus as language teachers, we can use methodological alternatives such as the concept of English as an international language (Jenkins, 2000), which turns English into a tool for learning and not as a set of rules students should learn, and culture plays a supporting role not a dominant one. It is also pertinent to remember the fact that learning in general and learning a language, in particular, carries certain degrees of stress. As teachers, we must notice and mitigate the stress caused in English learning. Perhaps even more so during communicative activities as these activities often single out the student and can generate anxiety and can make the student self-conscious. Being affective and allowing students to grow via risk-taking and trial and error is important within the EFL class. Another essential tenet relates to adversity, which may become a common occurrence even in the household, yet another factor to consider while teaching. We need to provide spaces for our students to feel safe and, at the very least, enjoy learning. English is a special subject to teach as it can become both content and a conduit for learning, as may be the case for art, crafts, and similar fields, and serve as a means to escape difficult situations or harsh environments.

Therefore we should all remember the concept called the stressor prevention process. Based on Sandler et al. (1997) the stress process model illustrates the typical progress from stressor to a developmental outcome where positive mediator and moderator actions

precede the developmental outcome (adaptation). In these last two, the teacher can implement positive reinforcements to help the student adapt more efficiently to stressors, thus fostering an environment where learning can occur.

Conclusion

To inquire into professional teacher identity, one must first delve into the self and its integrating parts as identity is the whole of the selves, a process, and convergence of everything that makes us who we are. Identity is an ever-evolving concept, and a positive teacher identity is an integral part of teacher resilience (Day, 2013). Our experiences and memories will inevitably influence who we are, and in all our cases, it seems less than positive circumstances have greatly shaped who we are as teachers. It may be socio-cultural adaptations or in many instances, a bad economic hand dealt by fate which molded our teaching self and how we view teaching. Regardless of where we came from, we can say that having the experiences and upbringing we had, has fostered a sense of vocation in all of us. As Higgins (2005) quoted Dewey (1916), I will bring out my sense of vocation- as in teaching continuously with a purpose. Being a dedicated teacher takes determination, and one must juggle many variables, even hidden factors like policies/politics/societal constructs and other hurdles we face as teachers. Some of us may have to deal with the indirect consequences of teaching like anxiety and learning to observe and deal with the issue both in ourselves and in our students. We also have to be creative and inventive when it comes to teaching as our environment, and the very options we have are limited. Still, these same limited options allow us to use everything at our disposal to teach in engaging and meaningful ways. Our past experiences teach us to make the best of what we have from our upbringing, our socioeconomic circumstances, and our cultural differences and implement them in our methodology. Our stories reflect a reality in our context where we must make the best of what is available to create our own way of teaching, of defining our as we held our meetings virtually. Virtuality allows for self-responsible data collection, collective team effort, and multi-voiced writing, but the concept of meeting (in person) ceased to exist and important non-verbal cues were lost (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2016). We can assume most meetings, from now on, will be conducted virtually for the foreseeable future, making adaptations to the methodology mandatory.

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