Teacher Research: Uncovering Professional Identities and Trajectories of Teacher Researchers through Narrative Research—A Colombian Case

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Abstract

This work explores real-life experiences around research. Thinking of the English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher as an inquirer of the academic reality, the study presents accounts of professional identity as narrated in the life histories of three EFL teachers-researchers in a private but non-profit institution in Bogota, Colombia. This study sheds light on different institutional practices that, grounded on a community of practice, reinforce research as an inquiry process and as an opportunity for professional and institutional development. Additionally, the study also addresses issues of investment when teachers engage in this practice. The work concludes by reflecting that teachers' professional identities as researchers are composed of experiences that have an important effect on their teaching expertise. Thus, teachers tend to alter their identities based on the relationships they establish within the community and undergo changes when previous and current experiences are put together. It is suggested that teacher education should help teachers-to-be understand these dynamics.

Keywords: teacher researcher, professional identity, communities of practice, professional development, narrative

1. Introduction

Models of teacher development must shift toward a focus on schools, cultivating soil beneficial to teacher development, and establishing teachers' professional learning communities (Richards & Farrell, 2005). However, many researchers cogently point out that under the traditional teacher development model, it is difficult for teachers to improve professionally (Goodman, 1995).

Although different studies have been carried out in order to understand and improve teaching practices within the EFL classroom (Rohani, 2011; Mackenzie, 2014), not several have concentrated on raising awareness on the importance of teachers' knowledge studies (Goodson, 1992). Therefore, the current study presents how EFL teachers by being immersed in classroom research modified or adjusted personal epistemologies (experiential/theoretical knowledge and how their LTI can be self-validated) regarding teaching and research itself. As researchers, we believe that this research could lead to a deeper understanding of a closer view of teachers as "natural" researchers and the notion of professional development itself.

On this matter, the notion of professional development provides a hint on how teachers are likely to change their teaching practices through researching, experimenting, reflecting, discussing and working together with other teachers (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Consequently, in order to understand teachers' own understanding of their profession and role as professionals, it seems necessary to make use of life stories to achieve the following purposes: 1) to empower and allow teachers to organize and articulate what they know; 2) to make connections between the personal and professional life; 3) to unveil the complexities of their practice.

Three teachers participated in this study. They were invited to share their life histories/stories in order to help us (researchers) construct a narrative to explore language teacher identities, hereafter LTI. These EFL fellow teachers had been immersed in an action research program that aimed to help them be more professional within the institution. Thus, these fellows were asked to tell about their previous and current experiences regarding their

knowledge on conducting research, thus, they were firstly surveyed in order to track back their experience doing action research or research in general. In particular, data collected from the surveyed agreed on that researching has implications on the professional path of teachers. The excerpt below may help support this:

"This research would be beneficial for other studies, such as a master program. I can know more of a specific teaching practice issue, and make a change or improve in my own practice" [sic]

Survey; teacher' reflection; question 1, 2014

Interestingly, the academic importance of conducting research as a way to modify current teaching practice is acknowledged. However, these notions of academic interest and involvement clashed with external reasons in relation to institutional policy. Teachers stated that the main reason to carry out a research study was a personal and professional interest of academic development.

Among many other responses, it was evident that teachers' interest of engaging in a research program to develop their own professional expertise in terms of research was present within their paths as professionals.

"I have found myself very interested in doing research in the classroom with the purpose of improving my practice." [sic]

"To contribute from the epistemological construction towards the educative change in local contexts." [sic]

"Keep up to date in terms of teaching practices, and in order to share experiences" [sic]

Survey; teachers' comments; question 5, 2014

Teachers also identified with some of the purposes of doing research stated by Noffke (1990); understanding and improving teaching. Teachers made evident their concern and interest to understand their own practices as professionals. They mentioned that doing research is:

"Because the idea is to grow as professional" [sic]

"Because our students learning environment is being enriched with ICT and different attitudes to build their knowledge" [sic]

"As I mentioned before, I do it because I like the research process and I think it is important to reflect upon my teaching practice to find ways to improve it." [sic]

"Because everything that a teacher does is to make the world a better place and to improve society." [sic]

"By improving teaching practices, we can help society improve academic approaches as well as institutions." [sic]

Survey; teachers' comments; question 6, 2014

Teachers seemed to possess a common interest though different identities; some of them interested in growing as professionals, others willing to do research to make the world a better place and some to improve their practices as well as their institutions. However, when asked about their previous or current engagement in this activity, most of them claimed not to have been fully engaged in this activity for several reasons:

"Policies forcing researchers to do things to unrealistic deadlines!"

"Institutions do not pay teachers for doing research."

"Being overwhelmed in terms of deadlines and expected goals."

"I feel that sometimes I do it because I have to, not because I want to"

Survey; teachers' comments; question 9, 2014.

Arguably, research was seen as something embedded within the dynamics of the institution where the pedagogical practice takes places. However and although teachers see this endeavor as something that might help them bring about instructional changes, little do they embrace research from a self-initiated practice but rather as something imposed.

Therefore, the current study was conducted with the aim of documenting what inquiring into teachers' research experiences via life stories could reveal about their professional identities and trajectories in an EFL context With this in mind, the following constructs were used as the theoretical foundations of the study.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Narrative Inquiry: Life History

Keeping teacher research in mind, it may be said that narrative inquiry brings storytelling and research together either by using stories as research data or by using storytelling as a tool for data analysis of presentation of findings. Thus, this study used narrative inquiry as an umbrella term for research involving stories (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014), which may serve to help us understand how language teachers as researchers organize their researching experiences and identities and represent them to themselves and to others in a field.

2.2 The Life History

Goodson and Sikes (2001) argue that the life history focuses on stories and the wider personal experience of a subject within a social and historical context. Then, narrative research and life histories are strongly associated with the importance of understanding individual lives and their experience in different contexts (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000).

Life history is then defined by Watson and Watson-Franke (1985) as a retrospective account by the individual of his or her life in whole or part, in written or oral form, that has been elicited or prompted by another person. Consequently, it aims to penetrate deeper than any other approaches by allowing the subjects to tell their stories and present their views in a way that "the stories people tell researchers are not isolated individual affairs but reflect and constitute the dialectics of power relations and competing truths within the wider society" (Bron & West, 2000, p. 159).

2.3 Teacher Research: LTI as Professionals

Grounded in literature, the notion of professional brings forth the following qualities (a) it creates a climate in which participants feel respected; (b) encourages the active participation of participants; (c) builds on their experiences; (d) employs collaborative inquiry; (e) guides learning for immediate application; and (f) empowers the participants through reflection and action based on their learning (Lawler & King, 2000, as cited in Lawler, 2003). With this in mind, teachers as professionals are assumed to be able to construct their own knowledge about the causes and consequences of their actions to give answers to specific practical problems and questions, and to provide evidence of what works in practice and why (Ponte, 2005).

To Borg (2010, p. 395):

> "Teacher research is a systematic inquiry, qualitative and /or quantitative, conducted by teachers in their own professional contexts, individually or collaboratively (with other teachers or external collaborators), and which aims to enhance teachers` understanding of some aspect of their work, is made public, has the potential to contribute to better quality of teaching and learning in individual classrooms and which may also inform institutional improvement and educational policy more broadly."

With reference to this, we hold the view that inquiry carried out by teachers turns out to be pivotal for us as researchers to locate the professional self within the processes of learning that are afforded by any educational setting where they exist. This is why any attempt to become a better professional puts forward the notion of identity as something still in flux.

The approach to identity that is underpinned here is situated within the symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), that teachers can achieve within the academic community. Arguably, the concept of identity, from a professional stance, yields a rich understanding of the relationship between self and a certain context of practice (Foucault, 1988). In that respect and to avoid a murky definition of language teacher identity (LTI), we might say that 1) identity is the outcome of an interface between the personal experiences of teachers and the social, cultural, and institutional context in which they function on a daily basis (van den Berg, 2002); and 2) that identify and more specifically LTIs are " cognitive, social, emotional, ideological and historical- they are both inside the teacher and outside the social" (Barkhuizen, 2017, p. 4). Then, LTI socially constructed, being an "on-going negotiation between the individual and the social context or environment" (Hawkins, 2005, p. 59).

2.4 Teachers and Professional Communities of Practice

Community is a potent symbolic presence. Cohen's (1985) notion of community as a "symbolic construct" is useful to account for how individuals create a sense of themselves as belonging in a particular setting of relationships and interactions (Hyland, 2012). Embedded in academic settings, conducting research has emerged as an obligation for language teachers to develop professionally.

The notion of community has been used to demonstrate immersion in the teaching and inquiry activity of the pedagogical reality and it displays affinity and connection with the field. By contrast, this study acknowledges

that research is often viewed by teachers as out of touch and irrelevant to their local contexts.

3. Method

This study took on a qualitative approach since not only is it a situated activity that locates different sets of interpretative materials to turn the world into a series of representations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) but also because a qualitative approach to inquiry is identified with the notion of multiple realities, the idea that understandings are created through interaction between the knower and the unknown or subject, and that subjects are studied in their natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). This is why, to get to know more in detail the data collected, the methodological approach used to analyze data collected was of thematic analysis. There are several theme-based approaches such as elements of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2006) used in content analysis. This data analysis approach known as ATA was seen here based on a set of inductive and iterative techniques designed to identify categories and concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Since this model of analysis may comprise similar steps to those proposed by Charmaz (2006), in ATA output may or may not be a theoretical model, but its analytical elements are quite similar.

The study built as well on Narrative Inquiry as a theory of research and methodological approach to look into teachers' professional experiences and in turn trace out possible constructions and changes in their identities as professionals and their own trajectories as EFL teachers.

3.1 Context

This study had a bearing on exploring what inquiring into teachers' research experiences via life stories could inform about their professional identity and trajectories in an EFL context. Therefore, the study took place at a binational English teaching institution in Bogota, Colombia where embedded in a professional development program, three EFL teachers participated in a series of interviews in order to narrate their professional experiences as teacher researchers.

These EFL teachers were selected since they were in charge of either conducting research to explore their classroom realities or "coaching" other members of the academic community, guiding them through the step-by-step of this inquiry process. The professional development program created by the institution started with the aim of providing teachers with the opportunity to grow professionally and in so doing reflect upon their pedagogical practices within the EFL classroom. For administrators and the institution in general, "teachers should be full professionals, able to contribute to and learn from the field of second and foreign language learning" (Institutional document, 2014). This belief has stated that the notion of "a full professional" may refer to those teachers who by being immersed in the teaching field are trying to pursue a research development within the field of English language teaching.

With this in mind, what has been done by the academic community in relation to teachers' development foregrounds its self-immersion in the paths of conducting research studies. On this matter, we believe that any community can be "inspired, helped, supported, enlightened, unshackled, or empowered" (Wenger, 1998, p. 6), especially following guiding principles of action research since it seems to "transform the educational practice into a meaningful pedagogical process" (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2010, p. 44).

With respect to action research, the institution has embraced the following benefits of action research. Firstly, action research can be used to fill the gap between theory and practice (Johnson, 2012); secondly, action research can facilitate teacher empowerment (Fueyo & Koorland, 1997); and lastly, that action research certainly promotes continuous learning (Boyer, 1990).

3.2 Trustworthiness: The Authenticity of Life Stories

According to Barkhuizen et al. (2014), a quantitative study is judged to be "reliable or valid," when the data collection and analysis are carried out in such a way that their replication would produce the same results. Nonetheless, the notion of reliability in a narrative study makes little sense if it is placed within the qualitative paradigm. Instead, the notion of validity in quantitative studies corresponds to the concept of credibility, trustworthiness, and authenticity in qualitative studies which means that the study's findings are accurate or true not only from the standpoint of the researcher but also from that of the participants and the readers of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

As this study is a dialogical effort to unfold teachers' experiences regarding research, results and findings presented in this study took on three main assumptions. Firstly, that the "trust" and "rapport" that was built with the research participants during the process of the interviews enhanced the "trustworthiness" of the research (Liu & Xu, 2011, p. 591); secondly, "the cumulative effect of narrative reasoning was understood as the collection of individual cases in which thought moves from case to case instead of from generalization" (Polkinghorne, 1995,

p. 11); lastly, that data were seen as negotiated process (Doyle, 2007).

4. Results

4.1 Life History: Andres

Andres was a teacher who held a bachelor degree in the teaching of English from a very well-known University in Bogota, Colombia. Andres speaks about his current experience doing research by comparing it with the one he carried out in his degree. Andres described this experience as "enriching" since he got to know about it as a learner or as pre-service teacher when he had to do it for his academic practicum. As an in-service teacher, Andres claimed that his views and perceptions of research and learning in general were validated by; 1) a personal interest in finishing his degree; 2) the influence of those senior teachers who were mainly directing or guiding the inquiry process within the classroom; and 3) Andres' classmates who shared the same academic interest and whose personal relationships had an impact on the process. Andres seemed to be highly satisfied with the coaching process he had at university. In the interview he participated in, he started by saying:

> "ok, I am new and not new in research because actually I did action research at XXX, I come from XXX University. By the time, it was a nice experience though it is demanding because when you are working on your thesis you are motivated, also I had the guidance through the whole process, it took like one or one and a half years, it was very very nice, a nice experience."

Interestingly, this personal involvement came along with the opportunities afforded by the research context the university presented him with. As argued by Norton and Toohey (2001) this sort of personal involvement can be seen by using the term "investment" since the idea of working on a "thesis" foregrounds the acquisition of a wide range of symbolic resources, which would increase the cultural capital and social power of Andres as the one who "invests" (Norton, 1995) in doing research. This personal interest had to do more with the possibility of validating his studies to be recognized by others as a teacher. At the time he was trying to graduate, Andres was indeed part of an imagined community of teacher-researchers ruled by government requirements; a community that as stated in the narration he was not part of but a community in which he was situating his learning.

As contended by Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 29) "learning viewed as situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process that we call legitimate peripheral participation". Goodson (2006, p. 18) argues that it is necessary to build in an understanding of the context, historical and social in which human experience and learning take place. Therefore, life history was used here to locate the self within its respective story and the broader social and historical context. Hence, when Andres was asked to check the meaning and analysis of the transcribed verbatim of his interview, he mentioned that not only did motivation affect the choice to do research but also to persist with it and the effort expended on such research activity. For Andres research at the university was both an inherent practice and a practical extension of knowledge that intentionally made him part of the community in which he was embedded.

In contrast to this, Andres's experience moved towards a different identification with the community of practice. In this experiential alteration, Andres made explicit a shift in his perception regarding research and growth as professional.

> "Now, I find it challenging and difficult in the following way; number one, as I said before, actually I would like to join another program but when you are or when you belong to only one program in this case the XXX, you feel that it is so demanding, doing action research which is time consuming, it implies a lot of effort only for, during the week. So, it would be different if it you are taking part of a program from Monday to Saturday, maybe you would not feel that difficulty like when thinking you are to do research; number two, though it is time consuming it is also expensive. When you are trying to get some not theory but literary reviews, in Colombia in general, it is kind of difficult to find the ones that you need because most of the databases are that official that you need to pay, so when you try to get access to different types of literature reviews or research projects, you do not get actually the ones you need, the ones that can be that meaningful for your study because a good database implies money, I think that is something that the people who planned this did not consider because we teachers we actually don't…"

What we made out of this short story had to do with how his own involvement and desire of investment to do research had changed. Indeed, Andres focused on those pitfalls that might have hindered his own engagement. One instance of this was the lack of access to databases that for him implied having money to afford them. Andres also saw policy makers/administrators as the key factor for this sort of disempowerment.

Andres' experience doing research seemed to be linked to his own professional agenda. Andres' participation in research appeared to be transitory when he was at the university since not only was he politically subsumed

within the learning process afforded by the university but also because this activity was justified and legitimized by his own participation within the community of practice. *Au contraire*, his participation within the current or subsequent community portrayed learning as something imposed that lacked the integration of agent, world, and activity (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

In regards to Andres' stance on stakeholders or administrators, much of the literature indicates that "administrators serve as professional development managers as those who create "a well-ordered environment so that work can be accomplished effectively and efficiently to the satisfaction of those involved"" (Bradley, Kallick, & Regan, 1991, p. 5). Surprisingly, Andres shed light on a tension between what is asked to be done and what is given to do it, a view that needs to be sifted through.

If it is understood that not only do teachers possess knowledge but that they can perform as creators and inquirers of their own professional and academic practices within the context of experience, it is important then to contrast what was found in Andres' life history. To do so, we decided to explore John's life history.

4.2 Life History: John

John is an in-service teacher who holds a bachelor degree to the teaching of English and a master degree from a very well-known university in Bogota, Colombia. Owing to the educational background he has, John also plays the role of teacher-coach. He is in charge of guiding teachers in the process of research. John's account of his professional experience offers a wealth of evidence to better understand the interrelated connection between professional identity and investment. Norton (1995) introduced the notion of investment to better capture the complex and conflicting factors affecting the extent to which language learners create, respond to, and sometimes resist opportunities to practice English. We hold the view that this notion could be extended to teachers' experiences. To this respect, John seems to see teachers as motivated or unmotivated. Such conflicting investment may be the reason why they desire or not to take up opportunities to pursue the research experience. Nevertheless, John directs specific attention to the education background possessed by teachers:

"Other thing that I have observed is that our backgrounds do matter when we are starting a research process even when we are coming up with ideas. So, what I have seen is that teachers whose backgrounds are research based or are connected to research in some way, they take it in a very… I don't know how to say this, in a very comfortable fashion "ok, we are going to carry out research and that is it" but teachers whose contact with research and specifically with action research is non-existent or was like little, you can see that they do not really like to take it because they want to carry out a research process."

From a critical perspective, investment here is situated under some conditions teachers decide to associate to their own professional and personal confidence as teachers. The education background possessed by teachers turns out to trigger their agentic and professional selves. From such a perspective, teachers' professional agency positions their identities as context-dependent. In John's life story, it is also unveiled that agency encompasses the capability to ascribe relevance and significance to things and events, including agentive behavior (van Lier, 2008). Teachers conceive and act towards research based on their own experiences and their own decision to exercise their professional selves; research is the result of teachers' conceptions of their educational and learning practice.

John's position as coach has invested him with the possibility to get closer to teachers' experiences. John seems to be concerned about teacher's reasons to do research:

"Another thing, I would say is like… I see teachers very worried about coming up with ideas for research and I would say that from my personal perspective research comes from your daily routines, let's say…I mean, if you start observing closely, if you start being more systematic with your teaching and being more attentive to details, there is where research ideas emerge, but I do not really see that, I see more teachers sitting down a night trying to figure out "what is it I am going to research?, what is the topic I want to dig in? What is the topic I want to deepen in? like "I want to be more effective in this way or in that way" but without really having carried out something like more reflective…maybe it is not the best word to describe this process, but like not taking into account their daily experience, their observation, the little things that you every day find in the classroom or in your students….if I have to describe it in a phrase –problems emerge from the teacher's worries more than from realities that are around the classes- I would say this is a difficulty that teachers might encounter."

Arguably, teachers' reasons to do research seem to move away from solving classroom problems, as a movement of social change or as a form of personal and professional development (Hammersley, 2004) and have fallen down into simply instrumentalized behaviors of professional practice. Teachers from John's eyes seem to

disregard their daily experiences and make of research a professional puzzle in which the real purpose of research is overshadowed by the need of complying with the institutional requirements. This sort of "problem" comes, in part, from trying to force an engagement in research over a self-initiating willingness to carry it out. In his own words:

> "I would say that is one of the pitfalls of the thing, because I find teachers like, they do not really establish a connection between practices and research and that is, I think, a big problem because they cope with problems, they can research problems, they come up with research questions and they come up with research objectives and all this type of protocol and formal things of a research process but I do not see teachers really take their practices there, I might be bias in this moment, but I have observed quite a long amount of time and a lot of classes and I do not really see teachers…"

Practices and realities are not taken into consideration to set a valuable research to pose a worth researching problem and to dig into the realities that are out there. Thus, the life stories used here as life histories, come across similar paths of experience but unveil for real different but interrelated dimensions that are foreground and see from the participants' eyes.

4.3 Life History: Julian

Julian was an in-service teacher who held a bachelor degree to the teaching of English from a very well-known university in Bogota, Colombia. Surprisingly, Julian also brought up some key issues that related to research and connected what was previously said by Andres:

> "I think, the thing about, you have to find all this information about research that has been done before, sometimes it tough and boring because you have to find all this information and sometimes you don't find enough information for your research and that is something that for me has been difficult because in the literature review, I have tried to find people working on the same field but not many people are working on that. They are working on phonics but not on IPA, like teaching directly, IPA symbols and those things, I just found one teacher, she actually works in XXX and she is working on that, how to show students the symbols and how to teach them those symbols to try to help them to pronounce better without stress and in funny way, in a simple way."

In the excerpt above, it was evident the pitfall with respect finding information related to their research studies. Nonetheless, Julian did not refer to any institution as the responsible for this issue. If the aforementioned is considered, the concept of agency might be an essential concept to understand Julian's professional identity in relation to his experience doing research. Agency conceived as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112) foregrounds that identity needs to be conceived through its connection with investment.

Agency and identity capture the degree to which people actively put symbolic, material and other resources into their language learning (Norton, 1995) though in this cases, how Julian can or not upon to overcome the encountered pitfalls. Agency indeed refers to "the capability of individual human beings to make choices and act on these choices in a way that makes a difference in their lives" (Martin, 2004, p. 135) as such, any kind of idea, behavior, or choice must band together the individual and the capacity of being, though within the possibilities afforded by the social structures in which he or she is situated (van Lier, 2008). In the excerpt below, Julian exercised agency and made an effort by using the own institution, more specifically colleagues in order to find a different path to gain knowledge.

> "I don't know, I have tried to find more people talking about that, but sometimes, what I said at the beginning, asking my colleagues if they are applying this kind of things, and asking my teachers at the university, I had a teacher in phonetics, she has helped me a lot."

Wenger (1998, p. 149) makes a clear link between the personal and professional self of a teacher. "Identity is the negotiated experience of self, involves community membership, has a learning trajectory, combines different forms of membership within an identity, and presumes involvement in local and global contexts". When Julian argued that *others* have contributed to his own understanding of a given problematic, it brought forth four pivotal implications. Firstly, that the professional identity of teachers yields a rich understanding of the relationship between self and a certain context of practice (Foucault, 1988); secondly, that professional identity, seen from Julian's life story, is situated from an interface between the personal experience and the social, cultural, and institutional context in which they function on a daily basis (van den Berg, 2002); thirdly, "Teachers learn by doing, reading, and reflecting (just as students do) but also by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see" (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011, p. 83).

Julian's own involvement with his community of practice emphasized the inherently and socially character of learning within the community that was concerned with how doing and knowing are collaboratively mediated. Thus Julian does echo Wenger's (1998, p. 56) notion of participation in which "participation in social communities shapes our experience and it also shapes those communities, the transformative potential goes in both ways". Julian's life story and experience represented the professional conditions by which research gets to be shaped and how professionally speaking identity combines trajectory and membership (Wenger, 1998). The excerpt below may substantiate this:

> "I think that before I start my research process I had a different point of view of teaching, ok. It was, you learn something in the university, in terms of grammar, on how to teach, how in years some teachers have taught, and that is it that is what you have to apply for the rest of your life as teacher. But I have found that is not the way, every day you find different ways, different people who are working on research trying to find different ways to teach, different ways to learn, I think, it has changed a lot my point of view about teaching."

Julian's professional identity emerged as something ongoing, situated and fragmented through experience. From such a perspective, learning to do research was not only embedded in the practices of the communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) but it also emerged as a collective endeavor of a community engaged in developing a specific form of practice.

Thus, Julian's experience doing research seemed to be linked to a more personal though collaborative agenda. Julian's professional identity could, in few words, be conceived in general terms as imbued by his own socioculturally mediated capacity to act (Ahearn, 2001).

5. Conclusions

This study aimed at to document and explore how teachers seen as potential researchers lived and experienced a research processes as result of an institutional policy in a private but non-profit institution where the ideal role for teachers was of becoming full professionals. Although many academics in narrative research have regarded experience as the distinguishing feature that separates narratives from other kinds of qualitative study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Reissman, 1993; Ricoeur, 1981), experience is seen as well as an approach. Thus, the experience approach carried out in this study made evident that "the meanings of events and experience are constantly being reframed within the contexts of our current and ongoing lives" (Mishler, 1986, p. 37), why teachers as researchers, from a narrative perspective, displayed different professional identities that can be now linked to the communities of practice where they are immersed (Wenger, 1998).

From these academic communities, teachers' identities emerged through a collectively developed understanding of research given and shared by the institution they worked for. However, such understanding was not mediated by a mutual engagement among teachers' personal agendas but by the one afforded by the institution. One instance of this was Andres whose interest in doing research emerged as something imposed and not self-initiated. For him, research is definitely important to become aware of any teaching practice. Nonetheless, research cannot be driven by external interests since this would make it an artificial task and not the ideal activity where teachers can reflect and "exercise judgment in deciding how to act" (Pollard et al., 2008, p. 5).

Teachers seemed to abide by the requirements of their profession but they seemed not to exercise their professional agency to overlap their personal desires of investment with practices and realities encountered in their lives as professionals. Teachers were acting without claiming ownership of their own professional practices and as a result their professional agency and self-determination were to be limited; arguably motivation and autonomy were as well two sides of the same coin of agency (van Lier, 1996).

In this study, it was found that professional identity can be (re) constructed by many personal, social and emotional experiences that have an important effect on the teaching expertise several EFL teachers undertake in their professions. Thus, LTI can be altered based on teachers' relationships they establish within the community and undergo changes when previous and current experiences are put together; in turn, teachers' experiences assist teachers to link their prior identity as professionals, with the one arising from the current experience in order to either be situated or to imagine themselves as agents of change. Hence, when teachers inquire into their lives as professionals and make connections to their own experiences and practices, the stories resulting from this inquiry enabled teachers to organize and articulate what they know and believe about teaching, and make connections between their personal and professional lives (Johnson & Golombek, 2011).

To sum up, any educational community needs to engage in a debate about the several values behind conducting research. Such debate would allow both teachers and stakeholders to open a broader interpretation on what is

needed to make of research a more valuable process for teachers regarding professional growth. On this, Wilson (2002, p. 143) argues that "if educational research is to change practice for the better… It can only do this by operating through the minds and the understanding of practitioners."

Thus, teachers' voices and experiences need to be kept in mind to find a balance between institutional and personal agendas and these issues should be included in the curriculum used to educate future EFL teachers.

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