

3. Experiencing Uncertainties

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*“El lenguaje que dice la verdad
es el lenguaje sentipensante.
El que es capaz de pensar sintiendo
y sentir pensando”.*

*“The language that tells the truth
is the language sentipensante¹⁰.
The one that is able to think feeling,
and to feel thinking.”
(Galeano, 1992)*

Introduction

We could not find better words to describe what becoming a researcher capable to expose himself/herself, while understanding *the others*, means to us. The word *sentipensante*, which was first used by Orlando Fals Borda (1981) on his marvelous anthology, and then coined by Eduardo Galeano (1992), refers to a type of person who is able to use a language where reason and heart combine to think and feel. In this chapter, *sentipensante* will be used as a paratext to analyze how such person is invited to resist intellectual colonialism during his process to becoming ELT researcher, and ends up emotionally and physically affected (Fals Borda, 1968). This chapter was inspired by the speeches, responses, and reactions from doctoral students to a research course that invited them to integrate an epistemological reflexivity (Vasilachis, 2009) into their research agendas and personas. Such exercises of reflexion should take those doctoral students to think about methodologies that prevent from preconceived answers, simplistic formulas, and certainties assumed as irrefutable facts. This deep thinking is also a part of our own

¹⁰ The impossibility of separating mind and soul.

reflections about the struggles and resistances of teachers who want to govern themselves (Méndez, 2017), to the point that we have decided to extend it to the academic field so that to expose some of our own wounds and struggles as education researchers in the Global South.

When reflecting upon the meaning and implications of being a PhD student in a specific area of knowledge, some demands from the established academic community become immediately apparent. Among them, I can mention the challenge to being able of producing relevant and situated knowledge to the field; being able to adopt and adapt a type of reasoning to integrate our research into the existing work; and, to succeed when developing and delivering academic dissertations with a correct use of the terminology, perspectives, standards, methods and procedures, in order to be accepted as member of the academic community, while making our own research reliable, and consequently enjoying the power and privilege of speaking with confidence. Some of these challenges are, often times, openly discussed and shared, while some others take place covertly. Indeed, some of these demands can be easily accepted while others must be endured! Once we have been educated in the academic tradition of the Global North, it has been not easy for us to face the epistemological and personal demands of doing research from a South-South perspective, where being *sentipensante* seems to be the right and only mood that fits within a type of research that really cares for *the others*.

When reading Vasilachis' ideas (1997; 2003) regarding a meta-epistemology to think qualitative research, where the knowing subject (*sujeto cognoscente*) and the to-be-known subject (*sujeto conocido*) are necessarily complementary, we come to realize how some ways of being and relating to people, that are common within the research communities, have been the outcome of some scientific dominant paradigms that claim for objectivity. Such claims have forced researchers to adopt and adapt some specific parameters to explain realities that match certain theories, as well as to use a language that hides subjectivity, and to use labels such as *informants*, *participants*, and *data*, all of them usurping the legitimate identity of the individuals and turning them into generalizations. Vasilachis' ideas have brought up a new and different understanding to our intention to conduct our research within a decolonial perspective, which immediately led us to question our own journey as researchers. It has, in turn, made us realize that we have supported canonical research in ELT. We have also assumed that certain types of discourses on researching, teaching and even acting are the natural way of

thinking. Furthermore, we have developed, yet involuntarily, an undesirable sense of superiority in our being teacher-researchers, upon the basis of some certainties coming from those views behind canonical research.

Conducting research is a process whose effects can be experienced in different forms. Some of us, researchers, might have felt compelled to follow the methodological traditions learned in the early years of our undergraduate or graduate education, thus undertaking our research projects within the perspective of knowledge extractivism. Such traditions have provided a sort of research *fluency* regarding *how to proceed*, which had gotten internalized, thus making us to speak of, to act on, and to perpetuate, a type of research where we thought we knew everything and had control over every single aspect including the perceptions of our participants. Yet, at some point along our research trajectories, some of us have felt summoned to go beyond those certainties and conduct a type of research that is open to uncertainties and new possibilities, thus transforming all individuals who are involved, including the researcher, while sharing power with everyone. However, arriving to this new locus of enunciation has never been an easy endeavor; becoming a *decolonial thinker* and a *sentipensante* researcher proved a goal causing wounds and making us vulnerable, since it would make our fears, trepidations and insecurities emerge. Although researchers would prefer to keep for themselves some types of episodes on this process most of them related to own struggles in the making as researchers, I agree with Alsup (2006) regarding her views that individuals' subjectivities act as the main vehicle to relate to each other, if assumed that a noticeable change will occur within the research process, and that such is particularly true within the arena of teacher education programs. That is, precisely, what qualitative research should show! We, researchers, should be able to explain how our locus of enunciation compelled us to work with teachers and prospective teachers, in our case, in order to understand, through our particular stories and problems, who we are, and how we have become subjects of the English teaching practice. In this sense, the challenge to being really impacted by our interactions with other individuals requires a serious ethical commitment to self-knowledge and openness.

Central to this discussion, is to share how the reactions of some doctoral students can be documented as struggles and wounds experienced during the process of preparing their research project at a doctoral level. I would like to start by discussing some of our first reactions to an opening exercise that took place within one of the sessions of our research seminar. The overall

purpose of such exercise was to assess the *coherence* and *consistency* of some research projects developed by our students. The exercise could have been regarded, at first glance, rather simple, as it only involved a chart to be horizontally filled to depict relations among research questions, objectives, methodology, instruments and, most importantly, assumptions subjacent to those questions and objectives. A second view would reveal that the chart intended to be an effective tool to detect how/if some assumptions lacked the proper connection with the questions. Actually, we, the participants in the seminar (which included thesis advisors as well as students), were able to corroborate that the chart was highly effective at making evident any inconsistencies; in fact, and despite the highly canonical chart template, when we engaged in discussions about some assumptions of our students, based on what was depicted in the chart, challenges and queries regarding some research questions or objectives that had been accepted in previous steps of the research process were uncovered. More specifically, for some projects the intended linkage between the epistemological view (decolonial or poststructuralism) and some specific procedures or research instruments revealed problematic.

The reactions of students to this exercise, in particular from those who were at the time more experienced in conducting research on a particular topic, were emotional and even perturbing. We were able to attest how some of the most self-confident students went through a sort of *panic ego attack* when they failed to sustain the validity of their exercise without invoking an author or a theory. Some other students were assaulted by a nervous laughter and ended up confessing their impossibility to explain the contradictions. Even some others, were unable to hide their concern and fear for not knowing how to fix a particular problem. This particular exercise was a breaking point even for us as teacher-advisors, because we did not have answers to all the questions of our students; additionally, we needed to recognize that we did not go through any similar type of pression when we were graduate students, mostly because by then we followed canonical views and methods to conducting research despite of our poststructuralist or critical epistemology positions.

Our expectations to challenge the rules that the so-called Global North had imposed upon us regarding not only conducting research but also upon our being and think, became essential. We believe that such is what a graduate education program from the Global South in our field must embrace. We do not know to what extend this challenge can be acknowledged, particularly by some people, even if they come to recognize it as a contradiction. The reason

to our doubts is that, while we speak and teach English, most of the time we do not even dare to speak about what it means to be an English teacher in Colombia. So, if we the graduate professors who teach English in our country do not discuss these matters, who is going to do it? Our conclusion is that we need a type of research able of exposing our own wounds, which at the same time carrying the potentiality to heal them and help us to think differently.

At some point while conducting our research projects, we all agreed to bring to the table inspiring literature and some other works in order to analyze how researchers who positioned themselves as decolonial, critical, or poststructuralists in qualitative research, dealt with a *sentipensante* epistemology implicating an ethical and political commitment to getting involved with the subject to-be-known. We also agreed in creating an atmosphere of work where we would be not afraid to expose our fears, insecurities and doubts. And, tacitly, we also agreed in becoming a community of researchers willing to work for social justice and cooperate with each other to dismantle colonialism within our research field.

As our research seminars have advanced, we have witnessed how the experience of conducting research under this mindframe sometimes turned painful. In the face of canonical research requirements, demands or criticisms to the works of our students elicited certain types of reactions. Some students who might have been taken over by their emotions, would bite their tongues and/or repress their tears in order to avoid any visible expression of their pain. Some others would get their face red and reacted with rage, even muttering incomprehensible words; here, those who risked speaking under such circumstance would need to come later on and apologize for having been rude.

We devoted some time to open expressions of those individual emotions while having a coffee or a tutoring session. Not surprisingly, even during some of such conversations, physical manifestations were experienced. For instance, some students confessed that they were unable to decompress regarding their thesis even at night, which had seriously disrupted the quality of their sleep; some others started to suffer health problems after enrolled in the doctoral program; some others started experiencing displeasure at work because they did not feel comfortable working with a different set of beliefs in comparison to those we maintain at our classes; a few of them were depressed or intimidated to the point that some even contemplated the idea of dropping out.

So, as graduate program professors, we wonder: are we exerting excessive pressure on our future doctors? Of course, we are! We do know their capabilities and potentialities as researchers. We also recognize that their research proposals are very promising for the field, to the point that we want to get the most of them, which should allow us to make their works highly visible. As advisors, we are learning from them, while we are all but available and willing to support them and push them to give their very best. At the same time, our students are also experiencing the social pressure from colleagues and bosses who have specific expectations about them as full-time graduate teachers at their workplaces. Support from the families of these future doctors is also crucial to surviving along all those years of study and research! But, what could be said in face of all that much time invested on the doctoral program if our future doctors are not devoting time to their families? Just to describe this reality by using an expression from the digital era, it can be stated that our future doctors always live in thesis mode! Every person who has been through the experience of developing his doctoral thesis, knows that a variety of emotions is experienced every single day. But at the end, we all shall see the worth of the effort.

Despite of all the considerations above, we would like to highlight that our students experienced a pressure that was stronger than any other, the most implacable one, the worst of all. Such was, the intellectual pressure that our doctoral students exercised upon themselves. Once they were seduced by the decolonial, critical and poststructuralist viewpoints, they became their own critics. Sometimes, they refused to present their work because they considered it superfluous or lacking rigorousness. They had been so open to change that they started experiencing doubts and questioning some characteristics or procedures of research that they had taken for granted before. Another important aspect to highlight here, is that we embarked on reading again some authors to problematize their claims and assumptions under these new epistemological lenses. Such new readings led us to rediscover different forms to position ourselves and expose our locus of enunciation, which in the past had been ignored because of canonical dominances.

Conclusion

In canonical methodologies, *thinking* prevails over *feeling*. Hence, objectivity in research reports is highly valued, thus creating the impression that conducting research is a process where the researcher is, in no way, related to the research question as if it was not a concern; additionally, the researchers are assumed to be not affected at all by their interactions with research participants or the context under study. It would seem that they are immune to the assault of doubts, contradictions and uncertainties! In this sense, researchers within this tradition are dispossessed from their subjectivity and from the expression of their emotions, learnings and transformations. That was the reason why, the main goal of this chapter was to make visible that the constitution of English language teachers as researchers at this doctoral program, embraces an epistemology where *thinking* and *feeling* are intimately interrelated. We cannot turn a blind eye to epistemologies that rescue the human side of research and bring to the surface researchers' struggles to subvert the canon while decolonizing themselves.

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