Chapter 5.
English Language Teachers´ Critical Identities

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Abstract

The field of education in Colombia demands a critical position due to the policies that seem to be conceived from the concept of a globalized and neoliberal world, which does have an incidence over the students´ learning processes. I have observed that, as English language teachers, we all have a critical identity, but that it shows itself during certain situations. A critical position towards education and pedagogy may make the difference between perpetuating traditional practices and proposing innovative practices that are coherent with Colombian students' particularities and needs. Many studies have explored teachers' identities, but little has been said about critical identity. Therefore, I find it relevant to understand how we construct our critical identities and their characteristics. I want to explore, understand, and reflect on how life histories, at both the personal and professional level, determine our critical identities, as well as their transcendence in our teaching practice.

Keywords: Criticalities, identities, teaching practices, education.

Researcher Positionality

I was born in Bogotá 40 years ago as the second son of a very young couple. My father was a language teacher, and my mother was a housewife. Both faced difficult situations, which, after two more children, lead them to file for divorce when I was seven. This event and a complicated economic situation made me into a child with emotional and behavioral issues. My parents looked for help, and it finally came from my third, fourth, and fifth grade teacher, who practiced a non-traditional teaching methodology in a public elementary school. She encouraged me to teach

my partners to play the flute and the guitar, sparking my interest in becoming a teacher. In my early years of primary school, I developed a keen awareness of the importance of critical thinking as a tool for engaging with the world around me. However, upon transitioning to high school, I encountered an institution with a decidedly traditional approach, prioritizing theory over practical application and emphasizing strict adherence to rules and orders. This juxtaposition significantly shaped my critical perspective on education, as the school failed to address my individual needs, leading to frustration and resentment. Despite my challenging high school experience, my aspiration to become a teacher persisted. While I had not yet decided on the subject I wished to teach, teaching and music were the only two future career paths I could envision. However, I perceived the educational system as a hindrance to my dream, prompting me to withdraw before entering the eighth grade. I opted for a self-directed approach, completing my academic studies independently and validating my secondary education through the ICFES test.

At that time, I genuinely believed the traditional school model held little societal significance and could disappear without adverse consequences. This conviction guided my subsequent journey as an English language teacher at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, where my primary goal was to create meaningful learning experiences for my students within the context of their lives. This commitment persisted throughout my Master's studies, where I delved into exploring students' argumentative writing skills, and over the course of my ten-year tenure teaching in a public school. However, my unwavering commitment to innovative educational approaches has occasionally resulted in conflicts with colleagues who adhere to more traditional views on education. Despite these challenges, I remain dedicated to fostering a dynamic and impactful learning environment for my students.

My Research Interest

In this section I will describe the research problem that has taken shape during the first part of my doctoral studies, as well as some related studies. I want to problematize the relationship between two social issues: criticality and identity. The discussion will help me understand how we, as English language teachers, construct our identities as an ongoing process that follows the same lines of the construction of a critical identity.

In relation to identity, Wenger (1998, cited by Tsui, 2007) sees it as a relational and experiential issue where we establish associations and differentiations, while positioning ourselves as part of socially organized categories and roles. As teachers we build an identity that is shaped by the events and experiences in our practice, and which characterizes our actions both inside and outside

the classroom. Zembylas (2003) offers three views of identity that I have taken as guide for my study: Ericksonian and neo-Ericksonian, socio-cultural, and post-structural. The first view points out that the person is the one who adapts and fits to life situations. The second view considers that the best way to understand how our mind works is by observing the social and cultural processes that influence the construction of who we are. Finally, the third view analyzes the socio-political context and its importance in the way identities are constructed and influenced by emotions, thoughts, judgments, and beliefs; from a poststructural view, identity is shaped by the relations between the narratives of subjectivity and the narratives of culture. I assume that the interactions we have within the field of education have an impact over our emotions, thoughts, and judgments, and they determine our actions as teachers. However, the construction of our critical identity may be traced from events we lived before our incursion into the teaching world; these past actions can potentially characterize the way we understand and live this identity.

Our identities are determined by the events and characteristics of our teaching context both inside and outside the classroom. Zare-Ee & Ghasedi (2014) analyzed how teachers' professional identities are constructed and how our self-image —in terms of our success or our students' success, our families, maybe a second job, etc., — are elements that outline our professional roles and the way we are seen by ourselves and by others, which affect the way our identity is formed. The events of our lives are constantly shaping and re-shaping our identity, and one of the things that I seek to understand with this study is the role played by movements and changes in our critical identity during our lives. Santa Monica (2017), who analyzed the process of redefining teacher identity by exploring areas of teacher socialization, argues that when we become teachers, there is a formation, and even a transformation, of our identity because it is a negotiated and shifting process; this process is not isolated nor personal, and arises from the socio-cultural elements of the field of education. I find it interesting to understand the elements and events that change our critical identity, and which may determine the transcendence of our critical positions towards the classroom.

An element that characterizes teachers' identities has to do with how being an agent with a wide incidence over the social context, leads us to assume positions that may agree or disagree with educative policies and administrative decisions. I assume this is a manifestation of our critical identity —which determines our concepts, actions, and decisions—, but sometimes it is hard to find this identity inside the classrooms. Miller *et al*. (2017), who analyzed language teacher identity as the base of educational practice and observe Foucault's notion of ethical self-formation to understand the development of teacher agency and critical

identity work, pointed out that our objective as language teachers is to facilitate transformation inside the classroom to improve our students' learning processes. According to the authors, our ethical judgments may create consciousness of our subjectivity in terms of how discourses influence the way language is taught and learnt. This critical identity, which may emerge when we try to resist educative policies that we do not find appropriate, should transcend to the classroom, so our students may benefit from untraditional teaching practices that allow them to construct their own critical identities.

The other element I want to problematize has to do with *being critical*. When it comes to talk about this issue in the ELT field, it is quite common to reflect on it as a language teaching approach and, later, to develop critical thinking or critical awareness. Therefore, talking about being critical in the language teaching field means creating teacher instruction programs, enroll teachers to the concept, and implement strategies to promote critical thinking or awareness in their students. Nowadays, critical thinking has become a prominent issue when it comes to designing school syllabi. For instance, syllabi are considered as content by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and by The Partnership for 21st Century Skills. Petek & Bedir (2018) —who problematize the impact of a 14-week action plan implementation on eight pre-service English teachers' awareness and teaching practices on the integration of critical thinking into language teaching— point out that thinking critically is something that must be learnt to innovate in post-secondary education and the workforce. They also say that without training our brains, our thinking may be biased, distorted, partial, uninformed, and prejudiced. Although this statement is not related to my study, I find it interesting to see how some government policies, motivated by economic purposes, have forced teachers to implement strategies that favor critical thinking, but without considering teachers' reflections about their critical identity.

I agree with Fatemeh Sadeghi *et al.* (2020) —who problematized the perception of EFL teachers and learners on the fundamental principles and constructs of critical thinking, the main characteristics of a critical thinker, and the strategies to reinforce critical thinking— when they argue that it is crucial to develop critical thinking in formal education. I also agree with them when they point out that teachers and other members of the educative community regret the lack of critical thinking, not only in school, but also outside school in moments and spaces with cultural influence over the students. I consider, as they suggest, that to understand critical thinking, we need to consider learners and teachers' perceptions of what critical thinking is, and then, generate pedagogical proposals. It is imperative to reflect upon how being critical influences our identity and

how this incidence goes beyond teaching practices and affects our essence as language teachers and humans.

I consider that if we, as English language teachers, observe, reflect, and understand our critical identities, we will be able to appreciate the importance of designing proposals that enable students to construct their identities that allow them to observe and reflect upon their own realities from a critical viewpoint. Accordingly with Hatch & Meller (2009) —who problematized the incidence of introducing critical pedagogical approaches in a program for pre-service teachers—, I believe schools and their agents are partners in crime in the prevalence of an unfair socio-economic system, but also that we, as teachers, can fight the *status quo* and promote social change by developing a critical perspective in our students. This may help them make connections between what they learn at school and what they experience from the world. We need to move away from the common perception of the school as a building where students go to become informed about the world by teachers. As Freire pointed, "liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information" (Freire, 2000, p. 79).

Although my focus is on teachers, I cannot forget that my purpose as a language teacher is to be part of the learning process of critical, reflective, and socially active students. Therefore, I hope that by going through a process that allows us to observe ourselves, students will benefit and have opportunities in school to grow their critical identities. Menard-Warwick *et al.* (2019) —who problematized how English teachers build their identities today by being conscious of their roles in history, their connections with their students, and the way they perceive the English language— signaled the importance of developing teacher identities through a dialogue between teachers and learners. I believe the benefits that come from teachers' exercises that involve reflection will surely have an incidence over the students' learning processes.

Despite the body of the research problems described in this section, little is known about critical identity. So far, I have not found a concrete definition of the concept. I will address this issue and its relation to my teaching context in the next section.

Salient Elements of my Research

This research proposal will be conducted with English language teachers from the Colegio Marruecos y Molinos IED, a state-founded school with morning, afternoon, and night shifts. This school is in the south of Bogotá, in the Rafael Uribe Uribe locality. It has around 3000 primary and secondary students in the morning and afternoon shifts, and about 300 in the night shift. The school implemented the "Enseñanza para la comprensión" approach (EPC), whose objective is to

guide students to perform actions that demonstrate knowledge of an issue and to move forward by using information in new ways (Perkins, 1998). By November 2020, the school started to shape a new proposal based on the "campos de pensamiento" approach, which is based on Edgar Morins' theory of complex thinking. The school´s PEI (Proyecto Educativo Institucional) is titled "Respuesta a un sueño de crecer juntos y ser felices mientras aprehendemos", which points three elements in the students' learning processes: procedural, axiological, and cognitive issues. According to the syllabus, the subject of English is conceptualized from the communicative approach, which is articulated with the EPC. The Marruecos y Molinos school has only one institutional project that focuses on the English language learning, called "Music for learning English", and is part of the "Aulas de inmersión" program, led by the city´s Education Office (Secretaría de Educación Distrital), and other city projects, such as the Spelling Bee. According to tests such as Pruebas Saber and Aptis, students´ proficiency on the English language is low; this has been confirmed by on-site teachers´ characterization of classroom processes.

Some elements of the previous context led me to problematize teachers' critical identities. On the one hand, I believe that very few of the school's theoretical foundations can be evidenced in English language classes, and that the material, strategies, and methodologies implemented in the classroom fail to represent what is written in official documents. On the contrary, the classes seem to follow a traditional approach. On the other hand, power relations at school prevent teachers from resisting decisions and indications of the city´s public office. The Colombian Ministry of Education commands Bogota´s Education Office and dictates what coordinators should say to the teachers, who simply obey in return. Nevertheless, since the school is a public institution, most of the teachers belong to teachers' unions such as FECODE and ADE; I perceive here a critical position to educative policies and to decisions and indications made by the principal about work issues. This difference between teachers' identities and critical features needs to be understood within the context of my research proposal.

I have identified three problematic factors that, joined together, form the basis of my problem statement; they result from my reflections and observations during the last ten years while teaching at the Marruecos y Molinos school. The first factor is what I see as an incongruence between English language teachers' identities both inside and outside the classroom. I believe this inconsistency affects our practice and the students' learning processes. Teaching English in the school has been, so far, a basic exercise on trying to teach students how to learn grammar structures. I have proposed different strategies to innovate and teach the language with communicative purposes, so that students can read, understand,

reflect, and propose ideas about the social issues that characterize their lives. However, some of my colleagues seem to ignore them and have, instead, defended and perpetuated (perhaps unconsciously) what I think is a traditional and decontextualized teaching methodology that seeks, unsuccessfully, to lead students to achieve good results in standardized English language tests such as Pruebas Saber and Aptis.

I believe this focus on favorable results in tests comes from certain discourses by school administrators who connect high scores to the reception of more money for the school and to a public recognition as a "successful school". In the process to understand the reason behind this resistance to innovation, I have seen teachers criticizing national and district governments and their policies, as well as decisions made by school administrators, participating in teachers' union meetings and stating viewpoints in both formal and informal settings, all of which I interpret as evidence of resistance. I perceive that some of the teachers I work with express critical positions, but they hide them once inside the classroom or when they work in planning or adjusting the syllabus. Although the document "Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés", by the Ministerio de Educación Nacional (2006), sets objectives in terms of language acquisition, I consider that in the school where I work there is a certain freedom to define the grammar topics to include in our lessons; then, we determine what happens in between, that is, inside the classroom. At the beginning of each year, we as teachers are free to discuss the methodologies, approaches, materials, and activities to be used during the school year. Year after year there have been proposals around making English a means and not a target: to use English to learn, reflect, and discuss about social issues, instead of making English a subject based on grammar rules. It is in those moments that my colleagues recognize the government as the instance that dictates what, why, when, and how we should teach the language, something which forestalls all attempts to renew our practices and include novel approaches to language teaching.

According to Jodelet (2011), social representations in education are the evidence of how we as teachers position ourselves in the field, based on our practice, relations with coworkers, norms, and social roles. Apparently, most of my colleagues position themselves in their teaching practice in the classroom as agents who are meant to obey. However, as I mentioned, outside the classroom they seem to be socially active agents who reflect, analyze, and oppose to government policies on language teaching. This counter position leads me to presume that when we build our identities, we develop a critical one, which is evidenced in different contexts or situations in the field of education.

I sense that we all have our own personal history in becoming teachers, and that this history determines the way each of us perceives his or her profession. These histories influence our decisions because, as teachers, we want to see in our students a reflection of our own experiences as students: we may want to replicate as teachers the school we experienced as students. My critiques to the disappearance of teachers' critical identities in the classroom may respond to the need of connecting what we do to what we consider the school should be on the basis of our past experiences as students. In other words, if a teacher had a pleasant experience as a student in a traditional school, he or she will try to make his or her practice a reflection (as in a mirror) of his or her own individual experiences. I find here a connection with the contradiction of the "oppressed oppressor" that Freire (2000) mentions: "Every prescription represents the imposition of some individual's choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber's behavior, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor" (p. 47). I feel that some teachers are afraid of trying new things in the classroom and, therefore, end up taking the role of the oppressor, because they believe in what they have been ordered to do.

I have reflected on the origins of my critical identity and observed events that defined and characterized it. I did not have an enjoyable experience as a high school student in a traditional context; ultimately, I found the way to skip that step. That is why I seek to change everything: there are wounds that I am trying to heal with my practice as a teacher. I understand that inside and outside the classroom, what I consider is the most important goal to achieve as an English language teacher is to respond to my students' needs and to favor their learning from a critical approach, regardless of the neoliberal policies that see students as potential instruments for a globalized capitalism. I consider that my critical identity is revealed in every situation of my teaching practices, both inside and outside the classroom, and that this position has brought me several confrontations which have harmed my relationships with work colleagues. I am not saying that all teachers' critical identities should arise in all aspects of the teaching practice: each teacher has his or her own personal history and events, and both shape their identities as language teachers, define their decisions and determine the way they conceive the field of education.

Teaching dynamics prevent us from stopping and reflecting on the way we got to a certain point in our teaching life, on where we stand today and on how we do our job, so we tend to normalize our actions and perceptions, disfavoring a self-analysis of our identity. What I want to problematize is related to the origins of our identity as English language teachers and its relation to our critical

positions. It is key to comprehend the role and the characteristics of this critical identity and how it affects our practices because it can contribute to develop a better understanding of ourselves, which can bring about a deep reflection on our lives' histories and their connection to our practices, and, eventually, favor students' learning processes. I also find it interesting to analyze these critical issues as determining elements of teachers' identity, rather than as a set of rules that we are forced to include in our classes to favor students' critical thinking or awareness. I will address this point in the third problematic fact, but for now, I want to focus on the incidence of teachers' critical identity on the stagnation of education in Colombia.

The second problematic fact is related to the vicious circle that I identified in the teaching practice, on the topic of the construction and shaping of critical identities. The critical thinking theory, the EPC approach, the theory of complex thinking, and the considerations of the different students' dimensions, among others, are basic tenets that support the institution's PEI and, therefore, should be the basis of the teaching practice. These elements could help pave the way for students to purposefully project themselves onto a new future, build their critical identities and having a broader view of their contexts. In the future, I believe these students should be capable of changing some of the colonial and Eurocentric practices and perceptions that have permeated Colombian culture for centuries, to move towards a new perspective on time and history, as future is the only moment in time where changes may occur (Quijano, 2014).

Even if these pedagogical proposals are not adequate by the moment they take place, nowadays teachers should participate actively in discussions that generate agreements, instill reflection, and benefit the teaching practice. Unfortunately, when teachers' identities are built from a traditional perspective, those proposals are accepted on paper but put aside in practice. This must be explained from the basis of teachers' narrations of their personal histories: from there, we may be able to identify how we built the concept of what education should be and the influence of critical issues in our lives. What determines the characteristics and the role of school in society is the way teachers see their role in the education field. Our teaching identities take shape in relation to our subjectivity and culture (Zembylas, 2003), and some of us still perceive school as an instructional institution where the power is vertical and flows from the top, reaching students at the bottom. Here appears what I call the "vicious circle", which helps explain the fact that teachers are victims of the system and then become victimizers within it: as students, we were structured by the school, but as teachers we structure the school.

Therefore, it is important to allow teachers to explore their own histories and to understand their identities, specially the critical one, to reflect if their decisions are perpetuating practices that they disagree with, but that they find necessary to develop because of their compliance with the system's aspirations. There are practices that have prevented schools from being perceived as meaningful and purposeful experiences for teachers and their histories, present times, and futures. In my opinion, most of the students today go to school only because society makes them believe that they must do it; they think it is a social requirement and not a personal project. I believe this happens because the institution itself is anachronical and decontextualized, and that its bases are still connected to outdated concepts of strategies, methodologies, conceptualization, objectives, and purposes that belong to education theories from 18th century Europe. Because of these school practices, education in Colombia seems to remain in the past and to appear disarticulated from the social context. Elements such as the school uniform, settings, and classroom dynamics, and rituals like the flag honors ceremonies —where students are forced to sing a misunderstood national anthem and both male and female students are taught to behave according to their genre— are proof of how far we are from a renewed society and from breaking the vicious circle I mentioned before. The continuous loop in how education is perceived and implemented may stem from the educational system's limited focus on contemplating and comprehending the concept of critical identity.

Finally, the third problematic fact is related to the literature I have reviewed about the issues I defined for my research interest. In the profiling exercise I conducted, most identity-related studies focus on other aspects of English language teacher identities, not to critical identities. There is indeed a current interest in defining our identities in relation to our profession, subjectivities, and lives as teachers, but little has been said about our critical identity. Additionally, as I mentioned before, critical issues in education have been addressed in terms of educative programs that promote critical thinking, whereas teachers have not been observed as critical agents. Critical issues have been described as the result of training processes and as a set of operational tasks that should be learned beforehand to become better teachers. However, so far, I have not found studies that question our perceptions on critical positions. It has not been easy to find studies that explore the way we build our individualities as teachers or the role of criticality on this process. There is also a gap on the literature, as there is no definition of the concept of critical identity. Menard-Warwick *et al*. (2019) conducted a study that problematizes how English teachers build their identity in a contemporary global society by understanding their positions in history, relationships with students, and perception of the English language as a symbolic

capital. They believe that English language teachers use the word "critical" to refer to power relations in the field of education. They also point out that teachers develop their identities by taking part in discourses with other field agents and relating then to their own subjectivities. Nevertheless, this study fails to offer a definition of English language teachers' critical identity: though it explores it as an observable feature in an immediate context, it does not follow it outside the teaching practice and throughout teachers´ lives. This clearly opens a door to a deeper study of teachers´ critical identities and the way they build them and express them as social agents. In the Colombian literature this issue is absent and there is a need to explore it in depth; the local context and the education field require the exploration of critical positions that allow a new way of perceiving teachers´ roles and the purposes of education in the country.

In short, these three problematic facts construct my problem statement and they emerged from my observations, experiences and reflections of some teaching practices at the school where I have worked for the last 10 years. The first problem is the need to understand the differences between teachers' critical identities, which are observable in elements that affect them directly in relation to work-related issues, and their absence in situations that require an active participation in decisions and actions which affect the teaching practice. The second problem is the never-ending vicious circle that stems from the lack of reflection on the characteristics of our identities as teachers, which makes Colombian education a perpetuated practice that forces students to become agents who are meant to obey and fit into the system. Lastly, the third and last problem is the lack of literature in Colombia that explores, defines, and characterizes teachers' critical identities from their life histories. These problems, I believe, may allow my proposal to become relevant for the field as these are issues that should be explored to improve our understanding of ourselves as teachers and, also, taken in consideration in the training of future teachers.

Problem Statement

Based on the previous sections, I have identified the following statements and questions:

- What do teachers understand by "being critical"?

- What does it mean to be critical, understood not as a systematic pedagogical strategy, but as a social representation that emerges from English language teachers' perceptions?

- Are we aware as teachers of the existence of this critical identity and of the way it influences our decisions?

- What may imply the differentiation between the implementation of critical issues as a demand from educative policies and the reflections upon these issues from teachers' identities, and how this may influence our practice as English language teachers?
- Is there a critical identity in the English language classroom? What is it and how does it happen?

These short statements have supported the following problem statement: How do we, as English language teachers, construct a critical identity, what characterizes it, and how it transcends the teaching practice inside and outside the classroom, but within the field of education?

Conclusions

Identity is an element of English Language Teaching that has been explored by different perspectives, but which still needs to be analyzed from the viewpoint of its critical attributes. Being critical should not only be a pedagogical strategy to be learnt and implemented; it is also part of what we are as teachers, and by being aware of that, we can make criticality something meaningful in our practice. I find it necessary to explore what is behind our critical positions and how we became critical subjects, whether if teaching influenced our critical positions or our critical positions led us to become teachers. It is important for teachers to reflect on the way their life stories connect to their practices, and how their decisions are the evidence of what education represents for them. By defining *critical identity*, we as teachers will be aware of its existence and identify its presence in different daily and work situations in the field of education. With this research proposal, I want to motivate more teachers to explore issues such as these, so that we may obtain a broader view of the meaning of critical identities.

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