

Trans-Gressive Uncertainties In approaching Transgender Learner Experiences in ELT Pre-Service Teacher's Formation

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Me, Myself and Us

I hold a BA Degree in Lengua Castellana, English, and French from Universidad de La Salle. I have a Master's in Education English Didactics from Universidad Externado de Colombia. Now, I am running Ph.D. studies at the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas. I was chosen to represent Colombia in the International Teacher Training Program on Child Rights, Classroom and School Management offered by Lund University in Sweden, which the Swedish International Development Agency sponsored.

I have 22 years of teaching experience; I have taught and learned at all educational levels, from kindergarten to University and master's degree programs. I have coordinated formative research and language departments at different university levels. Among my academic production experiences are the translation of research articles from Spanish to English, as well as Co-authoring of texts for teaching English and human values. Currently, I work as a teacher trainer at the University De La Salle and the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas.

The Title of my thesis is "Trans" Learning Experiences of a Transgender Student in an Initial Language Teacher Education Program'. My academic interests rely on applied research for designing, developing, validating, and promoting teaching materials and strategies, emphasizing peer relationships, LGBTQ rights, education for coexistence, a healthy classroom environment, prevention of school violence, and resilience.

What Makes me Tick?

After teaching for more than 20 years, I have had the worthy opportunity to observe how “we” teachers deal with the power our investiture gives us, sometimes I have made mistakes, and sometimes I have seen how my colleagues have abused their power as well, explicitly talking about the misperception we might have about gender and LGBTQ students. Since I was an undergraduate student, my projects stood by understanding, supporting, and promoting integral development and healthy class environments in LGBTQ school communities.

That interest was aroused after I received hetero-normalized instruction during my school years undergraduate studies at the university. I had to struggle again with the monolithic gender binary conception that frames individuals “as hetero-normal.” Nevertheless, I studied at a Catholic university, I did my best, and finally, I could base my graduation project on the integral development perspectives homosexual students have in schools.

If the LGBTQ community was not contemplated in educational school scenarios, much less could be said about transgender students. After becoming a teacher, I have witnessed how gender variabilities are not considered in teachers’ formation scenarios. My growing intellectual has always been my priority. Seeking doctoral studies, I came across a wonderful human being, Harold Castaneda, and finally, I found someone who directed my research interest. My proposal mainly focuses on what is happening with university structures related to teachers’ formation, specifically in the formation of transgender subjects.

Universities are hyper-regulated spaces in which, invisibly, there are spaces of censorship in producing knowledge and selecting topics of interest for research and learning. Pre-service teachers’ formation has constituted a scenario in which gender diversity, especially Transgenderism, are not contemplated. Teacher formation in Colombia seems monolithic and does not include topics or contents that deal with gender, much less about Transgenderism. Concluding, my research is looking into how to explore Transgender students learning experiences and then, after analyzing those experiences, design a formal proposal to make future transgender English teachers visible.

Finding an Approach

Adopting Positions, “Apprehending Decolonial”

The first learning I achieved during the consolidation of this methodological chapter was the benefits and kindness decolonial projects have recognizing how colonial mechanisms have permeated all our current educational practices. In

one of the tutorials we had with Dr. Gabriel Medina (2009), he asserted, “the de-colonial perspective is installed in a place other than the heteronormal production of the teachers who have been formed under hetero culturally,” paraphrasing, the concepts of teacher formation have been homogenized by colonial hetero normativity, he also mentions; “a lot of discursive mechanisms perpetuate the monolithic idea of cisgender currently” (p. 16).

On the other hand, Walsh (2009) highlights that the de-colonial projects intend to point out, to provoke a positioning, a posture, and a continued attitude in terms of transgressing, intervening, in-arise, and influence. The Decolonial perspectives denote a continuous struggle in which we can identify, make visible, and encourage “places” of exteriority and alternative constructions.

The previous intentions depict the de-colonial perspective is aligned with my research objectives, to describe how the canonical stands have strengthened former teachers’ lacks and prejudices, to characterize how transgender students have been misgendered, “dis politicized,” decontextualized of their right of being, to identify how transgender students have been normalized through heteronormal teaching practices and grand narratives, to analyze personal life histories of transgender students and teachers.

Among the decolonial categories, “Coloniality and Gender” proposed by Maria Lugones (2008) allows me to understand how this patriarchal indifference is constructed, to transform it into something that becomes unavoidable and has to be recognized by those involved in liberating fights. This category also discusses a different approach, quite distinct from occidental feminisms, of understanding patriarchy from the coloniality of gender. Maria Lugones invites us to think about the cartography of global power from what she calls the Modern/ Colonial System of Gender.

After analyzing the ideas of Lugones about coloniality and gender, some important questions emerged: if the binary conception of gender is evident in our academic context, when did it happen? Since this binary perception of gender has been promoted, has it become an accepted rule? To answer these questions, it was necessary to go beyond tracing back. I did the second exercise of documentary archeology; this time, the resources were research articles and books, which allowed me to trace back the meaning that grand narratives attributed to transgender identities from some pre-Hispanic cultures until the meaning given nowadays after colonialism, looking into elements have been left unattended, unsaid or vanished from our current scenario concerned with gender wise, like the existence of transgender identities.

The books analyzed were; *History of Material Culture in Equinoctial America* Patiño (1993), specifically volume VII *Erotic life & Hygienic Customs*. In this book,

the author relates the experiences provided by a character (called “El Narrador” in Spanish, “The narrator” in English) who was the person in charge of telling, through writing narratives, all the things that were happening in America at the moment Spanish conquest broke into, from the text above mentioned the following excerpt is self-explanatory:

In America, homosexuality exists in various degrees, from the tribes that did not practice it except exceptionally, such as Cumanagotos, Chibchas, Quimbayas, and others, to being tolerated and even institutionalized in the Panamanian isthmus, the Caribbean coast, the north coast Peruvian and the Ecuadorian North Coast. (p. 172)

In the previous paragraph, “The Narrator” says that homosexuality was evident in several levels and cultures. In some of those cultures’ homosexuality, more than tolerated, was an institutionalized practice. From the previous excerpt, it is possible to infer that in America, the perception and meaning attributed to gender differ from our current binary conception. Also, lesbians were visible before the colonial period, as is exemplified in the same text in the following excerpt: “They called lesbianism patagüia, and those who practiced it were called patagüilani, flat ironers” (p. 81). It is evidenced how colonial mechanisms have vanished the role of homosexual individuals in pre-colonial societies.

In respect, Schatzky (2001) states: “history of discourses has always been used among others, to justify and maintain the social order” (p. 13), I can assert that this initial documentary analysis has been a light in the path of tracing back to problematize what has happened so far, since what point gender diverse individuals were banished from our daily life. Because of grand narratives as the binary conception of gender, transgender students have vanished from our current educational context; we cannot deny that most of us grow up knowing what our sex is. I strongly believe one of the main problems outlined in the situations lived by the transgender students concerns directly with the lack of knowledge and the fear this lacks produces in “US,” the initial educators of those future transgender teachers.

In conclusion, the exercise allowed me to position this research under a decolonial perspective since the evidence presented points toward when the heteronormal matrix was imposed, before America was conquered, the American aboriginals recognized at least four gender variabilities. The decolonial perspective will allow me to build historical foundations in understanding from what point other gender conceptions were banished and the monolithic conception of binary sexuality was imposed; so far, that is uncertain. The switch I am proposing to appropriate a Decolonial Methodology is through drawing to tell; The innovation in the methodological approach consists in asking my participant to think about

learning experiences, then drawing them, talking about the experiences, and finally reflecting upon the experiences narrated in the interview. The instruments to develop this methodology are in-depth phenomenological interviews, video-taped records, transcriptional interviews, and drawing big books.

Setting up Positions

Ways of Being Regarding Epistemological and Ontological Positioning in Terms of Gender and Teacher Training

The second learning I achieved was to recognize who I am, not only in how to acknowledge but in understanding how acceptance of my humanity is the key to raising my locus of enunciation, only understanding who I am and the vision of the world I have, I will be able to understand other realities and epistemologies, in Amundson (1983) words; “all research work relies on a certain vision of the world, epistemological reflection is, therefore, consubstantial to any developed research” (p. 14).

Mignolo (2011) states that “decolonial projects” are synonymous with thinking and doing decolonially. All decolonial approaches should be based on the conception of the relationship of political, social, and cultural domination established by Europeans, coloniality, and modernity. This makes decoloniality both a political and an epistemic project. Given that the episteme of my research intends to decipher what the local knowledge says about Transgenderism, I decided to apprehend the Decolonial Perspective. The previously mentioned, because I consider our identity has been stolen, transgender identities in education have vanished and do not exist. It is a colonial problem since coloniality stole their existence.

Ontological Positioning

The word “subject,” etymologically speaking, has its origin in the Latin term *sub - jacere*, “subicere”; *sub-* “under,” + *jacere* “throw,” which means “born under” in “owing obedience.” Right beside this etymological definition comes the approach made by Bakhtin, 1998, Cited by Bubnova (1997), who wrote: The personalization is never a subjectivist position, its limit is not “one I” but “The I” in its interrelation with other subjects, it means I and other, me and you.

Following the author’s ideas, Bakhtin calls intuition the sympathy for which one subject moves into the interior of another to coincide with what is inside it, what is unique and therefore inexpressible, and is based on the relationship of human beings with his media world, for me, Bakhtin in this two paragraphs is

contextualizing the individuals as subjects, the author recognizes himself on another, and he called this act empathy, this thought represents the ability for you, to move inside others, to value the “inner” of other subjects.

On the path to conceptualizing or finding a better definition for the participants in my research, I came across Emmanuel Levinas (2000). In his book “Ethics and Infinity” he builds the concept of the subject, including Ideas from authors like Georg Hegel, Edmund Husserl, and Franz Kafka. They announce some categories that frame the term subject; subjectivity, otherness, intersubjectivity, alterity, and sameness. The previous dimensions are included in Levinas’ thoughts (*i.e.*, works of 1961 and 1974). These categories are descriptors of the encounter with another subject. That encounter frames a particular characteristic:

The other impacts me more than any other object or force. I can constitute the other subject cognitively, based on vision, as an alter ego. I can see that another human being is “like me, acts like me”, appears to be the master of her conscious life. (Levinas, 2000, p. 135)

My doctoral proposal is based on the human and professional understanding of the experiences in learning and formation of the future transgender ELT teachers, the characterization of the participants as “subjects” and its categories; subjectivity, otherness, intersubjectivity, alterity, and sameness, will be worthy in terms to profile them, avoiding objectifying them as I will explain further, currently, transgender students do not have a profile in learning and teaching scenarios, they are non-existent.

Innovating the Approach towards Avoiding Objectifying the Subject

The third learning I want to share is maybe the most important of the previous ones, “avoid objectifying the participants in my research”; In my experience teaching in universities, I have worked with several undergraduate students who have a deep and passionate interest in their research. Nevertheless they do objectify their participants just rushing towards the achievement of the data, procedures, and instruments seems to be so biased, the only concern about how to consolidate the data analysis chapter. It happened to me now in my doctoral, mainly because the topic I am researching is not easy to handle, and requests about the lives of transgender students’ experiences could be challenging. On the path to finding the best approach and methodology, I came across the author Irving Seidman (2013) and his book *Interviewing as qualitative research*.

What initially caught my attention was not only the fact he is a Professor Emeritus of qualitative research but how, in his beginnings, he had to deal with the

despair he felt because experimentalist and behaviorism ruled his procedures as a researcher. So, he proposed new procedures for phenomenological interviews, which conceive the participants as subjects, not only objects to be analyzed.

In chapter one of his book Seidman (2013) states, “Interviews are the best way to learn other people’s stories. More simply put, stories are a way of knowing” (p. 7). Seidman explains that the root of the word story is the Greek word *historian*, which means one who is “wise” and “learned.” With the previous explanation, I understand telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process. When people tell stories, they select details of their experience from the beginning, middle, and end. In order to give details of their experience a beginning, middle, and end, people must reflect on their experience. Shultz (1967, cited by Seidman, 2013) asserts that this process of selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them makes telling stories a meaning-making experience.

Vygotsky (1987) affirms: “Every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness” (p. 237). It means to me that the consciousness of each subject gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people; these conceptions about interviews provide me with the clarity that I can use this method to inquire about the learning experiences of my participants, and how my participants represent their life issues.

Seidman also explains that for those interested in interviewing as a research method, perhaps the most telling argument is the significance of language to understanding human behavior, which means understanding the use of language to inquire with human beings. One aspect that characterizes us as humans is the ability to symbolize our experiences through language (Heron, 1981). Heron also affirms that the original archetypal paradigm of human inquiry is two persons talking and asking questions of each other. Literally, he says:

The use of language, itself, ...contains within it the paradigm of cooperative inquiry; and since language is the primary tool whose use enables human construction and intending to occur, it is difficult to see how there can be any more fundamental mode of inquiry for human beings into the human condition. (p. 26)

I could deduce from the previous quote that interviewing is more than a basic mode of asking has been a way of telling narratives or experiences. It has been the best way to perpetuate history so humans have taped and made sense of their experiences. Seidman as well affirms that telling stories is a “science” he supports his affirmations by quoting Peter Reason (1981):

The best stories are those that stir people's minds hearts and souls and by so doing give them new insights into themselves, their problems, and their human condition. The challenge is to develop a human science that can more fully serve this aim. The question, then, is not "is storytelling science?" but "can science learn to tell good stories?." (p. 50)

In this proposal of the qualitative interview method, Seidman introduces consistency to the exercise by talking about "in-depth interviewing," asserting that interviews are not only a test hypothesis. Interviews are not to "evaluate" when they are normally used, but in-depth interviewing is an exciting understanding of the living experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. His words are:

Being interested in others is the key to some of the basic assumptions underlying interviewing technique. It requires that we interviewers keep our egos in check. I require that we realize we are not the center of the world. It demands that our actions as interviewers indicate that other stories are important. (p. 9)

Agreeing with the previous paragraph, I need to add that, specifically in research about gender, bias is often committed. At least, this is one of the conclusions I obtained from a profiling exercise I did for my research. Researchers are often dragging their research results toward the participants' victimization. This is one of the reasons I consider it a priority to include the participants of my research in the elaboration of the questions of the interviews to avoid committing bias.

Regarding this process of co-constructing the instruments of this research, I agree with Seidman's ideas: "The primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of individual people, the others" (p. 10). According to these ideas, Ferrarotti (1981) states that social abstractions like "education" are best understood through the experiences of the individuals whose work and lives are the bases for the abstraction's construction.

Following the above, the literature review and profiling exercise are done for state of the art in this research, it was possible to evidence that little research is done on transgender issues in the educational field, yet so little of it is based on studies involving the perspective of the transgender students.

The adequacy of a research method depends on the purpose of the research and the questions asked (Seidman, 2013). In-depth phenomenologically based interviewing combines life-story interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing

informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology³. According to the author, interviews use primarily but not exclusively open-ended questions in this approach.

At a certain level, phenomenology interviews create a sense of uncertainty in me. Using an approach from positivism or other trends requires finding a way to innovate those approaches. The decolonial approach demands avoiding such structuralism.

In this respect, some of Seidman's procedures seem to be pertinent to my process: "Besides focusing on human experience and its meaning, phenomenology stresses the transitory natural human experience and emphasizes that human lives are bounded by the time and that human experiences are fleeting." (pp. 16-17). In other words, in human experience, the "will be" becomes the "is" and then the "was" become an instant. So, what is most important to the phenomenological perspective is also inherently problematic in asking participants to reconstruct and reflect on their experience. Using the phenomenological approach, the researchers ask participants to search again for the essence of their lived experience but..., how could this process be less invasive?

Innovating the methodology mentioned above would be pertinent to my proposal. It will be very interesting to see not only how my research participant will have a factual resource to analyze her past, contrast it with the present, and perhaps shape their future, but overall, I emphasize that we will be co-constructing the procedures of this research.

As indicated earlier, the phenomenological theory emphasizes exploring the meaning of peoples' experiences in the context of their lives. The Seidman model proposes "in-depth phenomenological interviewing," which involves conducting three separate interviews. Besides innovating this methodology, I propose a hybridization approach apart from following the steps mentioned before. During the interviews, the participants will draw their learning experiences in a picture, aiming towards consolidating the whole experience in a big book.

Previous experiences with practitioner teachers have shown me that Big Books represent a spectacular option to work with students. We worked on a project about children's rights and how these rights were sometimes violated, the students were inhibited, but they felt free to paint, and the paper captured not only pictures but feelings and emotions.

3 According to Seidman, phenomenology is a complex philosophy with many facets. There is no single approach to interviewing research that could be called phenomenological. Researchers studying phenomenology might develop various approaches to inquire about what they understand as phenomenological.

In respect, there is online research conducted by Larkham, a nursery teacher, who did a research called *Using Big Books on an Interactive Whiteboard*. She says, “using a ‘big book’ with nursery-aged Pupils enables a whole class group to interact and participate during a story session. It also provides the starting point for discussion and conversation because the illustrations are available for all to view” (2010, p.1).

Therefore, including drawings in the interviewing process will be a wonderful ice-breaking start, reduce the participant’s anxiety, and allow her to reflect on her own storytelling, which will give a gain to the process of innovating Seidman’s methodology. Now I explain the steps in the interviewing process, which I will call encounters. All the encounters will be video and recorded taped.

Encounter One: Focus on Life history. This exercise will demand at least three sessions. In the first session, the interviewer’s task is to put the participant’s experience in context by asking her to tell and draw as much as possible about herself in light of her life up to the present time, for example, asking her (if she agrees), to reconstruct their early experiences in their family (session 1), in their school (session 2), with friends (session 3). The idea of co-construct implies involving her in creating the questions and developing the whole activity; making her feel comfortable will dissipate the sense of being objectified, which is the main goal of the innovating methodology proposed by Seidman.

Encounter Two: The details of experience. As with the previous activity, this encounter will be divided into three sessions. The purpose of this second encounter is to concentrate on the concrete details of the participant’s learning experiences; asking her to reconstruct the pictures with details will not ask for opinions but rather the details of the experience, upon which their options may be built to elicit details. The innovation here will consist of analyzing and talking about each picture taken, trying to recall the experience, going beyond, and reflecting upon the told. Seeing and reflecting on her pictures may give her a different perspective on situations and learnings.

Encounter Three: Reflection on the Meaning. In the third moment, Seidman suggests asking participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience. The question of “meaning” is not one of satisfaction or reward, although such issues may affect the participants’ thinking. Instead, it addresses the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants’ work and life. The twist here will be imagining the future; making sense or meaning requires that the participant looks at how the factors in her life interacted to bring them to the present situation and a future that would come next. A way to shape the future is by imagining it.

It also requires that she look at their present experience in detail and within the context in which it occurs. Exploring the past to clarify the events that led the participant to where she is now and describing the concrete details of the present experience establishes conditions for reflecting upon what she is doing in her life.

Even though it is in the third session, the focus is on the participant's understanding of her experience; through all three encounters, my participant is making meaning. The very process of putting picture experiences into words is a meaning-making process (Vygotsky, 1987). When participants are asked to tell stories of their experience, they are expected to frame some aspects of it with a beginning, a middle, and a future, that will provide the exercise a real meaning. This process will give us surprising findings; the uncertainty is an open door; we do not know where the path is going.

Finally, my role in the process will be the least invasive possible, just a guide, provider of the materials, being always kind, in disposition, and a good listener. Today, the biggest uncertainty is the current situation with Coronavirus, the methodology is planned, but maybe we will have to change, re-adapt, or simply innovate the proposed. The important thing is my friend, student, and participant have the best attitude towards the culmination of this work. I will always thank her for her dedication, professionalism, and good attitude.

The Not Yet

The three learnings of this methodological approach lead me towards filling the existing gap regarding the recognition or visibility of transgender students in the academic field:

First, the decolonial perspective is the path to trace back what has been erased about gender variabilities existing before we were colonized; because of this, it is evident transgender students are not existent in academic scenarios. Analyzing my participant learning experiences will be a starting point to co-construct the unknown transgender students' identities, all in terms of making them visible.

Second, Decoloniality is an invitation towards the innovation of canonical procedures, which tend to consider individual-like objects to be used only to get data. This uncertainty chapter allowed me to recognize my participation as a subject "in whom" I recognize otherness, intersubjectivity, alterity, and sameness.

Third, learning about Decoloniality has taught me how we have been colonized through power, knowledge, and the being. Thus, changing the critical paradigms, innovating, unlearning, and learning with new perspectives is necessary to avoid falling into the vicious circle of replicating models.

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