

## Identity as a source of agency for transformative english language teachers

### Identidad como fuente de pensamiento, actuación y sentimiento para docentes transformadores de lengua inglesa

Recibido:28-03-2022

Aceptado: 27-05-2022

Publicado:18-08-2022


Álvaro Quintero-Polo 

Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Bogotá, Colombia

Autor de correspondencia: [aquintero@udistrital.edu.co](mailto:aquintero@udistrital.edu.co)

Camila Duarte-González 

Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Bogotá, Colombia

Aura León-Castro 

Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Bogotá, Colombia

#### Abstract

**Objective:** This study aims to analyze two teacher-researchers' stories about their socially enacted identities as a source of agency for transformation to revindicate what language teachers have to say and do about themselves and to position them as valid interlocutors of the educational system.

**Method:** We used the narrative inquiry approach to analyze the participants' small stories. The study attempted to answer the following research question: What reflexive and transformative perspectives do language teachers use to tell their story as English language teaching professionals? The data corresponded to two participants' meaningful life stories that involved their personal, professional, and academic profiles. Those stories were collected through narrative interviews. **Results:** The analysis was encapsulated in the category titled Transformative Teachers' Storied Agency Being Affected by Neoliberal Dynamics. It is defined through two emerging subcategories—Asymmetric Social Relations: Educational Equality through Teacher-Researchers' Storied Agency Despite the Neoliberalism Hierarchy and Teacher-Researchers' Decisions and Actions for Tackling the Univalence and Ambivalence of the English Language Teaching Curriculum. **Discussion and Conclusion:** We account for the participants' transformative teacher-researcher identity as a site of agency in the frame of macro policies with a neoliberal influencing force. Our definition of the categories reflects one of the lessons we learned after our small story analysis: the concept of storied agency.

**Keywords:** teacher-researchers' agency, language teacher identity, neoliberal education dynamics, transformative teachers.

**Cómo citar este artículo (APA):** Quintero-Polo, A., Duarte-González, C., y León-Castro, A. (2022). Identity as a Source of Agency for Transformative English Language Teachers. *Educación y Humanismo*, 24(43), 110-128. <https://doi.org/10.17081/eduhum.24.43.5758>

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** Analizar las historias de dos docentes-investigadores que se relacionan con sus identidades socialmente promulgadas como fuente de pensamiento, actuación y sentimiento para la transformación con el propósito de reivindicar lo que los profesores de idiomas tienen que decir y hacer sobre sí mismos y posicionarlos como interlocutores válidos del sistema educativo. **Método:** El análisis utiliza el enfoque de indagación narrativa y los procedimientos para examinar historias cortas. El estudio evolucionó en torno a la pregunta de investigación: ¿Qué perspectivas reflexivas y transformadoras asumen los profesores de idiomas para construirse a sí mismos como profesionales de la enseñanza del idioma inglés? Los datos correspondieron a historias de vida significativas de dos participantes que involucraron sus perfiles personales, profesionales y académicos. Esas historias fueron recopiladas a través de entrevistas narrativas. **Resultados:** El análisis fue encapsulado en la categoría titulada El pensamiento, actuación y sentimiento de los docentes transformadores que se ven afectados por las dinámicas neoliberales. Esta categoría se define a través de dos subcategorías emergentes: Relaciones sociales asimétricas: Igualdad educativa a través de la agencia de los profesores-investigadores a pesar de la jerarquía neoliberal y Decisiones y acciones de profesores-investigadores para abordar la univalencia y la ambivalencia del currículo de enseñanza del idioma inglés. **Discusión y conclusión:** Damos cuenta de la identidad de docentes-investigadores transformadores de los participantes como un sitio de agencia en el marco de las políticas macro con una influencia neoliberal poderosa. Nuestra definición de las categorías contiene una de las lecciones que aprendimos después de nuestro análisis de las historias; se trata del concepto de agencia basada en historias.

**Palabras clave:** agencia de los docentes-investigadores, identidad del profesor de idiomas, dinámicas educativas neoliberales, maestros transformadores.

## Introductory Ideas for the Report

Human beings implicitly show their character traits when they tell their life experience stories. These stories embrace meaningful people, places, and events related to discourses and practices that shape people's identities. Nevertheless, identity shaping does not always have a positive connotation; it also relates to those conditioning factors that leave little or no room for people's free development. Such is the case of the power relations and professional knowledge base in the English language teaching (ELT) field which condition the alternatives Colombian language teachers create and act upon. In this respect, we believe that research revindicating what language teachers have to say and do about themselves becomes necessary to decrease the tendency to position them as mere clerks of the educational system.

Thus, in this article, we intend to report on the reflexivity that two Colombian language teacher-researchers accomplished through some stories about their personal, academic, and professional trajectories. We feel that their stories involve a transformative dimension of their own identity as teachers and researchers. We show that restricting factors, such as power and knowledge, enabled these two teacher-researchers to understand, act upon, and transform their own experiences concerning creating and implementing pedagogical and research alternatives. This lets us think of the notion of storied agency as a step toward a critical identity perspective. It means that the pedagogical and research alternatives of the two teacher-researchers relate to the informed decisions and actions they take upon the discourses and practices that condition their self-construction. By reflecting upon their own

stories around their personal, academic, and professional trajectories, the two teacher-researchers find ways to enlighten their decisions and actions. Their reflexivity as critical awareness serves the purpose of coping with institutional planning or the educational system. They do not fight against the system but find ways to act upon their own experiences to keep their own (ideological) principles. They consider a balance between the human and technical dimensions of all actors in the educational system.

This report springs from a larger-scale narrative study, titled: *Critical Language Teacher Identity in ELT as a Political Milieu: Colombian Teachers' Storied Agency in the Time of Neoliberal Insertion in Supranational Policies*. One question posed in that study and addressed in this article is the following: *What reflexive and transformative perspectives do language teachers use to tell their story as ELT professionals?* We decided to analyze the interviews of only two, out of 13, participants to whom we assigned the created pseudonyms of Julieta and Marcos. Our analysis was grounded on the selection of some of these two participants' clauses or small stories; the description of how they used language to reconstruct meaningful events and practices; and the interpretation together with the explanation of their socially enacted identities.

### Theoretical Considerations

Language teachers are often regarded as those individuals whose job is to transmit ready-made information in a hermetic way "guided" by lawmakers. We purposefully write the term "guided" between quotation marks to ironically show that, in fact, language educators are coerced to follow guidelines based on standards mandated by policymakers or technocrats. Those standards are uniform patterns that frame every actor in the educational system, leaving little or no space for individuality or diversity. In this regard, [Álvarez and Ramírez \(2021\)](#) support processes that inform sociocultural differences and invite educators "to bring forth their identities and let students deploy their diversity" (p. 19). Furthermore, language teachers experience a constant tension between their understanding of language pedagogy, language research, and language learning and the commands of the neoliberal norms of performativity ([Englund & Frostenson, 2017](#)) concerning the use of product-oriented instructional strategies and techniques to assure excellent quality results at the time of evaluating students' performance ([Day et al., 2007](#)). Teachers' success is measured in terms of how effectively they transmit pre-established language knowledge to students.

In addition to performativity as an external factor, some internal factors seem relevant in teacher identity construction, such as their self-conception as teachers. It relates to how teachers see themselves based on their understanding of their interaction with their context. This intertwined process, in identity construction, is complex and characterized by a consistent (re)interpretation of life experiences ([Beijaard et al., 2004](#); [Nias, 1996](#)). That interpretation connects to the reflexivity that language teachers practice upon multiple experiences in their personal, academic, and professional lives. This reflexivity leads them to make informed decisions and actions to understand and (re)define their experiences and knowledge ([Autor, 2003](#)). Those informed decisions and actions configure what we understand about language teachers' agency, or their capacity to think, act, and feel ([Monge-Urquijo, Laborín-Álvarez, & Siqueiros-Aguilera, 2019](#)). This in turn provides them with alternatives to resist, reject, or adhere to identity positionings, whether imposed by others or by themselves ([Wenger, 1998](#)).

In this sense, Flores (2014) and Fomunyam (2016) reckon that teachers' professional identity construction is multifaceted, dynamic, and fluid. Not only are teachers in a constant quest to claim the importance of their role as educators, but while doing so, they contest an imposed label as mere clerks or instructors of a language as neoliberal policies position them (Guerrero, 2010). We understand teacher agency as a step leading to teacher critical identity. It deals with the concept of reflexivity we mentioned above as well as the sensitivity toward social justice (Kubota, 2017). Reflexivity also becomes a site of resistance to contest neoliberal agendas. In the same vein, agency goes beyond acting upon a specific matter; it works across time and space for teachers to gain the power to speak and enact their criticality. Similarly, teachers can negotiate symbolic capital, reframe relations of power, and challenge normative ways of thinking to claim their right to speak (Norton, 2013).

The act of constructing a story enables teachers to exercise agency and claim their right to speak and be heard. That storied agency allows teachers to make sense of who they are inside and outside an educational context (Barkhuizen, 2017). Additionally, while teachers tell the story of their experiences, they negotiate their own understanding as professionals. Barkhuizen (2017) describes teachers' professional identities as permanently negotiated and renegotiated. This means they are under constant change. Thereby, framing them in only one way of understanding seems impossible because teachers are always negotiating who they are and what they think their job is about. That renegotiation leads them to resignify their own teaching experience as educators, as well as their practices within a classroom, which can develop into alternative practices for transformation. They may not be impacted as teachers, but important implications may take place for their immediate contexts, including schools, colleagues, and students.

In this manner, Coldron and Smith (1999) stress the importance of agency over social structure. They argue that teachers' choices, guided through reflection, constitute their identities as teachers. Additionally, Moore et al. (2002) assert that teachers' active or passive role in social spaces can be undermined by policies or institutions that require conformity, which could marginalize and/or diminish their positioning in those spaces. Decisions such as acting upon an immediate problem, learning and researching about it, or even telling and reflecting upon professional experiences are considered agency. These decisions are equally important when creating a new way of being an educator that clashes with the ways imposed by neoliberal policies and the ones internal school policies demand. These policies limit teachers' options when encountering a classroom full of different contexts, issues, and possibilities. This challenging situation is intensified in public contexts where schools' budget is limited and government care is at its minimum.

The process of acting upon classroom issues embodies some practices. For instance, some teachers might consider researching as a way of transformation. In this case, research does not overlap a conventional definition for publication, but it seems more aligned with Giroux's (1988) definition of teachers as intellectuals. When a teacher becomes an intellectual, he/she goes through a process of involvement, transformation, and empowerment. Regarding involvement, teachers decide to act upon a specific scenario they consider important in their daily context. In the case of transformation, teachers understand that the political relationship between education and society is not necessarily negative, positive, or neutral within the educational context. While understanding that dynamic and

fluid context, educators reflect upon different factors and make some decisions. These decisions may empower teachers to act and/or reflect on their profession, leading to the transformation of their practices.

In this article, teachers are denominated teacher-researchers or teacher-intellectuals, as they go through a process of intellectuality in which they investigate and learn deeply about a specific issue. They seem to do it to familiarize themselves with the concept and make informed decisions to address a specific issue within their immediate context: a classroom. Although we previously mentioned that teachers' active role can be undermined by external policies or institutions, educators empower themselves by being teacher-researchers and investing themselves in intellectual practices through research and their critical spirit.

### Method

The analysis of the narrative interviews with Julieta and Marcos adopted the narrative inquiry approach (Barkhuizen, 2013) for different reasons. Firstly, it demands a balance between participants' language use and their socially enacted identities, which we need to respect as analysts. The former refers to Gee's (2007) distinction of *discourses*, with a small "d," that represent those connected meaningful language bits; in our study, those connected bits are the small stories (Bamberg, 2006) we selected for our analysis. The latter revolves around what Gee refers to as *Discourse* with a capital "D," which embraces some "*saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations*" to imply that a "Discourse is a sort of 'identity kit' that comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, to take on a particular social role that others will recognize" (p. 142).

The second reason for considering the narrative inquiry approach encompasses our focus on participants' small stories with the purpose of listening, understanding, and interpreting the narrators' voices about what meaningful experiences are for them in a dialogical environment. Simultaneously, we remark on a third reason about how participants' small stories allowed and led them to be the protagonists from the beginning till the end of our study. A fourth reason is that our analysis of participants' small stories could highlight the uniqueness of their human events and actions, rather than the common properties (Chase, 2005). These four reasons are directly linked to the qualitative spirit of our study, as we aim at making visible what the participants have to say and do about their life experiences from their own perspectives in the frame of the neoliberal view of education.

For the larger-scale study, after both the Research Committee of the Faculty of Sciences and Education and the Research and Scientific Development Center of our university approved institutionalizing it, we opened a call for participation through an interview for MA students in the fields of ELT and Applied Linguistics from different public and private universities across Colombia. Once those students who were interested in participating accepted our invitation, they contacted us through email for arranging an appointment and having the interview on Google Meet. The features of the participants' profiles that we thought as fitting to our study's goals included the following: (i) being a current MA student;

(ii) being a current English language teacher at a private or public institution; (iii) having enough time available for the interview. From the open call, fourteen teachers accepted to participate; however, we decided to analyze the interviews of only two participants (Julieta and Marcos), considering the research question chosen for developing this article. Every participant signed a form granting us consent to use the collected data for research purposes (available at [https://drive.g.,oogle.com/drive/folders/1JiAMsFIFUC2iZHgkf7JBL4EFhe2S2y84?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1JiAMsFIFUC2iZHgkf7JBL4EFhe2S2y84?usp=sharing)).

The life stories told by participants during the interview constituted the data of the study. Some days before each interview, and thanks to email communication, participants received a guide for a preliminary introspective practice (available at [https://drive.g.,oogle.com/drive/folders/1JiAMsFIFUC2iZHgkf7JBL4EFhe2S2y84?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1JiAMsFIFUC2iZHgkf7JBL4EFhe2S2y84?usp=sharing)). The objective of that guide was to activate their reflection upon themselves as English language educators, their academic and professional experiences, and Colombian educational policies. These teacher-researchers also received an interview protocol (available at [https://drive.g.,oogle.com/drive/folders/1JiAMsFIFUC2iZHgkf7JBL4EFhe2S2y84?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1JiAMsFIFUC2iZHgkf7JBL4EFhe2S2y84?usp=sharing)) that stated three important moments in the process of collecting their narratives: before, during, and after the interview. The *before* moment aimed at triggering teachers' criticality and consisted of the recalling of meaningful moments in their experience as teacher-researchers who construct their identity as educators. Later, *during* the interview, there was a dialogic space in which researchers and participants conversed about the different moments in their life that marked their agency as teachers. Finally, *after* those interviews were conducted, they were transcribed and subsequently analyzed.

## Findings

### **Main Category: Transformative Teachers' Storied Agency Being Affected by Neoliberal Dynamics**

The components of this main category include *transformative teachers* and *teachers' storied agency*. These two components find neoliberalism as a determining external factor. Transformative teachers in our article are those teachers who discover new ways of being educators, in contrast to being only instructors of a language as a linguistic system. This transformation results from reflection on pedagogical and research daily practices as well as enrollment in academic formation programs. Furthermore, teachers' storied agency represents those situations in which teachers make sense and resignify their teaching and research experiences and practices, all together as alternatives for transformation. The new ways of being educators connect to the participants' preliminary step toward a critical identity perspective. This means that they frequently look for alternatives to inform their decisions and actions on their own experiences, which have implications for the resignification of their own beings.

As regards neoliberal agendas, we refer to them as the capital-based world order that introduces the language and the logic of the market into the educational system to comply with the demands of globalization and that imitates the private sector (Hatcher, 2000) to

the extent of controlling people's lives and determining social practices, values, and identities. Those agendas are not different from the commodification of education in general, and the mercantilization of the ELT curriculum in particular, considering the Colombian educational system. Such commodification brings about asymmetric social relations and impositions of worldviews (Springer, 2012). It affects the school life experiences of all actors in the educational system. School life experiences here are participants' meaningful personal, academic, and professional lived moments that make up their trajectories as teachers and researchers. Their trajectories include moments when they challenge the rigidity of a neoliberal view of the ELT curriculum by adopting an outlook that is rather humanistic, inquiring, and critical. That outlook is part of their new way of being educators which leads them to build, share, and activate new understandings of the world.

We complement the previous definition of the main category in the following paragraphs by describing the narrative profiles of the participants (Julieta and Marcos). We also explain two subcategories for which we use some narrative data excerpts. These two subcategories are *Asymmetric Social Relations: Educational Equality through Teacher-Researchers' Storied Agency Despite the Neoliberalism Hierarchy* and *Teacher-Researchers' Decisions and Actions for Tackling the Univalence and Ambivalence of the ELT Curriculum*. Thereby, we illustrate these subcategories and put forward our interpretation of the issues between the lines of participants' life stories, concerning this article's research question.

### Julieta

Julieta is a 32-year-old English teacher from Chipaque working at a public school located in a rural town. Regarding Julieta's professional story, she narrated that she had an experience in the United States through an exchange program where she learned how education works in the United States. When she returned to Colombia, she worked at private schools for five years. During one of those years, Julieta put a bilingualism program, called "System one" (Sistema Uno, own translation), into practice, in which she could implement cross-curricular instruction with her students.

Currently, Julieta studies for an MA degree in education. This participant told us that in the MA program, she realized that the Ministry of Education considers, as part of its strategic framework 2015-2025, achieving what they call the "Top Purpose 2025" through which "Colombia will be the most educated country in Latin America by 2025" (MEN, 2016, par. 3). Throughout her introspective reflection, she noticed how she lived that purpose at the schools and institutions where she has worked. For instance, she worked for five years at the Colombian National Training Service (*Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje* -SENA for its acronym in Spanish), where she experienced two important policies based on the National Development Plan. First, she did voluntary work for two years. In the first year, she worked with a teacher in Ireland where she said she learned a lot about didactics. She pointed out that this experience was useful because it took place with a teacher. Contrastively, in the second year, she did her voluntary work in Ghana where she showed a flaw since she worked with a speaker who did not have experience as a teacher. According to her, she had the role of the teacher because she knew about didactics. On the contrary, the speaker just considered language as a goal. Julieta stated that teaching English is related not only to knowledge about the language but also to knowledge about how to teach it. According to

Julieta, those voluntary work experiences allowed her to encourage her students to learn about culture and writing because they could communicate with Korean people through letters.

After working in the aforementioned schools and institutions, Julieta started working in public schools located in rural spaces. She stated that rural schools are abandoned by policies. She argued that policies are decontextualized. For instance, she mentioned that rural institutions would send planner books to students, but there would not be a monitoring process related to English learning and teaching. Julieta believes that public policies in rural areas are superficial since there are no real results concerning those regulations. Instead, rural schools are used to showing photos as if there were important results in English teaching. She illustrated how decontextualization may occur when referring to primary education in rural spaces where English is not considered in its curriculum. Also, according to her, immersion classes were never implemented in rural schools.

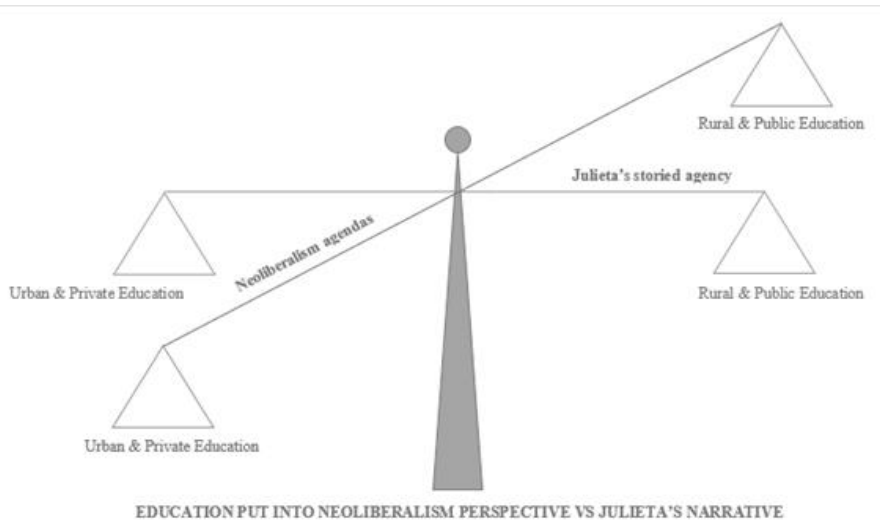
### **Subcategory 1: Asymmetric Social Relations: Educational Equality Through Teacher-Researchers' Storied Agency Despite the Neoliberalism Hierarchy**

This subcategory encompasses Julieta's tension between her sense of equality when teaching English in foreign, urban, rural, private, and public schools and the neoliberal unequal compartmentalization of ELT. From Julieta's narrative, we interpret that she, as a teacher-researcher, theorized ELT when she problematized the educational inequality since urban and private education educate for high roles in the society and labor contexts. In contrast, rural and public schools create their curricula for students to have subordinated roles. Moreover, neoliberalism promotes education as human capital (Bourdieu, 1991) to be competitive in the labor market, which is encouraged as a personal choice (Martin & Del Percio, 2019). In other words, neoliberal discourses foster the vision of freedom to give the responsibility of being competitive to each person. As Tavares (2022) states, "the current neoliberal system of higher education works to amplify individualism where the individual student is positioned as increasingly more solely responsible for his or her personal success" (p. 154).

Nevertheless, Julieta told us that, from her experience, she has researched and concluded that education suffers from inequality due to the hierarchical vision of neoliberal policies. Accordingly, we interpret in this subcategory that Julieta as a teacher-researcher has developed her storied agency. She has achieved it when reflecting upon her experience and not only expressing that the hierarchical vision of students which depends on their sociocultural context is problematic. Indeed, Julieta may treat her students equally because she perceives them as human beings who must develop their intellect, no matter their social stratification. Additionally, she understands language as a comprehensive way to develop students' intellect. Figure 1 shows a brief description of Julieta's vision of education despite the hierarchical understanding of education fostered by neoliberalism.



**Figure 1.**  
*Asymmetric Social Relations: Julieta's Storied Agency Despite the Neoliberalism Hierarchy*



Source: Own Creation

First, Julieta had a voluntary experience at international schools participating in the governmental purpose “Colombia will be the most educated country in Latin America by 2025” aforementioned. As a volunteer, she had the experience of working with two foreign people teaching English. The first one was from Ireland and the second one from Ghana. She told us that people who joined that program spoke English, but not all of them were teachers. Hence, she stated that those programs related to education should focus on pedagogy and not only on the language. Julieta mentioned that she had two opposite experiences, considering that the Irish volunteer was a teacher who focused on pedagogy and didactics, while the Gahanian volunteer was concerned with language as a goal and disregarded the pedagogical aspect. Therefore, she learned about ELT and didactics with the first volunteer, which was not the case with the second. Regarding Julieta’s narrative, she mentioned:

My first year working as a volunteer was with a primary school teacher from Ireland. I learned a lot. She was a super didactic teacher. I mean, she had a teaching methodology that I really liked because I learned about didactics. In the second year, I was with a volunteer from Ghana. The experience with students was a little complicated. This last volunteer did not have experience as a teacher. So, there was a flaw since the person in charge of didactics was me. He helped me with the students’ oral skill assessment. But I think that ELT is not a matter of knowing English or Spanish. It is a matter of knowing how to teach languages. I think that they [who led the voluntary work] should have required pedagogy studies or experience for people to take part in the voluntary work (Lines 58 to 74. Our translation from Spanish).

From Julieta’s narrative, we understood that she problematized educational policies focused on the English language by itself, leaving pedagogy out. In this vein, the promotion of international exchange by educational policies refers to connecting Colombian English language teachers with English language speakers from other countries, even when those speakers are not prepared to be English teachers. We infer that this vision of ELT fits the

neoliberal vision of the English language since neoliberalism promotes geographical mobility through language, as a way to succeed and progress (Martin et al., 2020). However, Julieta resists neoliberal agendas; not only did she expect to keep her contact with foreign speakers to improve her proficiency, but she also hoped to learn about English in *educational contexts*. Particularly, her concern was about her role as an English language teacher, rather than her proficiency as an English language speaker. At this point, we infer that Julieta's connection with the English language speaker who is not a teacher does not make sense to her. Conversely, she gives meaning to the voluntary program, when she learned about pedagogy and ELT in a foreign context, since she could learn a lot about methodologies to teach a language. Consequently, we interpret that Julieta's critical identity is constructed when she does not allow herself to be seduced by the neoliberal vision of exchanging experiences as a way to move geographically, and as a way to succeed. Instead, she gives meaning to her voluntary experience in proportion to her learning about pedagogy and didactics.

In addition, from Julieta's story, we interpret that she experienced a tension between the neoliberal vision of English language teachers as those who teach the instructional part of a language and her vision of English language teachers as those who develop students' intellect. Julieta mentioned:

President Juan Manuel Santos' discourse focuses on English learning as a tool for students to work in call centers. I state that a call center is not a place to develop a person's intellect. I mean, they do not view the English language as a social tool to learn the culture; they view the English language as a work tool (...) Additionally, it is sad to see that lower-class students are prepared to work in call centers, while private education students are educated to study at universities and get elite positions in their jobs. I worked for five years at private schools. I worked at a private one that is great because they implemented a bilingualism program called "System One" so we work on students' cross-curriculum, let us say. Taking into account the policies (...) in private universities and private schools, they do not educate students to work in a call center. I mean, there is compartmentalization related to education (Lines 123 to 137. Our translation from Spanish).

Considering Julieta's story, we infer that her critical identity entails the tension she generates about the vision of English language teachers. We consider that she reflects on her experiences as an English language teacher-researcher versus the neoliberal vision of ELT that is fostered in the institution where she works. That is, the "market-driven conception of education has led to the devalorization of traditional academic education" (Tavares, 2022, p. 155). Then, she positioned herself as a teacher whose vision of language is related to sociocultural learning that goes beyond the structure of a language by itself. In this vein, Kramsch & Vinall (2015) stated that due to neoliberalism, teachers are responsible for generating learners with language skills for work. They also mentioned that in neoliberal agendas, teachers are no longer professionals who cultivate learners psychologically, socially, and intellectually, or who help them become more mature individuals. However, Julieta stated her idea of education as an intellectual process, which goes beyond the structural vision of language as a goal, despite experiencing neoliberal policies. In addition, we understand ideology as a dynamic construct related to the ways through which meanings are produced, transmitted, and integrated in form of knowledge, social practices, and

cultural experiences (Giroux & Shannon, 1997). Since we comprehend ideology as a way to construct critical identity, we interpret that Julieta resists the neoliberal ideology when keeping her ideology about education and ELT. Julieta achieved it based on her educational experience, which made her disagree with the neoliberal vision of education and ELT.

On the other hand, Julieta narrated her experiences at private schools and public institutions for work and human development. She pointed out the private schools' vision of students as "thoughtful people who learn beyond the language. I mean, they live sociocultural experiences" (Julieta, line 249. Our translation from Spanish). Contrastively, public schools' vision of students emphasizes the development of language skills to allow them to work for call centers. For instance, regarding private schools, the national bilingualism program acknowledged the *System One* initiative, which she implemented there. It included international comprehensive material for students to work on their English skills from constructivist perspectives. That means students from private schools are privileged due to being considered subjects who must develop their intellect and the economic possibilities that facilitate their access to technological material. Julieta emphasized that public education perceives students as call center workers and teachers as trainers. She added that the socioeconomic stratification in ELT may manifest through a binary educational opposition in urban areas between private and public schools. Particularly, Julieta mentioned:

I think that the English teacher is visualized as a trainer teacher from neoliberal policies. In fact, at SENA [the National Training Service], there is a program for working in call centers. They train students to accomplish instructions. It is something very instructional because they do not view the student as a thinking, reflective person who goes beyond the language, as a code, to have a cultural and social experience. I have not felt like that because always when I went into the classroom, my understanding of teaching revolved around the cultural and social sides and communication (Lines 122 to 127. Our translation from Spanish).

Hence, we perceive that Julieta problematizes the discriminatory position that private and public schools assign to students, for example, dealing with them as potential workers. We understand that it is problematic for her since she positions her students as thinking reflective subjects, whereas public contexts intend to form workers who do not go beyond following instructions. Not only does Julieta problematize the educational vision of students according to their socioeconomic possibilities, but she also treats her students as thinking subjects, without discriminating if they are from public or private schools. Accordingly, we conclude that she exerts her agency because she acts under her professional principles, rather than allowing neoliberal agendas to colonize her ideas about English language learners. Briefly, Julieta's agency has to do with breaking the power given to elite students by policies.

### **Marcos**

Marcos is a 27-year-old English language teacher. He studied for a BA in ELT at a public university in Bogotá. After graduating from his BA program, he started working as an English language instructor in some private language institutes in Bogotá. After very few years of

being an instructor, he thought of alternatives for continuing his academic formation in an MA program. Marcos told us that he always knew that ELT was his passion and what he wanted to continue studying after his undergraduate program.

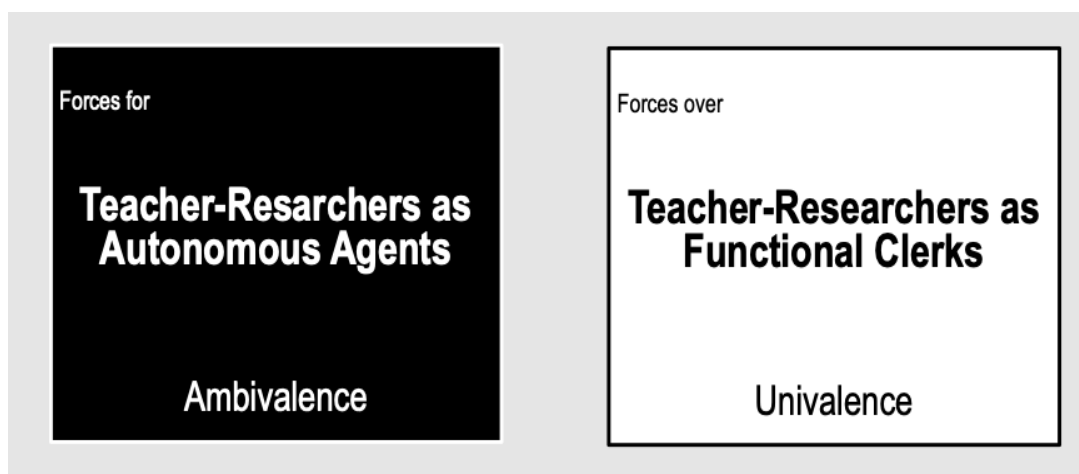
Based on his passion for ELT, Marcos decided to change his routine in Bogotá to widen his horizons by starting a new life in another city. Thus, the process of selecting, applying for, and eventually enrolling in an MA program in Medellín constituted a turning point in his academic and professional life, with implications for his personal life as well. He began an MA program at a public university. What caught Marcos' attention the most about the MA program was its research component, and the topic he wanted to develop was related to teachers' professional development. He admitted that a critical component of the MA program was not part of his interests at first. Nevertheless, he told us that his discovery of a critical dimension of contents and activities of the new graduate program appeared as he advanced in his studies and research proposal for his MA thesis.

### **Subcategory 2: Teacher-Researchers' Decisions and Actions for Tackling the Univalence and Ambivalence of the ELT Curriculum**

This subcategory refers to an account of Marcos' decisions and actions that relate to the tensions caused by the forces for and over his agency constructed through his personal, academic, and professional experiences. Marcos' agency, together with those of the 14 participants in our larger-scale study, goes back and forth from uncertainties to certainties when dealing with self-initiated as well as collective research practices related to his growth as a teacher-researcher (Fullan, 2001). In Figure 2, we intend to visualize the tensions between two forces. First, the uncertainties that act as a force for the autonomous decisions and actions of teacher-researchers appear when they deal with instructional and social issues not only inside but also outside their classrooms and schools. Second, top-down models of language instruction claim to provide teacher-researchers with recipe-like strategies to solve immediate classroom instructional issues that create the sensation of certainty, but they are veiled forces over the actors of the educational system.

**Figure 2.**

*Tensions of Teacher-Researchers between Ambivalence and Univalence*



Source: Own Creation

We relate the existence of uncertainties to the ambivalence that Marcos faces when having to decide on a research topic for his MA thesis. As for certainties, he wants to continue to work on the topic of teacher research that he started in his undergraduate program with student-teachers. Later, in his graduate program, he opts for a research area on teachers' professional development since it relates to his initial interest in teacher research, but this time with in-service teachers because he feels a greater capacity to face it. Moreover, Marcos declares that not being acquainted with a critical dimension of research made him hold onto the idea of professional development:

There was a critical one [research area], but as I had said, no, I was not as familiar with the critical question. So, I decided to go for professional development because I felt that this was the one that offered me the tools to be able to continue with the previous work that I had been doing since my undergraduate degree. There, well, basically what interested us a lot in the degree's work that we did were the perceptions of the student-teachers regarding research, as well as understanding the reasons why it was either difficult or easy for undergraduate students. So, I wanted to continue that line of thought; in this case, with the experience that I had already acquired during these years, I felt like I had a greater capacity, maybe to inquire about in-service teachers, not just with student-teachers. And then, the lengthy process of thinking about what I am going to do for my MA thesis begins there (Interview CM-47-61. Our translation from Spanish).

The stories in the narrative interview with Marcos gave us some pointers on the growth of his academic self. In particular terms, the excerpt above leads us to perceive that inquiring about student-teachers' perceptions of research has been Marcos' main interest, even before his MA program. For us, his earlier work on such an issue is a source of self-confidence that became a motivation to continue his academic formation and make his initial wonderings evolve by adapting himself and his research agenda to the new demands of his graduate program. Thus, Marcos challenged his own research interests. Although he declared that the critical dimension was far from his reach, he seemed willing to play his role as a researcher when moved or touched by his new MA program. We think that it is a turning point in his academic and professional trajectory. Thus, he decided to move from the issue of student-teachers' perceptions of (formative) research to the topic of in-service teachers' professional development. The turn to teachers' professional development (Mendez-Rivera & Guerrero-Nieto, 2022) also encompasses research as we infer. We learned about it from the declaration: "I felt like I had a greater capacity," through which Marcos tells us that he has made his academic self evolve. It is a sign of responsibility for his own (re)construction and integral development (Kumaravadivelu, 2012).

Concerning uncertainties, Marcos finds the critical dimension of research challenging. Although he was aware of it in a further moment from the interview, he told us that he decided to move from the topic of professional development to retake the topic of teacher research and immerse himself in its critical dimension. The long time and number of discussions that drove Marcos to make such a decision show that his intellectual investment led him to elucidate his uncertainties when he said he still needed to understand more about the critical dimension of research, however:

And then, after a lot of discussions, there was quite a lengthy process. And the decision I made was about the same thing, the research of teachers. But in this case, I decided to give it a critical approach in the sense of why teachers develop critical research... and, well, in the beginning, as I said, that is why I said, at first, I was not that interested in it because I felt that it was not something, well, that I had not developed that much. It has been quite a process and quite a challenge to understand all these critical perspectives. And in fact, I believe that although I am in the data collection phase and so on, I believe that I still have a lot to understand and a lot to apply in the contexts and specifically in the research that I am trying to carry out (Interview CM-138-153. Our translation from Spanish).

We identify the research practices of Marcos' MA program as a strong force to give him a step forward in the problematization of research itself. After accounting for Marcos' interest in others' perceptions of research, we focus on his decision to address the critical dimension of research, as told by himself, because it constitutes a sign of his growth and transformation in the continuous construction of his identity as a researcher. It also shows Marcos as being transformative, as Lerner (2001) puts it, since he starts, maintains, and follows up on the challenge of examining others' views on research. Doing research allows him to engage in problematizing others' critical perspectives on research, which leads him to rely on research as a systematic and procedural practice, instead of common sense (Piñeros & Quintero, 2006).

The decision of being transformative and the critical dimension of research take an interesting shape in another small story Marcos told us in the interview. It relates to research as a critical practice that serves the purpose of identifying and problematizing issues relevant to social reality (Atkinson, 1990). Such is the case of Marcos when asked to tell us about the relation between his academic and professional life experiences and a speech of a former President of Colombia at the relaunching of the bilingualism program of the National Ministry of Education, in the form of *Colombia Very Well*." We invited Marcos to watch and listen to it some days before the interview (the speech video is available at <https://youtu.be/kHJtJCdUnyw>). We interpreted the social relevance of research emerging when Marcos perceived himself as a teacher-researcher with the capacity to identify the influence of corporations, such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), on the Colombian bilingualism program. For us, it is relevant to think of the economic purposes behind policymaking as a practice that obeys the dictates of transnational organizations because it is problematic. Indeed, Marcos expressed something similar in the excerpt below when asserting that an interest solely in the profitability of education leads to overlooking the human development of people:

I feel that this is the speech that Santos gave there. He focused more on terms of work. It is English for work, not for other things. And as for the teaching of the English language, well, that is about rather economic purposes, so they discuss what the country's insertion in this organization, the OECD, is all about. So, I see it as having political and monetary interests there, rather than educational as such or having a relation to the development of people (Interview CM-209-251. Our translation from Spanish).

The OECD is a transnational organization that claims its attempt to build better policies for better lives. It created a “Better Life Index” for several countries. In the Better Life Index for Colombia, the OECD reports that compared to other countries in that index, “Colombia underperforms the average in income, jobs, education, health, environmental quality, social connections, civic engagement, and life satisfaction” (OECD, 2020, par. 1). It implies that Colombia must accomplish the demands to reach the minimum requirements to be part of the OECD. We could infer that Marcos finds it problematic when referring to the relationship between the insertion of Colombia in the OECD and the ELT field, as grounded on economic interests. This reflection shows Marcos’ transformative spirit as a researcher that leads him to understand how government representatives and policymakers use the ELT curriculum. As in other areas of the Colombian educational system, it is strategically presented as another alibi for justifying actions that respond to the demand for improving the economy of the country. An example of this is the following segment from the Education section of the OECD’s (2020, par. 19) Better Life Index for Colombia:

A well-educated and well-trained population is essential for a country’s social and economic well-being. Education plays a key role in providing individuals with the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to participate effectively in society and the economy. Having a good education greatly improves the likelihood of finding a job and earning enough money.

Although Marcos declares that education and people’s (human) development remain disregarded, teacher-researchers find ways to cope with education policies that determine them and their practices at schools, moved by what stands as a priority for them: students’ needs. Paradoxically, students’ needs are a source of uncertainty and bring in questions and doubts related to teaching and learning chores. Often, teachers succeed to fulfill their students’ needs despite government regulations. Education policies and government regulations require teachers to do more than they are prepared to, but they find alternatives to deal with uncertainty, for instance, teachers’ micro-practices (Guerrero & Autor, 2021). These correspond to those decisions and actions that teachers take to fulfill their students’ needs that often remain unnoticed within classrooms by policymakers, and they sometimes seem undermined even by their authors.

We also infer from Marcos’ narrative that the insertion of Colombia into the OECD is a sign of resistance and desire for transformation. We understand that transformation is achieved by doing research as a practice that signals the critical spirit of those who conduct such practice. That is our interpretation: Marcos’ interest in teachers’ professional development with a focus on research leads him to detach from a top-down and instrumentalist view of professional development toward models of how to teach best (Díaz-Maggioli, 2004). For Marcos, it is a reflective and critical way to understand teaching and figure out alternatives for transformation, as he declared:

So that was when I began to document much more about the critical side. It took me many months to understand, let us say, adequately, what the critical side consists of. And then, while designing the problem statement and the theoretical framework and everything, that was when it began to show how interesting this is; it is a perspective that definitely goes according to my interests, my vision of teaching,

and the purposes that I have, to transform, change, or at least raise awareness in students about something (Interview CM-379-388. Our translation from Spanish).

Marcos lets us see his engagement in doing research from a critical outlook. The events appear to be resulting from his human action or his agency as the narrator (López-Bonilla, 2004). It is an action that serves the purpose of tackling the ambivalence generated by forces that are external to him. For instance, Marcos mentioned the demands of the OECD in another moment of the interview. When his “human agency is being curtailed by institutional forces” (López-Bonilla, 2004, p. 64), Marcos appeals to his self-initiated research agenda to pursue the purpose of transforming the status quo.

### Concluding Remarks

The question that guided our analysis was *What reflexive and transformative perspectives do language teachers use to tell their story as ELT professionals?* We account for the participants’ transformative teacher-researcher identity as a site of agency in the frame of macro policies with a neoliberal influencing force. Our definition of the main category, *Transformative Teachers’ Storied Agency Being Affected by Neoliberal Dynamics*, contains one of the lessons we learned after our small story analysis; it is about the concept of storied agency. Particularly, it became a step toward a critical identity perspective. This means that these participants’ agency was a starting point for the construction of their critical identity. Their agency comes from their lived experiences as teacher-researchers. In other words, their agency serves their purpose of coping with neoliberal discourses that position them as only clerks.

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