

Critical Incidents, Reflective Writing, and Future Teachers' Professional Identities

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Abstract

A number of recent studies point to the benefits of critical incidents and reflective writing in the language instruction process. Within this context, this study purports to unveil the role that critical incidents and reflective writing play in the configuration of future EFL teachers' professional identities. To this end, 30 senior college students enrolled in an English Teaching Major wrote and reflected on critical incidents that have shaped their language learning and teaching of English experiences. Once data had been gathered, the researchers followed Freeman's (1998) four-stage process for data analysis and interpretation. Findings were later on theorized in light of the research goal and the theory discussed in the theoretical framework. Conclusions are that (1) spaces for reflection should be opened so that positive practices are kept and the negative can be dismantled, (2) reflective writing through critical incidents is an effective way to realize professional and other social identities, and (3) reflective writing through critical incidents is a bridge through which dialogue can be initiated amongst all educational actors. The study vindicates the use of narrative inquiry as a way to explore learner's affective domain and to understand educational phenomena as embedded within a specific socio-cultural context.

Key words: critical incidents, reflective writing, future teachers, professional identity, humanism, constructivism

Resumen

Estudios recientes resaltan la relación entre los incidentes críticos, la escritura reflexiva y el aprendizaje de lenguas. Dentro de este contexto, este estudio busca desvelar el papel de los incidentes críticos y la escritura reflexiva en la configuración de la identidad profesional de futuros docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL). Para tal cometido, 30 estudiantes universitarios de cuarto año de una carrera de enseñanza del inglés escribieron y reflexionaron sobre incidentes críticos que han forjado sus experiencias de aprendizaje y enseñanza del inglés. Recolectados los datos, los investigadores siguieron el *proceso de cuatro etapas* para el análisis e interpretación de resultados propuesto por Freeman (1998). Posteriormente, teorizaron sobre los hallazgos a la luz del objetivo de investigación, así como de lo discutido en el marco teórico. Se concluye que (1) se deben abrir espacios de reflexión que ayuden a preservar las prácticas docentes positivas y a desechar las negativas; (2) la escritura reflexiva mediante incidentes críticos constituye un método eficaz para comprender identidades profesionales, así como otras de tipo social; y (3) la escritura reflexiva mediante incidentes críticos sirve como medio de diálogo entre los distintos actores del proceso educativo. El estudio vindica el uso de la investigación narrativa biográfica como método para indagar en el dominio afectivo de los estudiantes, a la vez que llama a comprender todo fenómeno educativo dentro de un marco sociocultural determinado.

Palabras claves: incidentes críticos, escritura reflexiva, futuros docentes, identidad profesional, humanismo, constructivismo

Introduction

This is the first of a series of two papers on the role of critical incidents and reflective writing in the shaping of soon-to-be-teachers' professional identities. We do so through the theoretical lens of constructivism and humanism, for which we provide a theoretical overview in the lines following this introduction. We then turn to operationalizing the construct of professional identity as embodied within the more general category of social identity, and then go on to present the methodological procedures used, the results, the findings and discussion, and, lastly, the recommendations and further research.

By and large, educational research in Costa Rica and arguably elsewhere

has focused on the cognitive sphere and has neglected the affective domain and metacognition as variables that inevitably shape learning. Nonetheless, recent advancements in education have led to an unprecedented interest in the role that critical incidents (CIs) and reflective writing play in the language teaching-learning process (Ramsay, Barker, and Jones, 1999; Cisero, 2006; Mlynarczyk, 2006; Farrell, 2008; Khandelwal, 2009; Gorlewsk and Greene, 2011; Ryan 2011; Farrell, 2013; Purcell, 2013; Chang and Lin, 2014; Ruthertford, Flin and Irwin, 2015; Walker, 2015; Schulz, Krautheim, Hackemann, Kreuzer, Kochs and Wagner, 2016; Kalman, Aulls, Rohar, and Godley, 2008). Consequently, this study created the opportunity of penetrating the

participants' affective domain by looking at CIs through reflective writing as a means to gain insights into their experiences in the configuration of their teacher identities. Thus, in studying those CIs, autobiographical research has come its way a valuable technique to explore students' voices about affective issues surrounding their learning.

This study departs from the premise that opening spaces for self-reflection and analysis empowers pre-service teachers to develop a more acute sense of awareness on the disturbing consequences of negative feedback, as well as to "tailor", as Fallas puts it, their knowledge of language "to fit the diverse realities that they will find in the classroom" (2010, p. 171). All in all, the study adds up to the bulk of literature on humanism and constructivism and the extent to which they are actually endorsed in our Costa Rican contexts. This article is a contribution to the initiatives undertaken by Costa Rican authors such as Chaves (2008) and Rodríguez (2008) to advance the status quo of humanism and constructivism in the current language education landscape. Findings in general assist our understanding of the active role that critical incidents through reflective writing play in configuring future teachers' professional identities.

Theoretical Referent

In discussing findings from the CIs, we will turn to the principles of *social constructivism* and *humanism*, the two philosophies that underpin the English Teaching Major's (henceforth, ETM) curriculum. Thus, the categories emerging from

the participants' narratives will be scrutinized and theorized through the lens of these two major theories. We will not present a state of the art so far due to length restrictions, but will do so in the forthcoming publication of our second paper.

Some Relevant Considerations on Constructivism

In modern education, constructivism has received considerable critical attention and is currently at the core of pedagogical debates, empirical research, and overall curricular planning and development. In the field of language instruction in particular, authors such as Reagan and Osborn (2002) believe that the application of constructivist epistemology should "necessarily undergird virtually all classroom practice" (p. 64); and yet others like Kotzee (2010) reject it as a pedagogical alternative and have in contrast stressed the need for an "anti-constructivist" philosophy of teaching. "The fact that you hold constructivist epistemological views will not guarantee that you will be a constructivist teacher", Kotzee (p. 186) criticizes.

But debates aside, there are a number of principles which scholars view as the bedrocks of constructivist teaching, and which are also central to the specifics of this paper. We will then outline such principles in the following lines, knowing that our summary will not do justice to all that has been discussed around the subject; however, we hope to offer an insight on what a constructivist classroom should prospectively involve. According to Bronack, Riedl, and Tashner (2006), the following

five assumptions should inform our thinking as we understand and teach for constructivist classes:

- knowledge is participatory;
- learning leads development through predictable stages via shared activity;
- a useful knowledge base emerges through meaningful activity with others; [and]
- learners develop dispositions relative to the communities in which they practice. (p. 221)

All equally important, the last aspect stands out because it acknowledges the localness of learning dispositions, as opposed to the traditional generalizations-based conception of learning that has permeated much of the educational agenda for the past decades. In constructivist teaching, the context-bound nature of learning sets the way forward and prepares the means through which classroom dynamics are built. This assumption, however, bears implicitly a caveat to the teaching enterprise since, as the authors themselves warn, this “conceptual framework is an evolving construct” (p. 221). Richardson further brings up the same subject when he notes: “Constructivist teaching is not a monolithic, agreed-upon concept” (as cited in Beck and Kosnic, 2006, p. 7). This implies that attention should be paid to emerging debates and advancements on the subject so that our classroom choices are informed by current theoretical insights.

Beck and Kosnic review the same principles proposed by Bronack, Riedl, and Tashner (2006) but go on to caution that constructivism is certainly a complex undertaking, and that it may

work in the long run but only if it is supported by more schools of education and academia in general.

The Place for Humanism in the ETM

Turning now to humanism, we will begin by noting that humanism is not a teaching methodology as popular misconceptions often suggest. Much of what we know of 20th century humanist philosophy today originally developed from counseling and psychotherapy, and it soon gained prominence in different disciplines and extended to the social sciences including education (Herman, 1995, p. 9). Humanism followed the emergence of constructivism and advanced its way under the postulates of Erickson, Rogers and Maslow (Khatib, 2013), bringing in major transformations to classroom pedagogy all the way from redefining the roles of teachers and learners to acknowledging the importance of affect in the learning experience (see Tudor, 2002; Wang, 2005, as cited by Khatib, 2013, p. 45). By and large, it could be said that humanism is “committed to a social and intellectual climate defending students against intellectual oppression, physical punishment, and dishonor” (Aloni, 2007, as cited by Khatib, 2013, p. 45). Central to humanism are Rogers’ (1983) claims that learning should be “significant, meaningful, and experiential” (as cited in Herman, 1995, p. 10).

But all too good as could sound, humanism is more often than not a dilemmatic concept. In the context of the ETM, this is particularly true since no cues are given as to which view of humanism teachers should follow. To the uncritical eye, it may well be the case that the approach being promoted

is classical humanism, which not only conflicts with the principles of constructivism and humanism but also reduces learning to rational, cognitive activity that ignores the psychological and emotional dimensions, and that Solano (2015) has so sharply criticized in recent publications. Classical humanism, with its view of knowledge as “a set of [...] given truths requir[ing] the trained intellectual capacities of a teacher to transmit it” (Sivasubramaniam, 2011, p. 4), has no advantage over the knowledge-transmitting views so heatedly reproached by many scholars and researchers who, not knowing the far-reaching implications of classical humanism, end up embracing its tenets without questioning the small print between the lines.

At present, new theories and teaching philosophies such as *empowerment pedagogy* (see López, 2015), *culturally relevant pedagogy* and *culturally responsive teaching* (see Thomas, 2013) are also making their way in the educational landscape, bringing in, shaping and reshaping assumptions posed by these two approaches and opening new avenues for reflection, critique, and reconsideration of the extent to which constructivism and humanism respond satisfactorily to the complexities of our educational contexts.

On the other hand, we are certain that the downsides herein discussed for constructivism and humanism will not come to an end by simply talking about them. But we do believe that being upfront on the issue brings us closer to finding ways to make these philosophies work for our local teaching contexts. In the meantime, our paper is concerned with the extent to which the events narrated in the CIs reflect

the positive aspects of constructivism and humanism as (we believe) they have been envisioned by the curricular developers of the ETM.

On the Relevance of Teachers' Professional Identity

From a sociological perspective, identities are not fixed concepts but rather dynamic components that result from individuals' engagement in different social memberships. While some of our identities are ascribed to us by virtue of our birth, many of them are co-constructed by way of social exchanges and even imposed by others through discourse and power (Riley, 2001; Riley, 2007). According to Hall (2002), our identities are socially relevant because we make conscious language choices depending on the interactions we are called on to play. In a church context, for instance, we are likely to take on a more or less ecclesiastic language register and to expect the same from our interlocutors. Likewise, Hall argues, “in workplace events, we are likely to orient to each other's professional identity, and interact as, for example, employers, colleagues or clients” (p. 33), rather than, say, parents, teachers, church goers, or as members of a given ethnicity. In the current paper, we will be looking into the ways in which professional identities have been developed in future teachers.

About this, Tsui (2007) claims that teacher's professional identity is a crucial element “in the sociocultural and sociopolitical landscape of the classroom and in teachers' professional development” (p. 657); yet, she highlights that when it comes to research the attention has been centered mainly on the

cognitive area of teacher development. The author explains that currently an important area of research in the subject includes “the relationship between personal and social dimensions of identity” (p. 658). She also states that a number of authors have highlighted the need to research not only the personal area of identity, but also its professional context because it is there where teachers (especially young teachers) shape who they are as professionals and what methodological choices they make.

In such attempt, prospective teachers have been said to go over several developmental stages; namely, the *Fantasy* stage, where they “romanticize about the experience ahead” and sympathize with students’ viewpoints more than with their teachers’ (Gilmore, Hurst, and Maher, 2009, p. 2); the *Survival* stage, where they attempt to consolidate a sense of identity upon experiencing crisis and classroom upheaval; the *Mastery* stage, in which teachers walk their first steps towards full mastery over the target content and methodology; and the *Impact* stage, where the somewhat experienced teacher is able to make judicious choices based on students’ individual needs. In this last stage, teachers grow more concerned with self-appraisal of their work (ibid). While there are certainly other frameworks to the subject, this one offers a starting point to understanding the dynamism of teachers’ professional identity formation. But all in all, the relevance of exploring this process has to do with the fact that the interaction between instructors and their educational context “is manifested in [...] job satisfaction, occupational commitment, self-efficacy, and [...] motivation” (Canrinus, 2011, p. 18).

Critical Incidents and Reflective Writing

Critical incident analysis, according to Crisp, Green Lister, and Dutton (2005), was first introduced to understand pilot errors in flying aircraft. Thereafter it was used in researching safety in anesthesia. The authors go on to argue that critical incidents do not necessarily have to involve a high risk or dangerous situation. They define critical incidents by citing Tripp’s (1993) definition which stated that:

The vast majority of critical incidents, however, are not at all dramatic or obvious: they are straightforward accounts of very commonplace events that occur in routine professional practice which are critical in the rather different sense that they are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures. These incidents appear to be ‘typical’ rather than ‘critical’ at first sight, but are rendered critical through analysis. (pp. 24-25)

Critical incidents as a qualitative research technique have been successfully used in language learning and in teaching-related studies, as well as in research in other fields. Teacher education (e.g., Morey, Nakazawa, and Colvin, 1997; Graham, 1997), sign language learning (e.g., Lang, Foster, Gustina, Mowl, and Liu, 1996), and medicine (e.g., Schulz et al., 2016; Rutherford, et al., 2015) are among the many fields of study that have profited from CIs as a successful research technique.

Crisp et al. (2005) state that educators have used critical incidents as a method to prompt learning. To this end, the method typically involves students

describing the critical incident and going on to reflect and analyze it and identify the learning that has resulted from the experience. The reflection that takes place in so doing has proven a successful tool in language learning and in other fields such as political sciences (Josefson, 2005), sociology teaching (Purcell, 2013), teaching of science (Eiriksson, 1997), and general biology (Balgopal and Montplaisir, 2011), to mention a few. Given the overt value of reflective writing (see Ryan 2011, p. 99 for expansion), we have resolved to use it as a vehicle for students to articulate their critical incidents and thus start to understand the role of critical incidents in the shaping of participants' professional identities.

Methodology

Research Approach and Design

This research takes several forms depending on its depth, purpose, and design for data collection and analysis. In terms of depth, it is exploratory as it seeks to unveil the links between the informants' critical incidents and the configuration of their professional identities (see Barrantes, 2013); it does not seek out to conclusive results but more modestly to fuel discussion on the links between these two variables. According to its purpose, the study is best conceived as applied action research since it pursues the generation of preliminary data that will help frame a better understanding of phenomena (see Barrantes, 2013). In terms of its design, it is narrative research since it deals with "how different humans experience their world around them, and

it involves a methodology that allows people to tell the stories of their 'storied lives'" (Gay, Mills, and Airasian, 2009, p. 384). The research profits from qualitative data collection techniques such as autobiographical and biographical writing. We depart from Gay, Mills, and Airasian's (2009) claim that narrative research is not only a valid qualitative research design but also a prominent one within the new technology of language teaching and learning. Given its naturalistic perspective, our exploration understands reality as being subjective and acknowledges the possibility for other interpretations depending on the purpose, depth, context, and methods chosen for the research (see Golafshani, 2003).

The Participants and Context

The study took place at a public university in Costa Rica during the first term of 2015, with the participation of 30 senior college students enrolled in an English Teaching Major (ETM), and whose GPAs ranged from 6 to 9.52 on a 1-10 scale at the moment of the study. In order to conform to ethical requirements, both the institution and the participants' names will be kept confidentially.

The research was based on a comparative linguistics (CL) course which examined the differences and similarities between the students' native language (Spanish) and the target language (English). The course has been part of the ETM since its creation in 1992 (Universidad de Costa Rica, 2013, p. 2) but is now under examination as part of the restructuring policies brought about by recent accreditation standards. In the understanding

of some ETM professors and accreditation experts, CL should be taken out of the curriculum because its applications are obsolete for the purpose of the major; and also because CL has a lot to do with diachronic linguistics and very little with applied linguistics. But on close scrutiny of the 2012 and 2013 versions of the course syllabus, the fact stands out that while some of the objectives are comparative-linguistics-based, the majority of the contents are contrastive-linguistics-based. With its many applications for translation and foreign language methodology, CL seems to make more sense within the ETM and its teaching goals (see Fisiak, 2009; Gómez, McKenzie, and González, 2008). Thus, the course lent itself for introspection into both, the participants' English learning experiences and their teaching experiences since many of them were taking a teaching practicum course at the moment the study was run.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The course was planned around the principles of humanism and constructivism, and it drew insights from reflective learning and culturally relevant pedagogy. The final project consisted of the narration and analysis of a CI about students' learning and/or teaching of English experiences about any of the following areas:

- a. Aspects of the teaching practicum that was challenging, especially in terms of error correction, first language interference, etc.
- b. An article, book, etc. that increased the participants' awareness of their EFL learning process.
- c. An incident (teaching or learning) involving conflict, hostility, criticism, etc.
- d. A time when accent, grammar, pronunciation, etc., were severely criticized by a professor, a classmate, or an English native speaker.
- e. An experience involving someone criticizing or attacking their [the participants'] roots as Costa Rican-Latino speaker of Spanish.
- f. An event involving something or someone making them feel not ready to be an English teacher.
- g. An event involving English or Spanish being labeled as 'corrupt' or 'impure'.

Participants were given feedback on their critical incidents several times during the semester and were always pushed to go beyond their comfort zones in order to create a high-quality end product. They were also given guidelines as to the format of their CT reports, explanations about the nature and requirements of effective reflective writing, and the instrument with which their final works were to be assessed.

Once data had been gathered, the researchers followed Freeman's (1998) four-stage process for data analysis and interpretation. In the first stage, emerging patterns from the data were named (or labeled) in isolation. In the second, these patterns were categorized according to logical relations between and among themselves. The categories were not selected a priori from the outside but grounded on the data collected. In the third stage, the researchers studied relationships across categories and further identified additional categories that had not been pinned down during stage 1. In the last

stage, general connections were made between the categories and subcategories and then with the research inquiry: to explore the connection between reflective writing through CIs and the shaping of future EFL teachers' professional identities. Findings were later on theorized in light of the research goal and the theory discussed in the theoretical framework.

Data Sources and Validation Techniques

All data came from the incidents narrated by the participants. However, different artifacts such as final project guidelines, scoring rubrics and student grade records were used in order to put together the CIs project. Validity was achieved by means of two procedures. First, member checks were used via the researchers' assisting each other throughout the four stages described

above. Second, three levels of triangulation as described by Allwright and Bailey (1994, p. 73) were used: data triangulation, methodological triangulation (combining data collection strategies), and theoretical triangulation in the discussion of findings. Thus, the following section presents the analysis and interpretation of results.

The Results

This section analyses the categories and subcategories devised through Freeman's (1998) four-stage model described in the methodology section. Verbal descriptions will be accompanied by excerpts from the raw data of the critical incidents. Table 1 shows the citing codes that will be used.

Table 1: Qualitative Data Citation Codes

Instrument Type	Data Source	Citing Code
Critical Incident	CL Students	CI- P01-030

Source: Researchers' own design

Teachers as a Source of Critical Incidents

This category deals with two contrasting elements that, as reported by participants, have played a major role in shaping their professional identities: positive and negative teacher reinforcement.

The Role of Positive Teacher Reinforcement

Participants on the whole have suggested that exposure to positive teacher feedback and encouragement fosters feelings of motivation toward the target language. Participant eight, for instance, reports: "Ms. Ana Victoria", participant eight reports, "taught me more than being a single teacher but to be a partner, a friend; someone

that hear what students have to say, and, being more understanding and motivating with them” (CI-P8, Sic.). Another participant recounts her positive experiences in Elementary School, where she was exposed to learning through singing: “[That teacher] used to encourage me and my classmates to sing along with the multiple and colorful songs she’d put on her recording machine [...] and that made it fun and amusing for an elementary school kid” (CI-P15, Sic.). Later in her narrative, as she describes a time when she had to quit English classes at a language institute, this participant reports that her motivation had grown so strong that she would work independently through music in order to keep on nurturing her English skills: “On not being able to attend classes anymore I started looking for English songs by myself, and really enjoyed listening to them as I read the lyrics” (CI-P15). She clinches her CI with the following thought:

Thanks to Professors like Sara, who might not have a clue of the impact her deed had in my life (and whose name was changed for respect to her privacy) and Teacher Deyanira (whom I cannot call different), nowadays I see the teaching of English as my passion in life. I want to give my hand to the coming generations as it was given to me, so I am always searching and researching the best methods to bring the inspiring gift of music to the foreign language classroom. (CI-P15, Sic.)

What stands out from this last piece of data is that positive learning experiences have given rise to an altruistic attitude: the desire to help others as the participant was helped by her

teachers. This, if we may, is an initiation into the duty of English teaching; these are probably the first steps towards a professional teaching identity.

Closely linked to participant 15, participant 20 also reports to have developed an interest for English teaching as a result of positive teacher reinforcement:

I had a very good teacher during my childhood who taught me everything I knew before I started the university. So I knew that I wanted to major in something related to English and that is the reason I am in the English Teaching Major at the moment. (CI-P20, Sic.)

Participant 21 supports this thesis as she argues that his teachers’ encouragement of English use, together with classes she found enjoyable, helped her “boost” her “motivation and desire to learn” during seventh and eighth grade (CI-P21). As a result, she came into closer contact with the language even outside the classroom, and her classmates showed more willingness to participate in class:

So I started to fall in love with English. I enjoyed studying it at home, listening to music, watching movies, and looking up new vocabulary. In my English classes, my classmates were very eager to participate, complete the exercises, read aloud, and speak in the target language. (CI-P21)

However, as she gets to ninth grade, she experiences a downturn in her motivation due to a change of attitude on the part of her teacher: “But it all ended in just one week. All of a sudden,

she started speaking in Spanish most of the class and the classes became really boring". She goes on to describe feelings of demotivation until she reaches tenth grade, when another teacher makes her recover her love for the language. "Thanks to this teacher", she acknowledges, "I started to enjoy English even more than before, and I enjoyed watching movies and listening to music and all the activities I had deprived myself from as a result of my discouragement" (CI-P21, Sic.). Some initial implications from these experiences can be extracted from this participant's reflection on the importance of teacher reinforcement:

Now that I think about this [the whole string of incidents] with a fresh mind, I find myself thinking that there are situations that can help, hinder, motivate, or discourage us when learning a language. I learned that teachers have the power to motivate or discourage; to give you inspiration or take it away from you. (CI-P21)

Lastly, participant 28 makes the case that teachers' passion and creativity do play a crucial role in fostering motivation among language learners:

My interest in English began when I was a child. I truly enjoyed attending the English classes in my school, and my interest increased when I entered high school. My professor liked to motivate her students all the time. She was also very creative in her classes and liked to teach with passion. We could clearly see that she was so much in love with English and her professional career. (CI-28, Sic.)

But over and above the positive impact of positive teacher reinforcement on participants' motivation, a fact that merits attention here is that, often times, positive reinforcement is followed by some dose of the opposite; and this makes the formation of future teachers' identities a complex battleground, as we will discuss in the following subsection.

The Role of Negative Teacher Reinforcement

In sharp contrast with the above, negative teacher reinforcement was reported to cause feelings of demotivation, anxiety, sadness, psychological distress, and often apathy towards the target language. With blunt resentment, participant 6 describes the attitude of a teacher who, as he points out, "used handouts for kids, played songs for kids, [but] treated us like animals". During his first oral presentation, he reports to have made a mistake involving verb tense use ("today I ate gallo pinto and spoke to my mother in the telephone", Sic.), which made his classmates laugh. But the CI occurred when the teacher said: "Usted es un estúpido, usted solo viene aquí a rascarse los [...]". Astonished in disbelief—he reports—he pretended to think the comment was some sort of a gross joke, and went on to smile "awkwardly" and to remain silent: "I could only think how rude she had been, and how weird I actually felt. I sat down silently with a depressed mood for the rest of that class" (CI-P06). Although he later on claims to have made the incident work on his advantage, it is not difficult to imagine the emotional distress generated by a comment of this kind, especially because it comes

from a teacher. This goes without saying that the story needs to be taken for granted. One would need, for example, to dig deeper on the motives triggering such attitude on the part of the teacher, as well as to find out whether the story actually happened the way the participant claims it to have occurred; but this is thus far out of the scope of our paper.

A similar case comes from participant five, who reports to have been humiliated during a charades activity. In the activity, students were asked to pick out flashcards of different animals and then go to the front and make their classmates guess the animal they had chosen. To this participant's misfortune, his flashcard contained two sheep, whose sound he felt uncomfortable performing, and whose plural form he ignored. When his classmates managed to guess the content in the flashcard, they said "sheep", which he immediately corrected: "almost, it is actually sheeps because there are two of them in the picture". Then he goes on to narrate: "Instantly, with a hard-to-be-described mode, the teacher gestured angrily and in a despising way to me, as if she wanted to say 'shut up, sheep'". He explains that, because he wanted to know whether the word was an irregular plural, he asked the teacher for clarification, to which she replied in Spanish: "Shut it Daniel [fictional name], you do like to do from the class a philosophical one". Shocked by the incident, he reports that his motivation "went down, so much that I lost all interest in the course, and I even thought about dropping the course" (CI-P05, Sic.).

In participant 12's story, the negative feedback chain repeats when she

gets scolded as a result of having gotten distracted during an oral presentation. As she reports, she was playing with her hair and trying to reach a folder from her backpack, when, suddenly, she heard the teacher's voice cry: "Geraldine [fictional name], stop brushing your hair, and put away whatever you have in your hand". On explaining that she needed some notes from the folder, she was confronted again: "Put it away", and realized that the instructor was more irritated than she had initially perceived. In the following quotation, the participant explains the feelings of sadness and demotivation, and distress that aroused from the incident: "I was sad, demotivated, and I could not forget the way that professor had treated me because when she shouted at me everybody was looking at me and that made me feel really embarrassed and also I nearly cried". She also highlights: "Not long after, I was thinking about dropping out the course", and notes that the incident brought implications also to her academic performance (and, though not stated directly, her self-esteem, too): "Later, my academic performance was also affected. As soon as, I had to ask questions to this professor in order to improve my level of English, I preferred to stay quite and serious instead of talking to her" (CI-P12, Sic.).

In a CI titled, "The Negative Chip has been Successfully Installed", participant 24 recalls a traumatizing event when, during a teacher-student feedback session, she was told: "Mmm I don't know how put this. Ok, I cannot understand anything you said, you have serious problems in your grammar, and when I can understand what you say, it is just silly things"; as she struggles to make

sense of the teacher's comment, she hears the teacher go on: "More than that, you must change your chip if you want to pass this course, do you know what I mean?" The participant then describes the feelings of confusion, sadness, and demotivation following the incident, and her bursting into tears on leaving the classroom. Further ahead in her narrative, she states: "That was the first episode of a long nightmare", and then tosses expressions such as "I was so frustrated and demeaned", "I felt I was in jail" and so forth (CI-P24, Sic.). Towards the end of her account, this participant reflects on her current fears of speaking English as a result of this experience; that she cannot let her real voice come out and that now she must deal with the sequels of psychological anguish:

My major concern related to this critical incident is that I am afraid of not being able to get my ideas across clearly in English. So I get so nervous and do not let my real self come out. So what is demanding is to work on that trauma and do not let this experience avoid my chance to express whatever I want to utter in English (CI-P24, Sic.).

Another case worth-noticing is that of participant 28, who writes about positive teacher reinforcement during her childhood (see preceding section in this paper), and then goes on to describe an event involving psychological upheaval as a result of negative teacher reinforcement at a later point in her narrative. She claims to have been humiliated on her poor performance during an oral presentation in her freshman year in the ETM:

When I finished given the presentation, the professor made a rude comment about my performance in front of the whole class, scolding me because I had presented very little information. At that moment, I felt very sad and embarrassed for her comment, I had sweaty palms and started to hyperventilate. I had never been ridiculed by a teacher (CI-P28, Sic.).

The contrast between the incident involving positive teacher reinforcement and the one just narrated above is especially meaningful as it illustrates the power of teachers to encourage, but also to demoralize students; "to give you inspiration or take it away from you", as stated earlier in the account by participant 21. Later on, participant 28 reflects on the need for teachers to be careful with the way they give feedback to students, so that optimal results are attained: "I think a professor must talk to his/her student in private to avoid that he/she feels embarrassment or shame in front of his/her mates. Besides, the professor must be always patient, polite, and a person who encourages his/her students" (CI-P-28, Sic.). Lastly, she offers evidence of the impact this CI has had in the configuration of both her language learner and her future teacher identity:

I consider also that incident had a positive impact in my life, both as a student and as a future teacher. Now, I try always to look for as much information as possible for my speeches, and this has helped me to perform better not only in presentations but also in other course assignments. At present, I try always to learn to look on the bright

side of things, as I have also acquired knowledge to use adversity to my advantage in my future career as a teacher (CI-P28, Sic.).

From a global perspective, data for the two subcategories thus far examined suggests that the configuration of professional identities is not necessarily a monolithic process. That is to say, while positive experiences with the language generally gave birth to feelings of motivation, later events of the contrary challenged their identities even to a point of wanting to quit their careers, as participant 28 highlights: “So, gradually, I started to lose all motivation to attend the following classes, and even, I began losing my interest in my career” (CI-P28, Sic.). The implications for this will be discussed in the findings and conclusion section.

Context as a Site of Struggle

It is well known that context plays a very important role in language learning (Griffiths and Oxford, 2014) and arguably in the configuration of language teachers’ identities. Thus through this section, participant-reported critical incidents that relate to the context as a site of struggle are displayed. To this end, the present section is divided in two subsections: methodology and student demotivation and the link between psychological distress and student performance.

Methodology and Student Demotivation

In this subsection those critical incidents that because of their traits have been classified under the methodology

and student demotivation subcategory are presented.

Participant 18’s assertion, “I was never interested in this language in high school, probably because the classes were very boring. When I took back at those days I always remember a board full of sentences and gap-filling exercises and nothing more” (CI-P18), brings about the issue of faulty pedagogical and methodological practices in the language classroom that result in student demotivation. Along this same lines, participant 7 also complains that:

The professor’s style was not the way I was used to learning. That professor loved to give us lists with vocabulary and synonyms. The classes were intended to just practice vocabulary, and talk. He assigned anthologies of vocabulary exercises as homework, and then checked them in class. In this oral class, the professor did a written quiz. In this quiz, students were supposed to write the synonym of the words the professor chose; just that. (CI-P7, Sic.)

Arguably, such demotivation is the product of classroom practices that result boring and repetitive to students, as reported by participant 21:

When I was a child, I did not have much interest in learning English, so I did very little to become good at it. My English classes in Primary School were very boring and repetitive, and I learned only basic skills during the whole transition. In fact, I did not care much about English; I only cared about studying the contents so I could pass the test. (CI-P21)

The use of Spanish in the English classroom was also reported as methodological technique that jeopardized the learners' motivation:

When I was in ninth grade, I had a new teacher for my reading and writing classes. [...] All of a sudden, she started speaking in Spanish most of the class and the classes became really boring. [...], and [she] only talked in English when the principal or another teacher stepped by the classroom. All disillusioned, I started to her classes and, gradually, my passion for the language started to fade out, too. (CI- P20, Sic.)

The role the teacher adopted in the classroom was also discussed as a source of demotivation: "Also, the she did not care if we understood or not, nor if we had doubts or needed help. She would spend all the whole lesson in her computer, playing video games or chatting with people. [...] gradually, my passion for the language started to fade out, too" (CI- 20, Sic.).

Briefly, the CIs provided by the participants unveil four sources of student demotivation in the classroom related to methodology; namely: poor pedagogical and methodological practices, classroom practices that result boring and repetitive, use of Spanish by the teacher in the English classroom, and the role the teacher adopted in the classroom.

Psychological Distress and Student Performance

The forthcoming lines display the CIs that belong to the role of psychological distress in student performance.

There are various classroom situations that may cause psychological

distress and that at the end undermine student performance. Two such situations were found amongst the study participants that affected them in their role as student-teachers. The first one refers to the feelings resulting from being corrected in class while performing as the teacher. The participant narrates that, one day, as he gave a class in a practicum course, he was corrected on the pronunciation of a word by a student who was a native speaker of English. In this line of thought, participant two discussed his apprehensive feelings when dealing with the incident:

Teacher the correct pronunciation of "enanos" is dwarves, not dwarfs. (...) [I was] scared about looking unprofessional to my high school teacher's eyes (in addition I was scared of losing points on my supervisor's evaluation), and most importantly, I was worried to lose my authority as a teacher in the classroom. (CI-P2, Sic.)

The feeling described in this piece of data is by far a common one among novice and experienced teachers alike. In essence, what this participant is verbalizing is fear of losing face before both his students and before his supervising teacher. Common as it may be, this is evidence of first signs of an emerging professional teacher identity. The second instance of this kind of distress deals with having to teach a class that the student-teacher either did not feel prepared to teach or that he did not like. During a student teaching experience that was part of a pre-practicum course, the informant describes a time when he was carrying out observations prior to his actual teaching.

During these observations, he was taken aback by a student who did all the work and minimized the others. This made him wonder whether he was prepared to teach and, most importantly, whether he wanted to teach that class at all. As he puts it:

At that time, I started to feel scared because I could clearly picture the challenge that awaited me [...] But to be honest, I continued to be worried about my grades, and not only that, but I started to reflect on the idea that maybe I was starting this teaching process without the necessary experience to succeed [...] But, coming to think about it more carefully, what really troubled me was that I was not teaching the class that I wanted to teach. (CI-P3)

Another occurrence of psychological distress affecting student performance is the one induced by the type of classroom strategy and the attitude of peers. Such is the case of participant 20, who reported on how he lost his motivation towards English because of a negative experience with his peers during an evaluated end-of-term roundtable discussion. While performing the task, he forgot most of the content and grew highly nervous: "My body started to shake and my mind started to drift away: I grew terribly nervous". To make things worse, the moderator in the group started to make fun of him: "he was sitting right next to me, so it was even more difficult for me to concentrate: I felt desperate. I heard him laugh right next to me, in mockery, and I felt like never before". Afterwards, the moderator made him further uncomfortable by saying: "Why are you shaking so much?" (CI- P20) Not surprisingly, the

participant argues, he got a low grade and his motivation decreased. As his narration comes to an end, he reflects upon the role of external factors on motivation and, therefore, on student performance.

Now I understand that there are many factors that can affect someone's motivation and they are not always internal but external as well. Motivation plays an important role in a student's performance. Moreover, it does not matter if one has enough competence to talk about any topic at any particular moment, what matters at the end is the environment in which we have to perform. (CI-P20, Sic.)

While the incidents analyzed previously touched upon situations directly affecting participants' teacher identities, participant 20 reports an incident within the boundaries of learner identity. If we indulge ourselves into some speculation, we could assert that the configuration of teachers' professional identities is a complex process framed by diverse variables, including student teaching events as well as language learning experiences.

In brief, data suggests a clear-cut link between psychological distress and student performance at different levels: first, the feelings resulting from being corrected in class while performing as the teacher; second, having to teach a class that they either did not feel prepared to teach or that they did not like. These two affected participants in their role as student teachers. The last level deals with the type of classroom strategy and the attitude of peers which influenced students in their role as learners. Grosso modo, the data discussed in

this subcategory seems to indicate that, although in their own ways and in their own terms, these CIs have played an active role in the early configuration of the participants' professional identities, in part because they took place at a time that is close from the students' insertion in the job market.

Students as their Own Source of Critical Incidents

Roughly speaking, in this category students verbalize the role socio-psychological factors such as personality play in language learning. The first piece of evidence comes from participant 16, who states:

Since I was just I little kid I thought I was like a tiger: always trying to keep away from people, avoiding social events and being alone most of the time. That means I am shy; it is difficult for me to speak with someone and to socialize. Therefore, this situation has been a challenge since the day I realize I was I shy person. (CI-P16, p. 1, Sic.)

In this quotation, the participant reflects upon a personality trait that he describes as having been present ever since his childhood. This invites to believe that his shyness has permeated other spaces of his social interaction and has later on touched upon the language learning experience itself. This self-realization seems to have played a negative role in his communication encounters, as he later on stresses: "Being shy has always been an obstacle to everything in my life and the English learning process has been no exception" (CI-P16).

Participant 21 makes a similar point in saying that shyness is partially responsible for her finding English difficult: "But my English classes, actually very difficult to me due to my lack of knowledge and the fact that I was personality generally shy girl" (CI-P21, Sic.). It follows that, in her view, she's being affected not only by her self-perception as shy but also by an awareness that her knowledge is not up to the expectations. It is uncertain whether she is referring to linguistic knowledge of the English language or background knowledge in order to cope with communication successfully. Whatever the case might be, data from these two participants suggests that shyness plays a more active role in second language (L2) learning than is generally believed.

Closely connected to shyness is the theme of lack of self-confidence. In describing an incident involving stage fright, participant 18 narrates the obstacles caused by her feeling that her language command was not good as that of her classmates: "Sometimes I think my knowledge and my skills are so poor compared to those of my classmates (CI-P18)". Indeed, not only does she feel dimmed before her classmates, but she also indulges in what some have called an act of self-sabotage; that is to say, the self-inflicted idea that one could not perform as well as the others. All in all, the data shows that shyness and lack of self-confidence have permeated students' predispositions towards at least three elements: language learning, the English language itself, and language teaching at large.

Findings and Conclusions

We turn now to discussing the main findings as to the three mother categories analyzed in the previous section. We will do so in light of the theoretical principles of constructivism and humanism as presented in the theoretical framework. Then, we will go on to draw general conclusions based on those findings.

First and foremost, it stood out that CIs involving teachers play a vital—and often critical—role in the formation of future English teachers' professional identities. Through the current study it was found that most participants have been influenced by both, positive and negative teacher reinforcement along the course of their lives. However, perhaps the most striking fact is that the majority of incidents involving negative teacher feedback have taken place during college (in fact, only one CI reported a case of negative teacher feedback during elementary school), ironically at a stage in their academic preparation where they are supposed to get all the necessary tools for quality teaching. From a humanistic perspective, these incidents represent the total opposite of what we could call humanistic education. We made the point earlier in our theoretical discussion that, in the ETM, no clues are given about which kind of humanism teachers should adhere to. Is it that some of them are taking on classical humanism? Is it that some ignore the philosophical orientations of the major? Or is it that, as Solano (2015) has argued, some forms of humanism reduce humans to purely cognitive matter, and ignore the range of psychological and emotional factors

that frame the entirety of a human being? Unfortunately, these are questions for which we cannot offer any answers yet, but, which, certainly, must be tackled urgently in future research. As for the place of constructivism in the context of these narratives, we cannot but agree with Beck and Kosnic (2006) that constructivism can only work if it is endorsed by more schools and academia at large.

The second major finding deals with the link between the context and future teachers' identity formation. As evidenced in the data, elements such as teachers' methodology and psychological distress can be a major source of CIs, and they may be influenced by different classroom agents, such as teachers' methodology, assignments' level of difficulty, peers, participants themselves, and so on. This evidence highly suggests that it is ultimately on the interaction between humans and these agents that the context makes sense. In other words, it would seem that identities are not configured solely by the context per se, but by the reaction of individuals to it. Since identities are not built necessarily on a linear, cause-effect fashion, future teachers and in-service teachers alike need to be aware that their professional identities will likely undergo transformations as they gain experience in their professional praxes, as stated by Gilmore, Hurst, and Maher's (2009) in their discussion of the four developmental stages for instructors' professional identities.

The third and last finding touches upon the role of socio-psychological elements in L2. It would seem from the evidence that the configuration of this layer of identity begins during early years, and that it continues to permeate

adult language learning experiences. If we consider Hall's (2002) and Riley's (2001; 2007) views that identities are framed both by virtue of our birth and through the social exchanges we partake in, we must then suggest that teachers' professional identities do not begin exclusively when they decide to become teachers. Perhaps, we could speak about an early configuration of social, individual, personal, etc. identity that sets the grounds for future professional identity formation. Evidence of this kind, though not conclusive, is highly suggestive that more attention should be paid to this process because (1) it reinforces the claim that identity configuration is a complex deed and (2) it may have a direct impact on the cognitive and emotional side of learners.

Since the last two findings portray rather discouraging experiences for participants, we come back to the previous observation that informants' CIs portray the exact opposite of what constructivist-humanist pedagogies should look like. We are bluntly faced with evidence for a kind of counter-humanism, where the noble premise of humanism as "committed to a social and intellectual climate defending students against intellectual oppression, physical punishment, and dishonor" (Aloni, 2007, as cited by Khatib, 2013, p. 45) is replaced by a reality of psychological distress, dishonor, humiliation, and overall demotivation.

The combination of these findings provides support for the conclusion that spaces for reflection should be opened both in classroom practice and in research so that positive practices are kept and the negative can be dismantled, especially since most of the participants will soon be in a

position to either stop or reproduce the same circumstances they have been subject to. It is in this pursuit where the value of reflective writing through critical incidents becomes more evident. Since most of us are unaware of our own identity configuration processes, engaging in writing of this type is an effective way to realize not only our professional identities, but also a wider range of other social identities (Christison, 2010). In many ways, we can argue that reflective writing through critical incidents is a bridge through which dialogue can be initiated between students and teachers, between teacher-researchers and academia and, ultimately, between academia and curricular decision making. This collaterally vindicates the use of alternative methodologies such as narrative inquiry as a way to explore the affective domain of the learner and to view educational phenomena as always embedded within specific socio-cultural and political contexts.

Recommendations and Further Research

Once more, we reiterate the realistic posture of our study as to its transferability to other contexts, but invite in so doing to acknowledge the value of subjectivity in educational research. Far from weakening the validity of the scientific endeavor, acknowledging this subjectivity is but an indication of a more honest, more truthful, and more reasonable approach to classroom research and research in general. To echo Tudor's words:

Accepting that the reality of a situation has multiple interpretations, or that there are several rationalities at play in this situation, opens the door to improved mutual understanding and a sharing of insights (2001, p. 33).

As we acknowledged elsewhere in this paper, since our purpose was to prompt discussion on the possible links between critical incidents and the configuration of future teachers' professional identities, we suggest that more research be done along these lines. So far, the study has analyzed participants' incidents. Nonetheless, it is also vital to study the participants' own theoretical analyzes of their CIs as a way to make better sense out of the complexities underlying such configuration. Methodologically, similar research using different populations should be done. Putting together more studies of this nature would allow for the use of different research designs and therefore pursue more conclusive results on the subject.

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