The Wisdom of Teachers' Personal Theories: Creative ELT Practices From Colombian Rural Schools

La importancia de las teorías personales de los profesores: prácticas creativas de la enseñanza del inglés en colegios rurales colombianos

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Stemming from a study of what it is like to teach English in rural Colombia considering both English language teaching policy and social challenges of these contexts, this paper explores different locally grounded English language teaching practices. Through the analysis of teachers' narratives and field observations, four examples of such practices are discussed. These examples highlight how teachers intuitively tend to make the most of their expertise, the limited resources available, and the local lingua-cultural repertoires in an attempt to help students make sense of English. From the perspective of language teaching as a socially sensitive practice, findings suggest that teachers' own experiential and situational knowledge constitutes a powerful platform from which valuable bottom-up practices are and can further be devised.

Key words: Critical pedagogy, English language teaching practices, teacher knowledge, rural contexts.

Partiendo de un estudio sobre lo que conlleva enseñar inglés en Colombia rural considerando la política de enseñanza de inglés y los desafíos sociales de estos contextos, este artículo explora prácticas de enseñanza de inglés localmente construidas. A partir del análisis de narrativas de profesores y observaciones de campo, se discuten cuatro ejemplos de dichas prácticas. Éstos resaltan que intuitivamente los profesores tienden a sacar el máximo provecho de su experticia, los recursos limitados disponibles y los repertorios lingüísticos y culturales locales para ayudar a dar sentido al aprendizaje del inglés. Desde la perspectiva de enseñanza de lenguas como una práctica socialmente sensible, estos resultados muestran que el conocimiento experiencial y situacional de los profesores constituye una plataforma fuerte sobre la cual se desarrollan prácticas valiosas.

Palabras clave: conocimiento docente, contextos rurales, pedagogía crítica, prácticas de enseñanza del inglés.

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Introduction

This article is part of a series of papers reporting on a larger study exploring how English language teaching (ELT) is dealt with in rural Colombia, considering both active language policy promoting English in the school system on the one hand and the longstanding social issues rural communities endure, on the other. With regard to the latter, in fact, academics and rural development experts all agree that the Colombian rural sector has been neglected for many years (e.g., Grupo Diálogo Rural Colombia, 2012; Martínez-Restrepo, Pertuz, & Ramírez, 2016; PNUD, 2011). Such neglect is expressed in terms of a huge social, political, and historical "debt" with this sector. It is generally agreed among this group of experts that such a debt refers to an increasingly widening rural-urban gap generated in great part by an urban-oriented development bias that has translated into a constant negligence to address socioeconomic issues of the rural sector that include poor education and health systems as well as economic marginalisation and deprivation. It has also been pointed out that governments have continually failed to devise long term solutions to these problems (Grupo Diálogo Rural Colombia, 2012; PNUD, 2011). Ironically, mindfulness of these issues, in a sense, has contributed to making matters worse as in addition to these social issues of economic redistribution, rurality has also come to experience some sort of "cultural misrecognition" (Fraser, 1997). Following Fraser (1997), this is the case because these ideas have come to fuel a palpable "denigration" and subsidiary role given to rural lifestyles and peoples, who tend to be viewed as of lower status and backward (Cruz Arcila, 2017b).

One way in which these issues have come to the fore in the field of ELT has been the little awareness that there seems to be among policy makers and sometimes even academics of how rural teachers have dealt with ELT programmes enforced by the National Ministry of Education (MEN), let alone of the possible value of their own practices. Only recently there started to emerge a few studies exploring ELT in rural contexts. Some

of these studies highlight the importance of tailoring locally-grounded pedagogical actions to enhance students sense of cultural belonging and intercultural understanding (Ramos Holguín, Aguirre Morales, & Hernández, 2012) and to account for the cultural values and communicative practices of specific communities (Jaraba Ramírez & Arrieta Carrascal, 2012). Others have focused on identifying critical sociocultural elements (e.g., social needs, economic situation, cultural and historical heritage) challenging ELT in rural contexts (Bonilla & Cruz Arcila, 2014). More recently, another study reports how, in a small town, the ELT policy is perceived as abstract and detached from the social needs of the community (Roldán & Peláez, 2017). Before these studies, allusions to rural ELT practices were limited to highlighting how much more difficult it could be for rural teachers to comply with ambitious policy goals (e.g., Cárdenas, 2006; Guerrero, 2008). From the side of policy makers, another sign of the relegation of rural schools is the fact that currently the ELT policy focuses its main efforts on 350 schools, which appear to be located almost exclusively in some of the principal urban centres and municipalities of the country (MEN, 2016). Hence, this paper aims to contribute to combating such relegation and invisibility of rurality by bringing to the fore teachers' voices.

In this context, as observed in the larger study and given the current circumstances of lack of support and attention, insufficient resources, as well as an apparent lack of relevance of English in rural settings, students and teachers are indeed less likely to comply with policy makers' idealisations. However, it has already become clear that teachers are not just passive deliverers or technicians who simply follow orders (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). On the contrary, they are creative and active agents who negotiate with external pressures and are able to enact policies in creative ways (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012). Following on from these ideas, this paper more specifically deals with how, despite the undeniable challenging circumstances in rural schools, teachers

are able to develop creative contextualised practices where they make the most of their localised expertise and resources available. The fact that such practices are contextualised means that teachers are able to connect their teaching practices with the social reality of the school. Drawing on Olsen (2016), another way to refer to this localised expertise is through the terms "wisdom of practice" and "personal theories", which refer to the sorts of professional knowledge teachers construct throughout their experiences, to which I would also add, their social sensitivity. From this perspective, as this article suggests, it becomes of great value to unearth and potentiate teaching practices that draw from this form of professional knowledge.

In order to set the ground for the analysis intended, the paper starts by briefly discussing how ELT may be seen as necessarily connected with social context. This will be followed by a general description of the study and the discussion of four cases of contextualised practices. The paper ends with a discussion on what the findings of this study imply in terms of policy making and teacher development.

ELT and Social Context

Traditionally, language teaching and learning are presented as instrumental and positivistic oriented activities, as critiqued by Pennycook (1990, 2001). In this view, language is seen as an objective system of communication that teachers should pass on to students, who in turn are supposed to passively receive the knowledge being offered to them (see Canagarajah, 1999). This traditional perspective on language pedagogy fails to take account of the social reality of learners and teachers; that is, their problems, motivations, aspirations, and needs. The failure of traditional approaches to language pedagogy to cater for the social context stresses the importance of alternative critical approaches that engage with socially responsive practices (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2006). It is here where views of education such as that of critical pedagogy can be highly illuminating.

Although critical pedagogy has "many faces and histories" (Biesta, 1998), it has broadly developed as an approach to education that pursues ideals of social transformation and human development by promoting critical reflection, problem solving, and individual agency (Freire, 2000; McLaren, 2013). Theorists of critical pedagogy agree on considering education as a highly political activity through which power can be either exerted, perpetuated or challenged (Corson, 1993; Freire, 2000; McLaren, 1995). In consonance with this view, Crookes (2013) explains that critical pedagogy

> is a perspective on teaching, learning and curriculum that doesn't take for granted the status quo, but subjects it to critique, creates alternative forms of practice, and does so on the basis of radical theories of language, the individual and society that take seriously our hopes of improvement in the directions of goals such as liberty, equality and justice for all. (p. 1)

In the field of ELT, such a perspective offers a myriad of lines of critical work. In its broadest sense, a critical approach invites to analyse how broader economic, cultural, and political issues in society are reproduced, integrated, maintained, or resisted in the ELT classroom. In this fashion, ELT research informed by critical pedagogy interrogates, for instance, dominant discourses on the seemingly primary need to learn English in an era of globalisation, the relationship between local educational needs and global economic demands, and with it, the spread and relevance of mainstream methodologies. Likewise, as is the emphasis in this paper, critical pedagogy allows us to exalt alternative and locally grounded attempts to make English teaching socially relevant, especially in communities such as Colombian rural areas where English appears to be far removed from their everyday life.

For almost three decades now, this critical view on language teaching has influenced a number of scholars whose work has contributed to pursuing the goal of making second language education a more empowering, meaningful, ethical, and democratic process.

Pennycook's (1990, 2001) call for a critical applied linguistics framework represents one of the earliest attempts to go beyond traditional, "instrumental and positivist orientations towards language and teaching" (Pennycook, 1990, p. 304). Pennycook (2001) proposes seeing language education as a socioculturally and politically engaged practice that is concerned with "questions of gender, class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, culture, identity, politics, ideology, and discourse" (p. 10). In this fashion, central in Pennycook's proposal is the idea that critical applied linguistics should be considered as being engaged not just with the application of theories of linguistics, but more importantly with questioning them vis-à-vis broader issues of power and social inequality.

Echoing some of Pennycook's concerns about the positivist orientations of language education, Kumaravadivelu (2003, 2012) proposes "transformative" alternatives to existing models of language teaching and teacher education. Based on the argument that a conventional approach to language teaching is inappropriate to cater for the great diversity of sociocultural contexts, educational needs, or teaching situations, Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2003) argues that language teaching is in a "postmethod condition". With this umbrella term he emphasises the idea that mainstream language teaching methods are top-down prescriptive models that are intended to work in ideal circumstances and may, therefore, be ineffective or irrelevant in less ideal situations. In tune with the main argument in this paper, the postmethod condition, thus, stresses that teachers, instead of being expected to follow pre-established methods, can be recognised as autonomous professionals who are able to devise and reflect upon their own bottom-up, locally sensitive, innovative, and meaningful strategies to support their practices (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2012).

On the basis of these views, it could be argued that language teaching can be socially relevant and empowering by redefining methodologies of language teaching and processes of teacher education in more pluralistic and locally grounded terms. That is, language teaching could endorse the heterogeneity of educational needs of individuals that, more often than not, are delimited by the broader historical, political, and social conditions. Language teaching should be pluralistic and locally grounded inasmuch as both teachers and learners are enabled to make decisions about how best their educational experiences can be integrated to respond to these conditions and are not limited to just responding to technical training, as found in mainstream pedagogies.

Furthermore, these views offer an interesting point of comparison to analyse actual understandings and practices of ELT in Colombia. Although current language policies and discourses in the country seem to privilege traditional and instrumentally-led educational practices (Guerrero, 2010; Usma Wilches, 2009), critical perspectives like the ones discussed here emphasise the potential agency of teachers to deal with conflicts that are likely to emerge between current language policy and rural contexts. In this scenario, in line with the aims of this paper, it is relevant to explore how teachers have dealt with those emerging conflicts. As shall be seen below, teachers' personal theories prove to be of great value to do so.

The Study

This paper draws on a study of the current state of affairs of ELT in rural Colombia.[1] The study aimed at providing a grounded account of how active ELT policy operating in the country, on the one hand, and social issues affecting rural contexts (e.g., poverty, inequality, relegation and precarious conditions for schooling (Perfetti, 2003; Perry, 2010; PNUD, 2011), on the other hand, could come to shape both teaching practices and teachers' professional identities. The interest in carrying out this study arises from the need to bring to the fore the voices of teachers, who up to now are hardly heard in the national ELT landscape.

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1   This is a PhD research project carried out from January 2014 to December 2017.

Ten teachers participated in this study. They were located in seven different schools and municipalities of four different regions of the country (see Table 1). As Table 1 shows, teachers' profiles were diverse in terms of their work settings, number of years in the teaching profession, and their own histories and backgrounds. Such diversity allowed a rich theorization across the cases that each teacher represented.

Teaching biographies, two semi-structured interviews, and field observations (FO) were the sources of information. Teaching biographies (TB) focused on teachers' professional backgrounds and how they came to work in rural schools. Interview 1 (INT1), conducted before FO, focused on teachers' work histories, future plans, and feelings towards the profession as well as their perceptions of their students and the community. Interview 2 (INT2), after FO, focused on further probing points teachers have made in INT1, and aspects drawn from observations. FO were carried out during two-day visits to each school and at least three lessons per teacher, for a total of 32 field observations. Although the study is mainly narrative in nature, it also uses observation as an "ethnographic tool" (Green & Bloome, 2004). That is, observation served to get a feel of what teaching and learning English in Colombian rural schools were like. This enabled me to add my own impressions to the data gathered in interviews and teaching biographies, thus strengthening my understanding of the teachers' lived experiences. Findings presented here are the result of a process of thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008).

Table 1. Outline of Participants

Region of work-setting	Teacher (pseudonym)	Years of experience	Origin		Context of work experience		
			Rural	Urban	Mostly rural	Extensive experience in both	Mostly urban
Boyacá	Maria	20	x		x		
Cundinamarca	Clara	16		x	x		
Casanare	Eva	6		x	x		
Casanare	Arturo	5	x		x		
Nariño	Hilda	10		x	x		
	Jairo	9		x			x
	Ana	24		x		x	
	Camilo	15		x		x	
	Lily	20	x			x	
	Dora	19		x		x	

Personal Theories Informing Teachers' Practices

Other papers drawing from the same study have shown how teaching English in rural Colombia can be quite a challenging endeavour, especially in light of cultural and economic social arrangements existing in the country (Cruz Arcila, 2017b). They have also shown how classroom practices are negotiated with policy demands in creative and sometimes unexpected ways in an attempt to "make English fit", that is, to negotiate between what is asked from them and what they deem feasible and important (Cruz Arcila, 2017a). In close connection with these findings, the remainder of this paper discusses four examples of socially relevant practices tailored by teachers, whereby they attempt to make the most of their expertise, the limited resources available, and the local lingua-cultural repertoires in an attempt to help their rural students make sense of English.

Infusing Language Teaching With Cultural Values

Thanks to the work of scholars interested in exploring the link between language and culture (e.g., Byram, 1989; Kramsch, 1993, 1995), it is now widely accepted that these factors are constitutive of each other. That is, "language is deeply implicated with culture and an important part of it" (Nieto, 2010, p. 146). Language is not simply a means to an end but an end or action in itself which contributes to constructing and interpreting social and cultural reality (Pennycook, 2010). Therefore, from these premises the idea that teaching a language implies cultural matters becomes irrefutable.

In this study, such inseparable relationship of language and culture stood out in an interesting attempt on the part of teachers to show their learners that in English they could find a space for manifesting their own deep cultural values such as their religious beliefs. To illustrate this it is necessary to know that 90% of Colombians are estimated to self-identify with Christian religions, and the vast majority, 85%, are Roman Catholic

(StudyCountry, n.d.). It is also believed that Colombian rural communities show higher devotion to religious practices—which, apparently, is associated with their lower socioeconomic status (Beltrán Cely, 2013). In this context, as reported below, teachers have ingeniously used this cultural dynamics in their favour by successfully incorporating *prayer* in their teaching strategies, or in what Maria describes as their classroom "routines". Such routines, as documented in the field work, involve starting their lessons with a prayer in English (the case of Dora, Arturo, Hilda, Maria, and Lily); and making up their own prayers aligned with given contents of the lesson (the case of Lily and Dora). As Dora and Maria report,

> Sometimes we thank God for example for our food. If we are learning food, I include prayers thanking God for our food. If we are learning family members, I also do so for the members of the family . . . that's the way I incorporate all the vocabulary we study, in daily experiences they have . . . they like this and that helps them learn English. (Dora, INT2)

> I have always liked to pray in Spanish, I am catholic, I like saying the rosary, I pray at home. And children like prayers a lot, they like learning things in English and among the things they like are the prayers and I have it as part of my routine and all learn the prayers very well. (Maria, INT2)

Interestingly, prayers are described as being motivating. As Dora explains, they are easy ways to connect students' daily practices with the use of English and to do so she even makes up prayers adapted in relation to the contents she is working on. In Maria's case, she explicitly explains that she uses prayers not just because students like them but also because she is a religious person too. This is important because both teachers' and students' cultural values become immersed in the meanings they construct about English. At the same time, all this indicates that the connection of language and culture is approached by teachers as a way to establish representational links with the values of the community. In other words, teachers' use of

prayers seems to stem from the premise that valuing English in the cultural practices of students can be made easier if it is used in connection with their cultural values. From a critical pedagogy perspective, this practice can be critiqued for not inviting students to question such values; however, the emphasis here is on the importance of entrenched (and in this case hybridised) cultural practices to sort out contextual challenges for teaching English.

Furthermore, apart from triggering motivation and cultural familiarity towards English, prayers are also used to address specific language learning issues. At least that was the view of Lily, who reports using this strategy particularly to develop oral skills in her students, which she considers a major challenge.

> Researcher: What is the most frequent difficulty you have to deal with when teaching English?
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> Lily: S*peaking*, to speak in English. We have implemented [strategies], we have classroom projects, we use PRAYERS because they are very religious, here they always pray and [cultivate] values and all that. So, I always in the morning I tell them "today we are going to pray to ask the Lord for the value of friendship, or the value of responsibility or for different values" and we say a prayer. Then, in every term, I make up a prayer to pray to God, to the Virgin Mary, to the Guardian Angel and to baby Jesus . . . I make up a prayer for verbal fluidity . . . They like that. All students learnt it, ALL. We also have the songs but with the songs they say "ah, the thing is that we have a bad voice". (Lily, INT1)

Lily has discovered that on the basis of students' religious views, memorising prayers in English has been an effective strategy to develop oral skills. The success of this practice is such that, as Lily also explains, it proves to be more appealing to students than using songs, a mainstream strategy used in language teaching as a motivating factor. In Lily's view, this is the case primarily because that strategy is in line with their cultural values as well as their personality traits as they "feel less embarrassed to pray than to sing" (INT1).

Valuing Students' Linguacultural Repertoires

The previous example shows how teachers' creative practices may be informed by their cultural sensitivity and intuitive ability to build from their students' worldviews. In this study, another instance of teachers' creativity following this line is the use of what García (2009) calls "translanguaging" (see also Canagarajah, 2011; Creese & Blackledge, 2010 on this notion). This term underlies a dynamic view of bilingualism where languages are not considered as separate systems, but as elements within a whole linguistic repertoire people can use fluidly and in an integrative manner. In other words, a translanguaging perspective of bilingualism emphasises the practices people perform with all the linguistic resources at their disposal, rather than being limited to the linguistic resources of what traditionally is understood as one language only (García & Wei, 2014). According to Garcia and Wei (2014) and Creese and Blackledge (2010), a translanguaging approach to education underlies a flexible pedagogy that opens up the possibility for teachers and students to use all their linguistic and cultural resources for facilitating learning.

As Hilda reports below, she intuitively endorses the use of translanguaging in her lessons as a sort of cultural bridge between students' cultural background and new forms of representations of such backgrounds (i.e., English). Particularly, she refers to the idea that words with cultural loads such as "cuy" (guinea pig, an iconic gastronomic product of the region) "cedazo," (handmade strainer), "hornilla" (a wood burner, usually in the form of a hole with a metal support on the top) or colloquial expressions such as "qué chimba" (which, depending on the context, can be used to express either joy, irony, or disagreement) can make the use of English more meaningful as students see there is room for, as Hilda says, what is "theirs."

> Researcher: Have you identified any particularities of teaching English in rural zones?
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> Hilda: . . . maybe the knowledge they have of what is out of the rural context . . . there are expressions that astonish students, as they do

not really know the outside context, I mean they are framed within their own context. Then, I try to locate myself in their context, what they have, for example, domestic animals, nature, what they have there, and cultural aspects. So, they come and ask me "teacher, how do you say *cedazo*?" so they ask me how to say terms that are from that region . . . the *cuy* for example . . . but [I say to them] "cuy is cuy" it is a name but it does not have to change because it is not going to be recognised anywhere else.

Researcher: Yes.

Hilda: I think there is a clash with regards to certain terms, but the truth is that I apply what they have. So, from what they have . . . I make them take some terms they use, or their own expressions normally used when they are upset. For example, in a dialogue they say . . . the term "*qué chimba*!" so, we also use that term within English, I mean, we use what is theirs.

Researcher: Those expressions are used in Spanish?

Hilda: Yes, they are their expressions and their words. Not all, all pure English.

Researcher: How has this strategy worked for you?

Hilda: . . . it has worked well because they like it, they have fun, I mean it is a way in which students' interest in another language can be triggered. The idea is not to make them get away from what is theirs, the idea is that little by little they start absorbing the English language. I mean, I think that the mix of the two is ideal because through half-joking learning English becomes more interesting and fun. (Hilda, INT1)

Hilda seems to understand the value of using resources from a bilingual repertoire as an effective pedagogic strategy, which is not reduced merely to coping with lack of proficiency. She sees it as strategy to build from students' cultural and linguistic repertoires to make learning English meaningful for them. That is, she promotes the mix of what is theirs (their local cultural expressions in Spanish) with what is new (English) in order to trigger their appreciation of English or at least to familiarise them with the L2, in an attempt to "develop the weaker language in relationship with the one that is more dominant" (García & Wei, 2014, p. 64). From the point of view of new literacy studies (Street, 2002,

2003), this sort of practice seems to also resemble the idea that literacy development is necessarily connected to cultures and histories of individuals as opposed to an autonomous and technical process. Put differently, this practice can be seen as a resource rather than a problem to be fixed.

The flexible approach Hilda takes to teach English was also evident in classroom observations. In a lesson with eighth graders it was observed that,

> After the prayers, Hilda started her lesson by showing students a sketch of a town in construction. In Spanish she invited her students to imagine it as an ideal place to live in ten years' time. She instructed them to work in pairs and come up with a description of this ideal place. After that, drawing on students' descriptions in Spanish, Hilda started to explain how to express those ideas in English, and explained the use of the auxiliary verb *will/won't* with examples: "*the town won't have rubbish*" with its translation "*no habrá basura en el pueblo*". Following the examples, students started to express their own ideas but this time in English. While they attempted to do so, the use of Spanish to negotiate meanings among the groups was not only evident but also welcome by the teacher. (FO21, Hilda)

In this observation it was evident that Hilda uses an initial discussion in L1 as a platform to give ideas to students about what to write in English later on with a greater understanding of what they are doing. Students and teachers' L1 is clearly used as a resource for contextualising students, for offering enough clarity as to what the purposes of the lesson are, and for negotiating meanings among students in the pair work stage.

Hilda's recognition, endorsement and promotion of a mix between students' own linguistic and cultural backgrounds and their learning of English highlight the pedagogical use of translanguaging for building background knowledge in order to facilitate meaning making, and thus deepen understanding (García & Wei, 2014). Hilda's reading of her circumstances has led her to adopt an approach that, in her view, is attractive to students and suitable for her school context.

Incorporating Multimodal Literacies

Despite the evident lack of resources and internet access in schools, engagement with multimedia and digital texts in the classroom was not completely absent. In fact, in an attempt to still find other ways to draw students' attention towards English, teachers have maximised the limited technology at their disposal and have found ways to incorporate its use. A case in point is Arturo who has been able to integrate the use of smartphones to engage students in a number of learning and assessment activities. This is what he says about the purposes of this practice:

> The mobile . . . is for the acquisition of vocabulary and pronunciation, then as we did yesterday, I was teaching them regular verbs in past . . . so we do a little list of regular verbs, first I make groups each of them with one mobile phone, they record the verbs, then they [students] with those verbs . . . write sentences or texts where they have to use the vocabulary that we have recorded. So, what I do is to record and evaluate the contents we have studied, the vocabulary and the pronunciation of the new vocabulary or in 9th grade we are doing transcriptions. I read a long text . . . first, I give them the audio recording for them to assimilate the transcription, the reading with the audio, and then I come to each group and check if they are learning to write and listen . . . after listening to the recording, an oral evaluation takes place where I don't say anything in English, I say in Spanish the meaning and they say and write it in English . . . with 9th grade, that [strategy] is the one that has worked best as students just with the fact of sending files via *WhatsApp* get motivated because we are using the mobile phone, students have affinity to that. Students have come the following day saying "teacher, I already learnt it, I know all the text, I am ready for the dictation." (Arturo, INT2)

As he reports, the mobile phone serves as a tool to complement students' traditional literacy activities (based on printed texts) with texts they are creating and disseminating through smartphones. In this case, the phone works mainly as a means to store and circulate teachers' modelling of language use for students to engage with in subsequent oral and written activities.

This practice echoes the idea that in the XXI century digital communication technology has led literacy practices to develop in multiple directions and forms, as argued by multimodal literacy scholars (e.g., Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2010; Walsh, 2010).

Multimodal literacy is an umbrella term to describe the process of "meaning-making that occurs through the reading, viewing, understanding, responding to and producing and interacting with multimedia and digital texts" (Walsh, 2010, p. 213). As observed in Arturo's case, despite the fact that the production of and inter-action with multimedia texts are not as sophisticated as they can be in contexts with more access to a wider range of communication technologies, these processes still prove pedagogically significant in his context. Vocabulary building and pronunciation training are the main purposes of using phones mentioned. However, it could be argued that autonomy, collaboration, and motivation are other important processes to underscore in this practice. Autonomy is triggered as students are provided with the opportunity to use the teachers' input as frequently as they wish. Collaboration seems to play an important role because, as was apparent in FO, during group work students became a source of peer feedback and mutual support. Similarly, as Arturo argues, motivation is increased because students are usually eager to use their phones in classroom tasks. These are ways in which the mobile phone as a mode of meaning making in the classroom has "affected, changed, and shaped" (Jewitt & Kress, 2003) the process of learning English.

However, some could critique Arturo's teaching practices for relying on memorisation, translation, and transcription of texts. These pedagogic strategies are often labelled as traditional, of little use, and ineffective in current communicative trends of language teaching. In contrast to these views, in this study these practices have emerged as being part of local pedagogies (Canagarajah, 2005) that, although not aligned with current mainstream discourses on

ELT methodology, can still prove valuable. As shown here, in a rural under-resourced school context with little contact with English, rote learning activities that include the limited technology available can be more effective than following teaching methodologies in vogue (Cook, 1997).

"Squeezing" Their Expertise

As has become apparent in the present discussion, teachers are not taking passive attitudes towards contextual challenges. On the contrary, to different degrees, they seem to agree with Ana when she says that "a mistake would be to just complain and do nothing" (Ana, INT2). From this understanding, as observed above, they have tailored their teaching in a socioculturally sensitive manner and have maximised the resources at hand. In fact, the three practices just discussed are clear instances of the sort of expertise teachers have developed throughout their experience. This is a type of expertise that, bearing in mind the findings of this study, combine the academic training they may have had access to with, perhaps more importantly, their own capacity to read and act upon the circumstances mediating their teaching. Although important, their expertise can be looked at not so much in terms of how much English teachers know or how familiarised they are with mainstream theories and methodologies, but in terms of how well they can relate to their contexts, as the above examples indicate.

This sort of expertise some other times is also demonstrated in attempts to face challenges like the lack of teaching materials. In these cases, some teachers have come to design these materials by themselves. Some of the most remarkable examples of this include full teaching guides as a substitute to textbooks (Jairo) and initiatives to design and compile computer mediated pedagogic material that can be available even without internet access (Dora). A striking observation from these examples is that in both cases, the process of developing material has been supported by research.

That is, teachers are not simply relying on their hunches to address the aforementioned challenges. Beyond that, these attempts appear to involve a systematic process of observation and reflection, which to some extent guarantee the relevance and applicability of the work done. This is how Jairo describes his experience,

> Researcher: Can you tell me about how you came up with the idea of designing your own material?
>
> Jairo: When I worked in [name of former school] we were aware of the problem of not having a textbook hm Why the absence of a textbook? Because parents did not have economic resources to buy it. Then . . . with other English teachers, we decided to design a textbook adjusted to the standards of the Ministry and to the syllabus at that time too. So we did some work and typed a textbook for each grade, a text for primary and another for high school. Then, I saved it . . . and when I arrived here at [name of current school], I found that there was no textbook . . . so, I modified the textbook in order to adjust it to the syllabus of the school and the students' needs.
>
> Researcher: You told me it was the product of a research project?
>
> Jairo: Yes . . . it consisted of identifying appropriate activities for students according to their ages, so, depending on the age and the level. [The research also aimed to] analyse whether a given activity was useful to learn vocabulary or practice conversation.
>
> Researcher: Was that research your own initiative?
>
> Jairo: The research as such emerged from the need, the particular need I also found here, teachers did not have a guiding textbook, a guiding text to follow processes. Then, the textbook is organised for students to reach the level we required in order to succeed to the next grade, right? So, the intention of the text, at the beginning, was to tackle that need. (Jairo, INT1)

By acting as a materials developer and by doing so in a systematic manner, it can be argued, Jairo is "squeezing" his expertise in order to respond to a pressing contextual need. Not being trained as a researcher did not prevent him from "acting at the edge of [his] competence" (Tsui, 2003, p. 276)[2] and endeavouring to provide solutions.

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2 Tsui (2003) borrows this term from Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) to argue that expertise is developed mainly in circumstances where

Another sign of the complex and systematic work done is the idea that he is aware of the standards for ELT and, thus, used them as a point of reference for the materials designed. In other words, his attempt goes beyond mere strategies to cope.

A similar case of squeezing their professional expertise to offer long term solutions is Dora. The expertise she had gained throughout her 20 years of experience and through the Masters course she was completing at the time of fieldwork appear to have empowered her not only to try to address the issue of lack of material in her benefit but also in benefit of her primary school colleagues, most of whom were not qualified in English teaching. She did this by designing and compiling a set of pedagogical computer-based materials and by offering informal professional development opportunities to her colleagues. As she reports,

> Last year I provided training in teaching English in primary school to colleagues from my institution through the creation of materials I have compiled with HINTS to teach songs, poems, prayers, and I also provided a few links to do so. Currently, as I have noticed the need to find innovative resources, which at the same time are attractive to children, I am doing a MA in Educational Technology. My goal is to motivate primary school children to learn English through the use of technological tools, and at the same time, share with my fellow teachers tools to facilitate their pedagogical practice. (Dora, TB)

As documented in FO, as part of her MA thesis Dora has designed a blog where she has compiled a series of hints and pedagogic resources (mostly worksheets and interactive activities) to practice listening, vocabulary, reading, and writing (many of them designed or adapted by herself). As she explained, her challenge was to make available those resources without the need of internet access, which at that time was still unsolved. It is worth noting here that, like Jairo, Dora's attempt is also informed by careful and systematic research procedures, which,

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people approach a given issue laboriously at the peak of their capacity and that in so doing growth opportunities for themselves are created.

as argued here, serve as a good way to maximize the scope of their professional action.

Conclusion and Implications

Drawing on the critical pedagogy principles underlying this analysis, we can say that teachers' sociocultural sensitivity as well as their attempts to creatively make the most of both the resources at their disposal and their own expertise are indicators of valuable actions they are willing to undertake in an attempt to negotiate between external demands and situational challenges. These are also examples of the sorts of small steps Crookes (2013) talks about when referring to the practicability of critical language pedagogy and of Kumaravadivelu's (2006) emphasis on the power of teachers as transformative practitioners who are able to devise their own effective practices. Following Canagarajah (2005), these localised initiatives can even be seen as relevant to be brought to the fore and put into negotiation with other more global and mainstream practices. A whole different dynamics might be in place if, for example, initiatives like the ones teachers in this study have undertaken are boosted and supported. Teachers would not be seen simply as technicians who need to be given all the tools and instructions but as "intellectuals" able to construct their own tools, and from whom others could actually learn. From this perspective, in relation to the current Colombian ELT policy, a different nature of professional development aimed at building from what teachers already do may prove even more pertinent than the efforts to simply familiarise teachers with fashionable widespread teaching methodologies. This is precisely one of the strongest suggestions in an earlier study with rural teachers (Bonilla Medina & Cruz-Arcila, 2013). The study showed that in some contexts alternative localised teacher development programmes, which for example take teachers to understand and account for the contextual factors in their practice, can prove more useful than exclusively being instructed on language and methodology. Professional development

programmes of this nature, as this paper also suggests, underscores the importance of empowering teachers' situated expertise.

By the same token, this study also suggests that there may be a wealth of unexplored teaching practices ensuring teachers' agency and ingenuity. There could be numerous other interesting pedagogic practices, but these remain unknown. This paper stresses the importantance of bringing those practices to light as that can help to capture a better picture of how ELT is being addressed in diverse contexts. On that basis, it would also be possible to build from teachers' efforts by, for example, setting up professional development programmes that are underpinned on the premise that what teachers need to do is not necessarily completely different from what they already do. It could be argued that teachers need to learn how to better take advantage of what they already do and how to bring this into negotiation with other alternatives. In other words, following Olsen (2016), teachers' "wisdom of practice" and "personal theories" (usually the product of experiences) can be enriched with professional theories (the product of research). In this fashion, what teachers already do and know is potentiated instead of simply discarded and ignored.

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