Teachers' Knowledge of Second Language and Curriculum: A Narrative Experience

Conocimiento de los profesores acerca de la segunda lengua y el currículo: una experiencia narrativa

Jenny Alexandra Mendieta Aguilar[*]

Universidad de La Sabana, Colombia

This study was carried out with a group of three teachers who work for the foreign languages department of a private university in Colombia. It was aimed at unveiling and characterizing the narrative knowledge these teachers hold about language teaching and learning processes as well as the role this knowledge plays in the constant construction and evaluation of curriculum. Data were collected through concept maps, biodata surveys, narrative interviews, and participant observation within a narrative inquiry approach to research. Findings show the crucial need to value and explore teachers' knowledge from a narrative perspective in order to better understand the complexity of the teaching context in which they work.

Key words: Narrative inquiry, narratives, second language curriculum, second language teaching and learning, teachers' beliefs.

Este proyecto de investigación se realizó con un grupo de tres profesores que laboran en el Departamento de Lenguas de una universidad privada de Colombia. El objetivo fue develar y caracterizar el conocimiento narrativo de los participantes en relación con la enseñanza y aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera y el papel de dicho conocimiento en la construcción y evaluación del currículo. Se recolectaron datos mediante mapas conceptuales, encuestas, entrevistas narrativas y observación de clases, en el marco de una metodología de la investigación de tipo narrativo. Los resultados muestran la necesidad de valorar y explorar el conocimiento de los docentes, desde una perspectiva narrativa, y con el fin de comprender mejor la complejidad del contexto en donde laboran.

Palabras clave: currículo de una segunda lengua, creencias de los docentes, enseñanza y aprendizaje de una segunda lengua, estudio de la narrativa, narrativas.

Introduction

Educational research on EFL/ESL (English as a Foreign Language/English as a Second Language) has been concerned with different issues that somehow inform or affect language, language acquisition/learning and language teaching. One of these issues has been curriculum and, lately, the interrelationship of teachers' knowledge, life experiences and beliefs, as well as the practices they employ in and outside the classroom.

Woods (1996) affirms that there has been a shift in educational research over the years e.g. from a focus on the methods and products of teaching to a focus on the processes of teaching. Accordingly, it is important for researchers to examine the language teaching and learning processes as they are perceived and interpreted by the participants themselves, given that there is a disparity between the language learning activities that are present in the second-language classroom, their intended theoretical purpose, and how they are perceived by both teacher and learner. According to Woods (1996), research has addressed extensively what happens to second language learners from a host of perspectives, but unfortunately, has failed somehow to examine the processes by which language teachers plan and make decisions about teaching, as well as what they bring to the second language classroom such as knowledge base, beliefs and experiences.

Despite the fact that various studies concerning teaching processes have been carried out in the ELT (English Language Teaching) field, what Woods affirmed more than 10 years ago is still relevant to some of our local contexts. From my own experience as a language teacher and as an observer of what happens in our field, I think curriculum is still considered a static entity in many institutions –a set of pre-established assumptions as to what the content, methodology and ways of evaluation and assessment should be like. And many stakeholders still assume that certain contents, materials and teaching procedures should result in specific language learning outcomes, ignoring the importance of what the different curricular agents as teachers and students believe about what constitutes effective learning and teaching.

It is my contention that teachers hold immense power over what happens in the classroom when it comes to curricular decisions and language learning opportunities. The findings of the present study clearly show that teachers make decisions about what to do and what not to do in order to accomplish certain goals that might either align with or completely differ from what is set by the pre-established curriculum. In a similar vein, Drake and Gamoran (2006) state that the relationships between teachers and curricula are often filled with significant tensions and challenges, and that these tensions have to do in part with teachers' beliefs, experiences and opinions about the different issues that relate to their practices. As a result, teachers have come to adopt their own models of curriculum use which they constantly read, evaluate and adapt.

Keeping in mind what I previously mentioned, my own experience as a language teacher, and what some researchers like Woods (1996) and Drake and Gamoran (2006) have discussed in terms of curriculum and language teaching, I decided to observe to what extent the issues they present in their research and theories are related to the reality of my teaching context. When doing so, I noticed that Woods and Drake and Gamoran's concerns are not far from the truth at my workplace, a private university, considering that some research has been carried out in relation to students' needs and language learning processes, but little in regard to the teaching process. As a result, I decided to pose the following research question in order to better understand this phenomenon.

- How does teachers' narrative knowledge about foreign language teaching and the curriculum shape and characterize the curriculum stories that are lived in the classroom?

Theoretical Considerations

Narrative Inquiry: An Alternative Paradigm to Understanding Teaching and Curriculum

Narrative inquiry was the research approach followed in this study, for narratives allow a contextualized and integrated understanding of teachers' beliefs, knowledge and prior experiences and, as Drake and Gamoran (2006) state:

> By situating the beliefs in teachers' narrative identities, the historical and developmental origins of the beliefs remain connected to the beliefs themselves, which allows for an understanding of teachers´ beliefs not as isolated statements, but as interrelated ideas rooted in teachers' identities- their stories of themselves as learners and teachers. (p. 158)

Sikes and Gale (2006) also value the use of narratives in educational research in light of the fact that "Human beings are storying creatures that make sense of the world and the things that happen to them by constructing narratives to explain and interpret events both to themselves and to other people" (p. 1).

In terms of the relationship between curriculum and teachers' beliefs, Cortazzi (1993) states that any real change in the curriculum is not likely to be carried out unless teachers' perceptions, beliefs and experiences are taken into account. For him, what teachers know about context and instructional actions is tied to specific events they have experienced in the classroom. He affirms that this knowledge is expressed in narrative forms. Therefore, the story is what most adequately constitutes and presents teachers' knowledge.

From different ways to study narratives, Cortazzi (1993) believes NI is one of the approaches that better informs and accounts for teachers' knowledge, since it focuses less on problematic situations, life transitions and turning points in teachers' lives (as autobiography and life stories do) and more on the everyday business of the classroom. Its purpose is to explicate the experiential understanding of teachers' thinking in terms of everyday meaning and practices.

From my standpoint, this approach has come to encompass and make use of certain concepts which help us in our endeavor of reflecting upon the complex world of teaching and learning. From this perspective, NI turns out to be more than just an approach to do research and becomes to some extent a paradigm for understanding certain issues in education. I believe this is so, for NI poses interesting questions to the academic community in regard to what actually happens in our classrooms and institutions.

For Coulter, Michael, and Poynor (2007), who discuss Connelly and Clandinin's stance regarding NI (2006), to understand teachers and the teaching process from a narrative perspective implies that teachers' feelings, past and present professional and personal events, as well as the possible future implications of these events, must be valued and explored in order to gain insights into the way they re-create their "professional self" in different settings. This means that the world of teaching goes beyond the mere transmission of content or the implementation of a given syllabus. From a narrative perspective, teachers (and also learners) are recognized as human beings who live in specific social contexts and who participate in determined personal and professional situations, bringing to the classroom not only their content knowledge, but all their whole and multifaceted lives. That is why Connelly and Clandinin (2006) propose a

three-dimensional space narrative structure that, from my point of view, helps researchers identify the elements that ought to be taken into account if we are to look at the participants' knowledge from a holistic and critical perspective (see Table 1).

For Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002), who analyze Connelly and Clandinin's approach, in *temporality*, "the researcher should analyze the transcript or text for information about past experiences of the storyteller" (p. 339). In addition, he/she must look for present experiences as illustrated by current actions or by actions to occur in the future. As a result, the researcher is considering "the past, present, and future" of the participants (p. 339).

As for *sociality* (or interaction), it is important to analyze the personal and social elements of the stories. In this stage "the researcher analyzes a transcript or text for the personal experiences of the storyteller as well as for the interaction of the individual with other people" (p. 339). For the proponents of this research approach, sociality relates to two concepts: the *personal,* which is linked to the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions of the person; and the *social,* which is linked to the existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors, and people that form the individual's context.

As for *place* (or situation), Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) affirm that situation or place also ought to be analyzed in a transcript or text for narrative researchers should look for specific situations in the storyteller's landscape; these may be physical places or the sequence of the storyteller's places. This should be so, since it is important to recognize that "all events take place some place" (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006, p. 481), and that what happens in a given situation is shaped by the context and physical location in which this situation occurs.

Consequently, acknowledging that people's experiences are socially constructed and connected to their past, present and future, and that these experiences are context-related and therefore linked to a specific moment and place, evidences a big step forward in our endeavor to analyze educational practices from a more inclusive perspective. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) and Elbaz (1983), as cited by Beattie, Dobson, Thornton and Hegge (2007), also state that, for teachers, questions of professional knowledge are deeply entwined with questions of identity due to the fact that "their

Table 1. The Three-Dimensional Space Narrative Structure. Adapted from Conelly and Clandinin, 2006

Interaction		Continuity			Situation/place
Personal	Social	Past	Present	Future	
Look inward to internal conditions, feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions.	Look outward to existential conditions in the environment with other people feelings, and their intentions, purposes, assumptions, and points of view.	Look backward to remember experiences and stories from earlier times.	Look at current experiences, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event.	Look forward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines.	Look at context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters' intentions, purposes, and different points of view.

practices are expressions of a knowledge that has intellectual, moral, and social dimensions and which is situational, theoretical, personal, social and experimental" (p. 120).

In a similar vein, understanding that humans are storying creatures who live storied lives, as asserted by Sikes and Gale (2006), also means that stories are lived, created and negotiated everywhere. Hence, the classroom turns into one of the best places that stories take place and, consequently, curriculum also acquires a narrative view. Olson (2000) points out that *curriculum* comes to life within classrooms as teachers and students create lived *curriculum* texts. "*Curriculum*, then, is what they experience situationally and relationally, each person constructing and reconstructing his or her narrative knowledge in response to interactions and according to personal and situational particulars" (p. 1).

So, when curriculum is understood as narratively constructed and reconstructed through experience, "the stories lived and told by students and teachers of what is important, relevant, meaningful, or problematic for them are valued" (Olson, 2000, p. 1). Also, as Jackson (1992), cited by Beattie et al (2007) claims, teachers become more aware of the richer, broader and deeper significance of their work as their horizons and awareness expand and extend. Not only seeing more, but experiencing "changes in the value they attach to their work as it comes to be more meaningful" (p. 121).

Methodology

The study was carried out during the second semester 2009. The teachers selected for the study (Paul, Mary and Richard) were teaching different levels of the English proficiency program and were chosen based on their availability to participate in the study, their teaching schedules and the language program they were attempting to implement in their classrooms. It is important to mention that the

proficiency program of the languages department offers the community (students, staff members and nearby residents) seven English levels aimed at the development of linguistic, cultural and academic competences. This program also aims at developing autonomous learners and helps those learners develop strategies needed to take international tests all throughout the seven courses.

Regarding the participants, each one of them was teaching at a different language level and thereby interpreted, adapted and put into action a different language program and curriculum. In that sense, the twofold aim of this research was (1) to obtain an understanding of the meaning teachers narratively give to their teaching and learning experiences and classroom practices, and (2) to gain an understanding of the relationship there might be between their narrative knowledge (beliefs, pedagogical theories and experiences) about foreign language teaching/learning and the decisions they make in and outside the classroom (that is, the interpretation and adaptation they make of the second language curriculum).

This proposal is a qualitative, descriptive and interpretative research study since it involves "the understanding of teaching as a highly complex, context-specific and interactive activity" Clavijo (2004, p. 15), and because "it uses inductive reasoning to create ways of understanding phenomena" (Thorne, Kirkham & MacDonald-Eames, 1997, p. 172). That is to say, as a result of the complexity of analyzing teaching processes, this study uses inductive methods (such as narrative analysis and grounded theory) to make sense of the data gathered.

Data Collection Instruments

Taking into account the characteristics of qualitative research and specifically those of NI, this study used multiple methods of data collection

such as biodata surveys (see sample in Appendix 1), concept maps, narrative interviews, video-taped class sessions, and field notes from the direct observations of classes. Data were gathered during the second semester of 2009, as shown in Table 2.

- Concepts maps can capture and graphically represent the schematic mental representations of teachers' knowledge, which are tied to their belief system and their actual classroom practices. According to Farrell (2001), the use of concepts maps was transferred into educational research to understand how teachers use their knowledge to carry out a complex task such as teaching. These maps, along with a biodata survey, were an initial step in the data collection process, designed to create a profile of the participants (see Appendix 2).

- Narrative interviews allowed teachers to initially clarify, explain and discuss in detail what they wrote in their concepts maps. They also let me explore the participants' perceptions, attitudes, and feelings about language learning and teaching (see Appendix 3). Subsequently, they permitted participants to describe what they did in the classroom (their practices) and the reasons they had to do certain things

and not others with the aim of identifying relationships between their belief systems and the curricular decisions they made in and outside the classroom. Narrative interviewing also promoted a space for teachers to construct narratives around the description of their experiences and beliefs.

- Videotaped class sessions helped me identify the kinds of decisions teachers made in the classroom and how those decisions were evidence of their constant evaluation, adaptation or modification of the curriculum. They served as a tool to contrast, confirm or disconfirm the information gathered from the concept map and interviews, and also worked as the means through which I could identify important issues to explore in subsequent interviews.

- Field notes guided me in the process of giving a balance between the *emic* and *etic* perspective of the research since they served as a means to register my own insights and reflections about what I saw in the classroom and how I connected them to the teachers' narratives.

After being analyzed in matrix form, all these data were re-constructed and re-created through the compilation of individual and collective stories

Table 2. Data collection timetable

Time	Data gathered	Instrument
First month, second semestrer, 2009	Teachers' learning and teaching initial profile	• Biodata survey • Concept map • 1ˢᵗ narrative interview
Second and third part of the semester (from September to December)	Teachers' narrative knowledge about language teaching and curriculum	• Video-taped sessions (7 per teacher) • Field Notes (Per class observed) • Narrative Interviews 2 and 3
April 2010	Member checks	• Narrative stories created by the researcher

which each of the participants had the opportunity to read and co-create. These individual stories reflected teachers' past and present language learning and language teaching experiences and, as a final step, were integrated into one final story that reflected the commonalities and differences of their knowledge base, beliefs and experiences.

Participants' Roles

The role of each of the three teachers was one of collaborator since they allowed me to be in their classroom as a participant observer and were willing to register their knowledge and experiences in some of the data collection instruments used such as the concept map and the biodata survey. As to my role as a researcher, I acted routinely as a coordinator, but more to the point, as the participants' friend and colleague as I was also teaching an English level and had a close relationship with them. This dual role gave me the perspective of a language teacher who often understood and identified with the participants' narratives and discourse, as well as that of a curriculum designer who wanted to explore their understanding of the curriculum they had re-created and co-constructed with their students.

Data Analysis Process

During the data analysis process, two stages were followed. There was an initial moment where the data were analyzed in order to account for the narrative knowledge of each of the participants in relation to language learning, teaching and curriculum. In the process of analyzing these data, I decided to use grounded theory methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) such as open coding, axial coding and selective coding in order to recognize key ideas or aspects, establish relationships between these emerging aspects, and identify main or core concepts. In the second stage, I decided to assign meaning to these concepts by putting them together

(or by re-creating them) in a narrative fashion (through stories) –all this based on the fact that humans assign meaning to the world, and to what they know and do through narrative constructions; that is, through stories. To culminate the final stage of the data analysis process, I examined these individual narrative representations in terms of educational and EFL theoretical concepts in order to establish individual sub-categories and main categories and answer the research question that had been initially posed. For this effort, process grounded theory methods were also used.

Due to the nature of the research and bearing in mind that NI calls for the recognition of the individual and his/her multifaceted life, all the stories and categories that emerged during the data analysis process had an individual focus, although, they were also compared and brought together in a final story with the purpose of establishing commonalties and differences that could account for the social aspect of the three-dimensional space proposed by Connelly and Clandinin (2006). For the purpose of this document, this task implies that I will start by describing and explaining the subcategories that emerged from the data (accounts of the particular teaching and learning world of each of the participants), and then I will address the main categories in which learning, teaching, curriculum, personality, beliefs, experiences and knowledge are all brought together. I will also present the similarities and differences that were identified in terms of the three participants' teaching and learning experiences as well as their curricular knowledge. This will be done by using excerpts from some of the stories and by contrasting them to theoretical underpinnings and personal reflections.

Findings

The sub-categories that emerged from data analysis are related to the main theoretical constructs the research question posed for this project and from Drake and Gamoran's (2006) idea of acknowledging the fact that each teacher creates his/her own version of curriculum . They are *Teachers' narrative knowledge about language teaching/learning and curriculum* and *How curriculum is experienced in and outside the classroom*. To be able to tackle the first issue, I looked into the data for ideas and beliefs related to the roles of the teacher, students, language, classroom and assessment as well as into the nature of language learning and teaching so that I could unveil and re-create the way each of the participants approached the teaching of English in her/his classroom. Thus, the name given to the first sub-category is linked to the specific teaching knowledge, experiences and practices of each of the participants. The second one embraces the curricular model each participant created in order to match her/his pedagogical beliefs and experiences to her/his teaching practices.

As mentioned earlier, after analyzing the research constructs independently, the two sub-categories were subsumed into a bigger concept or main category with the objective of better explaining how the participants' narrative knowledge shaped the curriculum stories they lived in their classrooms (see Figure 1). Participants are given pseudonyms in order to account for privacy and ethical issues.

Sub-Categories: Being Learners, Teachers and Curriculum Makers

Paul

In Paul's case, the first subcategory is labeled under the heading: *Adopting a student-centered approach to language teaching*. As evidenced in
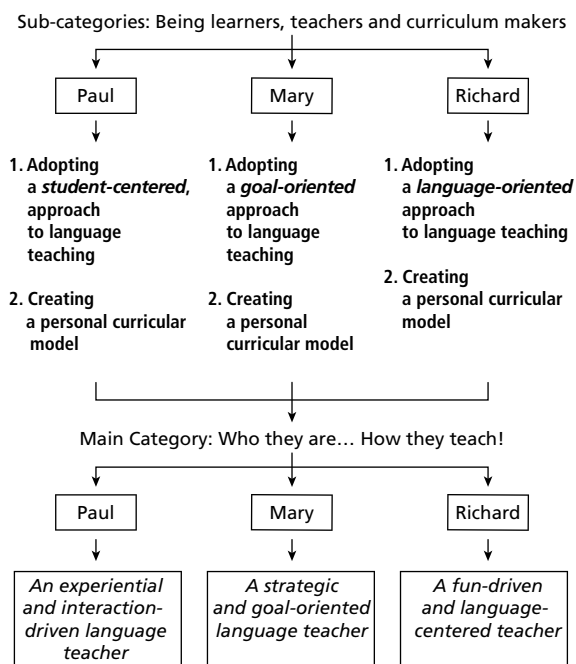

Figure 1. Categories and sub-categories derived from data analysis.

the following excerpts, Paul is a teacher who strongly believes students should be at the core of the learning process, and therefore issues such as scaffolding, the social role of learning, and the importance of students' previous knowledge and experiences are highly regarded.

> Well... I am not a professor who likes to use the board very much... I like the students to... yeah... to kind of just... put them to understand what they're studying and what they're doing in the classroom... I am not a professor who is just gonna be like on the board all the time and … this is the simple past ... you know... when we are on a new subject... I like to get what they understand about that before I give … I give an explanation… …I'm not the teacher who knows it all.
>
> Why having activities different from the ones given in the program? "I like to do an activity even if it is a totally random activity that has nothing to do with the class but it's gonna help them in their real lives—yeah, because the book says one thing but then a lot of the things we see in the book they're not gonna use. Yeah, it's just grammar and vocabulary and things like that".

I know that I don't necessarily follow the program for the week or anything because I don't like to do that, I mean we all have our own styles for teaching, but I know I'll get to the same objective. (Interviews 1 and 2)

The essential nature Paul attributes to students' active participation during class activities, the need to plan activities that connect to real contemporary issues in order to promote interaction, and his role as a facilitator (as opposed to that of a teacher who is expected to provide students with all the answers) are relevant to the type of curricular decisions he makes when trying to put the English program for level three into action. The fact that he plans activities which sometimes drift away from the pre-established curriculum is an indicator of the need there is to create a personal version of the curriculum in order to match the one that had been given to him to his own knowledge and beliefs.

Creating a personal curricular model emerged as a second subcategory due to the fact that Paul's narrative knowledge about language teaching and learning is directly related to the way he implements the curriculum in the classroom. From the analysis of the data, I observed how he interpreted, evaluated and adapted the prescribed curriculum in light of his convictions about what should be done in the classroom to promote communication and language learning.

In the narrative interviews, he interestingly showed his concern about the lack of connection to reality he found in the textbook as one of the reasons to skip or change some of the activities that were part of the program, and which had been given to him prior to the initiation of the course. Paul's evaluation of the role and effectiveness of the textbook was the key to the type of new activities he planned and brought into the classroom, given that the program and curriculum for this language course were designed and based on most of the tasks proposed by the textbook.

Paul's adaptation of the curriculum was not only tied to the evaluation of the textbook, but also to his personal conception of students' needs. More to the point, if he felt students enjoyed the class, he would regard the activities he had planned as successful and he would then continue implementing them in subsequent classes and courses. As both a participant observer in some of his classes and a researcher who was analyzing what took place in the classroom in terms of students' attitudes, class activities and teacher's discourse, I found myself judging some of his teaching practices as lacking organization or development; however, when talking to him in the interviews, I was amazed to learn that he did not think of those specific practices as unsuccessful or under-developed but, on the contrary, judged them as appropriate and enjoyable for his students. This finding confirms what Polkinghorne (1995) says regarding the need to understand the representation of people's lives as they (participants) see them and not as they (their practices) may actually be.

One last constitutive and essential element of Paul's creation of his own curricular model is his creative personality. This personal trait turns him into a teacher who is constantly experimenting in the classroom. Adapting and implementing activities different from the ones specified in the syllabus and giving students an active role in the classroom are all elements manifest in his teaching practices due to the fact that he likes experimenting and testing new things, not only in his professional but also in his personal life. "Trial and Error" is somehow a prerogative he assumes when he plans and puts the curriculum into action.

And what about exploring all the time? "Well... I am not a professor that is afraid to explore different ways of teaching …. lots of professors are very scared to try something new because they're gonna be like… well students are not going to learn from

this. ...I think it has to do with my major in college which was graphic design, and with graphic design comes a lot of creativity and it works a lot with trial and error. (Interview 2)

Mary

When replicating the exercise of identifying the two subcategories for Mary's data, I realized how, despite belonging to the same teaching community, her approach to language teaching and learning and to curriculum differed markedly from what was displayed by Paul in the classes and interviews. Therefore, she evidenced *adopting a goal-oriented approach to language teaching.*

> Classes do not necessarily need to be full of games or things like that. They need to provide students with useful activities... activities that can help them reach their learning goals… to get where it is expected. I remember I had classes where I had a lot of fun, however I did not learn much. (Interview 1)

Mary's goal-oriented personality and her interest in exposing students to challenging and meaningful language-learning experiences drove her lessons and students towards the achievement of the pre-established curricular goals. As a result, most of her teaching and learning practices became efforts to realize the outcomes that had been established for her level.

For Mary it is crucial to provide students with knowledge that is useful and challenging for them; as such, it is important to design and carry out learning and teaching activities that can help them enrich and consolidate their language knowledge. Thus, the level of students' commitment and her effort to have students participate as much as possible in class were key factors in the development of her classes. From her personal perspective, when there is an emphasis on achieving the goals of a program, it is relevant to give evidence of proper teaching and learning through clear outcomes.

In a goal-oriented or product-oriented view of teaching, products or outcomes are essential in the process of measuring the efficacy of the curriculum as well as the performance of students and teachers. So for her, heading where she is expected to go and evidencing that process in her classes are important factors in the process of adapting and creating her own curricular model.

In the second subcategory, *Creating a personal curricular model*, I often observed that, despite her agreement with many of the objectives and principles that underlie the program of level seven, she clearly exhibits a tension related to a "gap" in terms of the content that ought to be taught, the material selected and the time specified to do so. Though she sees herself as not having sufficient experience to judge the curriculum she has been asked to follow, she does evaluate what takes place in her classes and realizes the need to analyze the relationship that exists between goals and the time allotted for achieving them, as well as the appropriateness of the materials for the meeting of the objectives.

> We have to cover some contents which are advanced, but there are still some... some gaps between what should be and what it is, and there is not time to do all the things that are required.
> I think we should leave the book aside and focus on the exams… if that´s what we want... or focus on the book and have an extra course for exams… but both things are difficult... there is not enough time. (Interview 1)

In her classes and interviews, I witnessed the priorities she established in the classroom of wisely using the time, and of promoting awareness in her students of the complexity of the objectives and competences they needed to develop in order to produce the concomitant level of commitment required on their part. The reality of the classroom, students' language performance, and poor scores were issues of concern she revealed frequently in

the narrative interviews. So, as a consequence of the "gap" which she had initially identified (and which seemed to be continuously confirmed throughout the semester), she planned lessons and activities which were strategy-oriented and tried to guide students in the analysis of the language and assessment criteria so that they could acquire on their own what they could probably not develop and practice in the classroom.

> The only way they can do (learn the L2) that is just thinking... period!... taking a look at the context, the words around, semantic... you know semantic fields.... we have it somehow clear but they don't... and it might seem obvious for us, but not for them... so if you tell them things like associate words... What is this? What is that? Should they go together? Don't you think they're kind of connected? Well, all those things... it would be easier for them. In some schools or institutes or whatever... the evaluation is not very important, but here it's crucial... They have to really be familiar with the evaluation and the way they're evaluated; in that way, they can asses their own language performance. (Interview 2)

To create her own version of the curriculum, she evaluated the pre-established curriculum in terms of the appropriateness of the objectives and some of the evaluative practices that had been already planned and created a curriculum closely related to the original version, which she tried to put into action as diligently as she could. From my role as a participant researcher, it was fascinating to notice how, despite identifying apparent discrepancies between the pre-established curriculum and the curriculum in action, she did not drift very far afield, as did Paul at times; instead, she designed and planned her lessons in ways that could attend to this tension and yet get to where all stakeholders expected. I personally believe that, as in Paul's case, Mary's knowledge, experiences, and especially her *goal-oriented personality* shaped each of the

teaching and curricular decisions she made in and outside of the classroom.

Richard

Following a similar vein, the first subcategory in Richard's case is named *Adopting a language-oriented approach to language teaching.*

> When they don't talk it's because they don't know how to pronounce the word... even though they have the grammar maybe they don't want to say it because of the pronunciation.
> I told them like... they don't have grammar structures... so I checked that and we reviewed that and I told them also that they don't have vocabulary. If you don't have vocabulary how are you gonna write things? If you don't have structures how are you gonna express yourself? (Interview 2)

In his classes and interviews the importance he gives to the successful use of the language at initial language-learning levels was clearly recognizable. For him, to be able to make students aware of the way the language works, of its patterns of pronunciation and of text formation is a key element in the pedagogic decision-making process he carries out in and outside the classroom. To be a good communicator, it is necessary to acquire solid knowledge of grammar structures, vocabulary and pronunciation patterns; therefore, for Richard, it is essential to promote learning strategies and error-correction practices so that students can analyze and test their own language knowledge and that of their peers.

His previous learning experiences also come to bear heavily on the approach to language teaching he uses because he believes in the importance of having students use the language to express ideas about their own lives and in creating an enjoyable atmosphere where students can laugh while they learn the target language. For him, some of the language learning experiences that impacted him the most were the ones where he had fun and

enjoyed what he did in the classroom. Subsequently, making jokes or laughing at different classroom and cultural issues is an important element in the development of his lesson plan, owing to the fact that students can feel relaxed and comfortable in the classroom.

> I'm always trying to, to, to… change it (the project for the given level), to make it more coherent… to adapt it to their personal experiences… As we were talking about eating habits, it came to my mind this recipe thing because I did it in one of my classes as a student and I enjoyed a lot.
>
> I like to involve culture, real life and students' experiences... for me classes should be interesting and fun... I like talking to people and making fun of things... of the students and even of myself... in that way they can learn in a relaxed and fun way. (Interview 1)

Richard's priorities and knowledge of language learning and teaching, coupled with his previous learning experiences and funny personality, guided him in the creation of his *own personal curriculum.* In this subcategory, I was able to identify a middle ground between Paul's constant adaptation of the curriculum and Mary's preoccupation with meeting the objectives of the level just as they had been established. Throughout the interviews and class observations, I noticed how Richard modified some of the practices that had been pre-planned in the curriculum of his level in order to match them to his personal view of language learning (e.g. "Students are to be encouraged to express ideas about their own lives and experiences."). However, I could also identify how he decided to carry out some other activities just as they had been planned in the syllabus, provided that they matched one of his most salient beliefs about language teaching –that of giving students models for writing and speaking before asking them to use the language in a written or oral way.

> I liked it because... I selected that activity because it was taking part the aspects that I was reviewing and… also it was a perfect example in order to give them the model so they can create something similar. (Interview 2)

In the interviews, he did not directly evaluate or make judgments about the pre-established curriculum or curricular goals as Paul or Mary did; on the contrary, he attributed students' possible failure or unsuccessful language performance to the lack of work at home. In that sense, he evaluated the curriculum as a course of study based on the role and responsibilities of students and not necessarily based on his role as a teacher or the role of the stakeholders as designers of the curriculum.

This idea may also explain why he did not change or adapt the pre-planned curriculum as frequently as Paul did, given that he understands language learning as a process that entails the desire and intrinsic motivation of students, and also the commitment to devote time to learning the language outside the classroom. In this sense, what is done in the classroom is just a small part compared to what each student must do on his or her own. Mary expressed agreement with this idea at given points throughout the narratives interviews, but she equally questioned the extent to which the objectives that had been set for the program were likely to be achieved by her and her students. Paul, on the contrary, did not show any concern about what students ought to do at home. Instead, he was worried about what he could do to have them use the language and learn it meaningfully in the classroom.

This last paragraph introduces the importance of analyzing the adherence teachers show to the discourse of the institution they belong to. Paul, for instance, did not seem to adhere much to the discourse of autonomy promoted by the language department of the university; therefore, he did not show much concern about these principles during the interviews and, on the contrary, in the classes

frequently adapted the curriculum that had already been planned for him. Mary and Richard, however, both showed more adherence to these principles and tried to enact them in their classes through various teaching and learning practices that were similar to the ones suggested by the coordinators.

Drake and Gamoran (2006) espouse the need to understand how teachers interpret, evaluate and adapt the prescribed curriculum in order to understand why they do the things they do in the classroom. Identifying the things teachers know and believe in, and then analyzing teachers' practices in light of those things can serve to explain how curriculum is put into practice and how aligned this curriculum is to the one established by stakeholders. Similarly, Connelly and Clandinin (1988 as cited in Beattie, et al. 2007) assert that "the more we understand ourselves and can articulate reasons why we are what we are, do what we do, and are headed where we have chosen, the more meaningful our curriculum will be" (p. 11).

These two authors, also cited by Craig (2006), talk about the need to see teachers as *"curriculum makers"* and not only as curriculum implementers for "teachers and students live out a curriculum [in which] an account of teachers' and students' lives over time is the curriculum itself" (1992, p. 365). That is to say, the curriculum stories teachers create on a daily basis with their students in and outside the classroom are actually what make up most of the curriculum, more so than the curriculum stories written by stakeholders.

Olson (2000) also affirms that "when teachers see *curriculum* as prescribed by people outside classrooms, whether in *curriculum* documents or in stories created by others, they often see *curriculum* as irrelevant to the narrative experiences of teachers and students in classrooms" (p. 169). Therefore, it may be understood why Paul, Mary and Richard saw the need to plan and carry out tasks differently

and not always as they were written in the official documents of the institution.

For Olson (2000), "each teacher has to negotiate her or his emerging curriculum stories within curriculum stories already in progress" (p. 169). So, their collective and individual stories help us see how teachers' experiential narratives uniquely and profoundly shape curriculum stories constructed in classrooms, and whether these stories are in tension with the ones created by "people positioned in out-of-classroom places". Olson (2000) also cites Craig (1995), who points out that the "tension between curriculum stories written for teachers in out-of-classroom places and curriculum stories lived by teachers in their own classrooms creates the dilemmas that gnaw at [the] soul" (p. 24). These possible dilemmas and the way they develop must receive most of our attention and analysis, and that is why Connelly and Clandinnin (2006) stress the relevance of interpreting teachers' stories within their three-dimensional space proposal: temporality, sociality and place.

Understanding their experiences as learners of English and as pre-service teachers, their personalities, their beliefs and knowledge of the language teaching profession, their current teaching practices and their affiliation with the institutional and (why not) national foreign language teaching discourse helped me create a more holistic picture of who they are as teachers and of who they may become in the near future.

Main Category: Who are the teachers? How do they teach?

Paul

Going back to Paul's story, it becomes apparent how I understand temporality as a key influence on Paul's personality, overseas language learning experiences, and teacher training in Colombia and

also on the way he constitutes his current teaching methodology and personal curricular model. As to sociality and place, Paul's relationships with his students and stakeholders determined the way he either accepted or rejected what was written in the prescribed curriculum story. The combination of all these categories merged into a broader concept or main category that is rooted in who Paul is, not only as professional but as a human being.

This melting pot which contains his experiences, teaching knowledge, personality and beliefs makes him think, teach and act the way he does, and therefore reveals him as *An experiential and interaction-driven language teacher*, who makes curricular decisions in and outside the classroom in response to his personal and professional self-image. As a teacher who learned the language by using it for real communicative purposes and who was trained from a modernist language-teaching point of view, in which the student is understood as an active member in the language teaching process, Paul builds on his experiences to construct his classroom as a place where he is not the only person who holds knowledge, but as a place where the opportunity to learn from one another through interaction and real-life communicative activities seems to be the most valued. He reveals himself as a human being who likes to experiment and create new things and who therefore sees the classroom as the perfect scenario in which to carry out new ideas and be himself. "I do everything I do because it has to do a lot with me, I guess".

Mary

Mary, on the contrary, is *a strategic and goal-oriented language teacher*, for she has been influenced by what she considers to be her own successful language learning experiences while she was a pre-service teacher. Consequently, she makes some of her teaching decisions based on her own perceptions of what was effective for her while learning the language. One example in support of this conclusion comes from the period of her formation when she had been given tasks that required her to think or make an effort, rather than have fun. Becoming a strategic and analytic learner is something Mary considers useful for an advanced language learner; so, she teaches her students to analyze the patterns of the foreign language, believing that this can help them learn to decipher the L2 on their own and better equip or prepare them to face an international exam or any other task.

Her experiences as a language learner, her analytic and challenge-driven personality, her pre-service and in-service language teaching experiences (temporality), her goal-oriented mind, her interest in her students' moods and weaknesses, her sense of belonging and affiliation with a local and institutional discourse (sociality and place), and her own constructions of what it means to be a successful language learner and teacher lead her to make the decisions she makes and to act in the classroom the way she does.

Richard

Lastly, and based on my analysis of the data and the stories, I assert that Richard is *a fun-driven and language-centered teacher*. His humorous personality helped him enjoy the different classes where he could relax and have fun while learning English. Being a funny person turns him into a teacher who likes joking around as well as sharing personal experiences in the classroom. Nonetheless, he combines his personality with the dynamics he establishes in the classroom of being responsible and committed to the class assignments in order to learn to master the skills of the target language appropriately. Correcting students' pronunciation mistakes, testing their language knowledge,

contrasting the L1 and L2, and having them concentrate on the language structures when writing and speaking are some the activities that reveal his interest in helping students become accurate, and therefore, successful language learners.

Conclusion: Going Back to the Question

Before concentrating on the research question, it is important for me to clarify that the names I am giving to the main categories specifically relate to what was observed and narratively explored in a specific period of time under certain particular circumstances. Therefore, to say that Paul drifts away from curricular stories that have been written for him, or that Mary does the opposite, does not necessarily mean that they will do so in all situations. Similarly, to stress that Richard concentrates on certain aspects of the language when making curricular decisions does not mean that he will not make use of other approaches or methodologies for language teaching.

The process of analyzing Paul, Mary and Richard's knowledge, beliefs and experiences from a narrative perspective sheds light on the way teachers construct their own curricular models and somehow demystifies the idea that there is a linear and static relationship between what is dictated in the prescribed curriculum and what is actually done in the classroom by teachers. When thinking of Paul's data, I realized that some people could have judged him as a teacher who does not comply with academic requirements and probably as an ineffective language teacher, but by digging impartially into the reasons he holds for doing the things he does, I could understand that what he does in the classroom is tightly connected to who he is. As Drake and Gamoran (2006) affirm, it is only through this type of analysis of teachers

and teaching processes that we can really improve curriculum or guarantee better results when attempting to implement a curricular reform.

Hence, to answer the main research question I posed for this study, I could say that, on the one hand, the three participants' knowledge of language teaching and curriculum, which was narratively re-created in the interviews and in this research document, emerged as something that is particular to each one of them, despite their being members of a common teaching community. Paul, Mary and Richard have each lived unique learning, teaching and personal experiences which have shaped their systems of beliefs and, consequently, their knowledge as language teachers. In Clandinin's terms (1985), their *personal practical knowledge,* "knowledge which is imbued with all the experiences that make up a person's being, and which meaning is derived from, and understood in terms of a person's experiential history, both professional and personal" (p. 362), is completely attached to what each one of them has experienced as a language learner and teacher.

On the other hand, I could interestingly evidence how all the knowledge or attributes just mentioned directly affected the type of decisions these three teachers made in their classes when planning new lessons or interpreting the curriculum created for their levels. Each one of them also lived personal and unique stories that were shaped by a compound of external and internal factors, which includes but is not limited to the objectives to achieve, physical setting, students' moods, attitudes, needs, interests, language knowledge, and level of commitment, assessment practices, academic chronogram, institutional principles, personality, teaching beliefs, and past and present classroom experiences. The type of curriculum these three teachers lived and co-constructed with their students, and which they transformed with varying

frequency, was all mediated, filtered and informed by their personal practical knowledge and the external factors previously described.

In Clandinin and Connelly's (1995) words, Paul, Mary, and Richard's personal practical knowledge informed the decisions they made in the different professional-knowledge landscapes they were part of. "A landscape metaphor [refers to] space, place, and time, but also takes into account human relationships and the moral and intellectual considerations involved when these phenomena interact with one another" (p. 25). These Canadian authors support this landscape metaphor on the idea that teachers spend part of their time in classrooms and part of their time in other professional, communal places. For them, these are two fundamentally different places on the landscape: "the one behind the classroom door with students and the other in professional places with others" (p. 26).

> The place on the landscape outside of our classrooms is a place filled with knowledge funneled into the school system for the purpose of altering teachers' and children's class-room lives… Classrooms are, for the most part, safe places…where teachers are free to live stories of practice…When teachers move out of their classrooms, they often live and tell cover stories… Cover stories enable teachers whose teacher stories are marginalized … to continue to practice and to sustain their teacher stories (p. 26).

These two authors argue, like Margaret Olson (2000), that there is often a degree of tension between the stories that are written for teachers and the ones that are written by them. In the narrative interviews that were carried out in the study, I noticed that the three teachers, especially Paul and Mary, told me part of their *secret stories*, as they shared with me their disagreement with certain aspects of the stories that stakeholders had written for them. Some of the misgivings they expressed or acknowledged may

have not been shared by them in other landscapes or contexts of the language department.

Based on what I could evidence in the interviews, the personal and practical knowledge of each of the teachers shaped their classroom curriculum stories in different ways; some of the secret stories were more similar to the cover stories they lived and told outside the classroom, as in Richard's or Mary's case. Nonetheless, some other stories (like Paul's) were unlike what was written by others, and therefore could have been marginalized if looked at from a perspective dissimilar to the one stressed by NI.

Consequently, I would point out, as other researchers have, the importance of studying teachers and the development of curriculum from a more holistic perspective, where teachers are seen as capable of drawing upon "an image of a creative and practical reformer discerning problems through an awareness of apparent gaps between what should be and what is, then seeking solutions from his understanding of what might be done, and finally moving to bring about change or improvement" (p. 30, Schwab, 1969, cited by Ben-Peretz, 1980).

Implications

A type of study like this one confirms what Olson (2000) states about the importance of "creating and legitimizing professional development spaces that emphasize the valuing, sharing, and examination of teachers' curriculum narratives as an integral part of implementing curriculum as a course of study that can assist teachers to better understand their own practices and the practices of their colleagues" (p. 1). That is to say, if institutions come to value teachers' knowledge about teaching and curriculum, we could more easily recognize how what they think, experience and know form an integral part of the

implementation of any pre-established curriculum or curriculum as a course of study, as Olson calls it.

If this narrative knowledge were valued, understood and shared, we would not only provide more constructive and effective learning experiences for the students, but teachers would also have the latitude to explore and reflect upon their own teaching practices and beliefs about language and the language-learning process, which might eventually cause changes in the things they do in and outside the classroom. Understanding how teachers actually come to acquire knowledge and teach could be integrated into a future development program for teachers, one which may have benefits that eclipse those of current teachers´ seminars or training courses, which tend to focus narrowly on the "what" of the teaching process, rather than on the "who, how, and why" of this paramount educational phenomenon.

There are also some implications that apply to the local context of the study, the participants and the researcher. In terms of the place where the study was conducted, I would argue that from my role as an active member in the process of curricular design, the results of this study will shed light on the way the stakeholders have understood and designed the curriculum of each of the courses so far.

Understanding the important role that teachers' active participation plays in the creation of successful programs is an issue that had not been analyzed from a narrative perspective before, but which can now be looked at differently, given that there is new evidence of how some of our teachers understand the programs and constitute their teaching practices. In addition, the results of this study show the importance of conceptualizing the process of class observation and the evaluation of the teachers' performance through a different lens, due to the fact that common class observation formats or criteria do not always provide enough

and thorough information to really comprehend teachers' classroom practices. It will be necessary then to go beyond the process used up to now and initiate a more intimate one, as the one suggested by NI, where teachers' voices and stories are taken as valuable in order to promote curricular and educational success.

Regarding the participation of the three teachers, it is important to mention (based on their comments) that this study was an opportunity for them to reflect upon their practices and pedagogical knowledge and beliefs. The interviews afforded them a space where they could take some time from their busy days with the ultimate objective of thinking and talking about their experiences and assumptions—something many of us feel we do not have the time to do. Discussing the reasons behind the things they did in the classroom was an opportunity for them to test their knowledge and theories. This was so, as it is easy to find divergences between what a teacher says he or she believes in and what he or she actually does in the classroom. At some point, Richard told me it was an interesting experience for him to look at his classes and notice things he had not seen before; after some of the interviews he seemed to walk out the door with ideas in his mind for further reflection.

As to my role as a researcher, I can affirm that the experience of trying to implement an NI approach, not only as part of the methodology of the study but as the core of the theoretical construct of this project, allowed me to achieve a deeper understanding of alternative approaches to qualitative research, which are interesting but little known in the Colombian context. The NI experience somehow challenges certain traditional research concepts and roles, such as the importance of objectivity in the interviewing and data analysis process, or in the construction of the role of the participants and researchers. NI acknowledges

the influence and impact of the researcher in the re-creation of the story-line of the phenomenon under study and recognizes the importance of the role of the participants in the co-construction and negotiation of the data analysis process.

Regarding my role as a coordinator, I feel my own assumptions and conceptions about curricular design and the evaluation of teachers' performance changed greatly. From my role as a level coordinator, I know I intervened deeply in the two processes just mentioned, but I also recognized I understand them differently now from how I did in the past. To assess the quality of a teacher's pedagogical performance solely based on the few insights one might gain from observing a couple of classes during the semester is a practice I conceive as insufficient at times. From my experience with Paul, Mary and Richard, I understood that teaching and curriculum execution are much more complex phenomena than what is actually portrayed in books, and therefore should be carefully addressed and continuously explored.

References

Beattie, M., Dobson, D., Thornton, G., & Hegge, L. (2007). Interacting narratives: Creating and re-creating the self. *International Journal of Lifelong Education. 26*(2), 119-141.

Ben-Peretz, M. (1980). Teachers' role in curriculum development: An alternative approach. *Canadian Journal of Education, 5*(2), 52-62.

Clavijo, A. (2004) Teacher acting critically upon the curriculum: Innovations that transform teaching. *Ikala, 15*, 11-44.

Clandinin, M. (1985). Personal practical knowledge: A study of teachers' classroom images. *Curriculum Inquiry, 15*(4), 361-385.

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1995). Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes: Teacher stories. Stories of teachers. School stories. Stories of school. *Educational Researcher, 25*(3), 24-30.

Connelly, M., & Clandinin, D. (2006). Narrative inquiry. In Camilli, G., & Elmore, P. (Eds.), *Handbook of complimentary methods in education research* (pp. 477-487). Washington: American Educational Research Association.

Cortazzi, M., (1993). *Narrative and the study of teaching: Narrative analysis.* London: Routledge.

Coulter, C., Charles, M., & Poynor, L. (2007). Storytelling as pedagogy: An unexpected outcome of Narrative Inquiry. *Curriculum Inquiry, 37*(2), 103-122.

Craig, S. (2006). Why is dissemination so difficult: The nature of teacher knowledge and the spread of curricular reform. *American Education Research Journal. 43*(2), 257-293.

Drake, C., & Gamoran, M. (2006). Practicing change: Adaptation and teacher narrative in the context of mathematics education reform. *Curriculum Inquiry, 36*(2), 153-185.

Elbaz, F. (1983). *Teacher thinking: A study of practical knowledge.* New York: Nichols Publishing Company.

Farrell, T. (2001). Concept maps to trace conceptual change in pre-service English teachers. RECL *Journal, 32*(2), 27-44.

Jackson, P. (1992). Helping teachers develop. In Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (Eds.), *Understanding Teacher Development.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Olson, M. (2000). Curriculum as a multistoried process. *Canadian Journal of Education, 25*(2), 169.

Ollerenshaw, J., & Creswell, J. (2002). Narrative Research: A Comparison of two restorying data analysis approaches. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*(3), 329-350.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. In J. A. H. A. R. Wisniewski (Ed.), *Life history and narrative* (pp. 5-24). London: Falmer Press.

Schwab, Joseph J. (1969). *College Curriculum and Student Protest.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sikes, P., & Gale, K. (2006). *Narrative approaches to educational research: Research in education.* Retrieved from http://www.edu.plymouth.ac.uk/resined/

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory, procedures and techniques.* London: Sage.

Thorne, S., Kirkham, S.R., & MacDonald-Emes, J. (1997). Interpretive description: A noncategorical qualitative alternative for developing nursing knowledge. *Research in Nursing & Health*, *20*, 169-177.

Woods, D. (1996). *Teacher cognition in language teaching: Beliefs, decision-making and classroom practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

About the Author

Jenny Alexandra Mendieta Aguilar holds an MA in Applied Linguistics to the TEFL and a BA in Modern Languages from Universidad Francisco José de Caldas. She has worked in primary and high schools, as well as in universities. She currently works at Universidad de La Sabana, as an English teacher and level coordinator.

Appendix 1: Teacher's Biodata Survey

This survey is aimed at gathering information about your learning and teaching background and experiences. Please answer the questions in the space provided and ask the researcher if you have any doubt.

1. How long have you been learning English?
   _____

2. When did you start learning it?
   _____
   _____

3. Where did you learn it?
   _____
   _____

4. What kind of experiences (travel, courses, jobs, etc.) helped you learn the language? Why?
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

5. Why did you decide to become a teacher? Did anything influence you?
   _____
   _____
   _____

6. How long have you been a teacher?
   _____
   _____

7. Where have you worked?
   _____
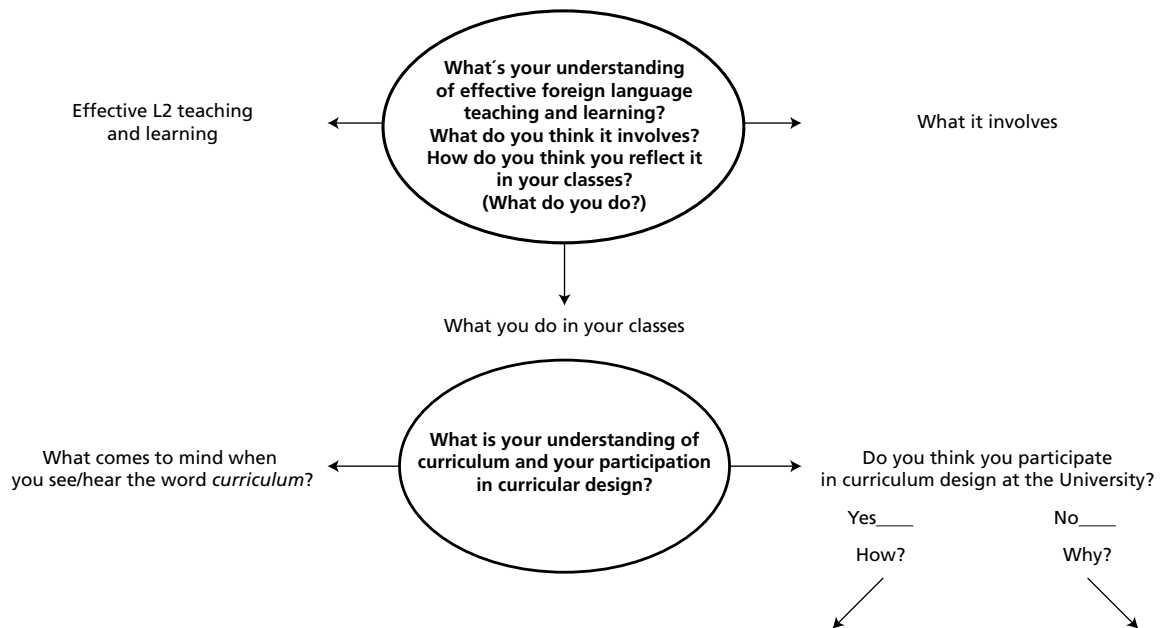   _____
   _____
   _____

8. Where are you currently working? How do you like it?
   _____
   _____
   _____

9. What are the different roles and responsibilities you have been in charge of during your teaching experience?
   _____
   _____
   _____

Appendix 2: Teacher's Concept Map

Dear teacher/colleague,

The following concept map is aimed at exploring your understanding and beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning and about the development of curriculum. Please write down all the concepts and ideas you relate to the questions and statements provided below, trying to address the three questions posed in the two bubbles as thoroughly as possible. Feel free to ask the researcher in case of doubt.

Effective L2 teaching and learning ← **What's your understanding of effective foreign language teaching and learning? What do you think it involves? How do you think you reflect it in your classes? (What do you do?)** → What it involves

What you do in your classes

What comes to mind when you see/hear the word *curriculum*? ← **What is your understanding of curriculum and your participation in curricular design?** → Do you think you participate in curriculum design at the University?

Yes____   No____

How?   Why?

Appendix 3: First Narrative Interview Protocol

Objective for the following questions: To generate an in-depth profile of the teachers so that experiences as learners that might have influenced the kind of teachers they are can be unveiled.

1. Tell me about the way you learned English.
   - When did you begin?
   - Where did you learn it?
   - What were some significant experiences for you as a learner of English?

2. Tell me the story of your interest in English teaching.
   - When, why and how did you decide to become a teacher?
   - What helped/made you decide to become a teacher?
   - What experiences (positive or negative) as a learner influenced you to be the teacher you are?

Objective for the following questions: To explore how teachers see themselves as curriculum planners and makers.

1. When you think about effective language teaching, what do you think of?

2. Describe one class you are currently in charge of: What do you do? (describe it from the beginning until the end)

3. As an in-service language teacher:
   - What moments of joy have you experienced as a language teacher?
   - What concerns have you had?
   - What desires do you have? Things you would like to happen.

4. (Based on the concept map). This is the concept map you created in regard to your understanding of curriculum. Could you explain it to me?
   - Provide examples

5. You indicated that you have participated in the creation and evaluation of the curriculum of the foreign language program of the university.
   - Tell me how you have participated.
   a. What tasks have you done?
   b. How did you get involved?
   - How do you feel about your participation?

6. How do you feel about being involved in this project?