

# Growing together as teacher researchers<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the description of an innovative academic program implemented in the Masters Program in Applied Linguistics to TEFL at Distrital University in Bogotá, Colombia that aimed at facilitating EFL teachers' undertaking of research in schools in Bogotá. The process of working collaboratively included identifying teachers' feelings related to their research capabilities. The program allowed students to develop awareness

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of the applications of qualitative research in education. This experience contributed to bridging the gap between reflective practice and research practices. It also promoted a high quality of academic debate.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo se enfoca en una descripción de un programa académico innovador que se desarrolló en la Maestría en Lingüística Aplicada a la Enseñanza del Inglés de la Universidad Distrital en Bogotá, Colombia con el propósito de facilitar el proceso de investigación llevado a cabo por docentes de Inglés en instituciones educativas en Bogotá. El proceso colaborativo desarrollado incluyó la identificación de creencias y conceptos de los docentes de Inglés sobre sus capacidades investigativas. El programa permitió el conocimiento y aplicación de diseños de investigación cualitativa en educación. Esta experiencia contribuyó a establecer un puente entre las prácticas reflexivas de los docentes y sus prácticas investigativas. Al mismo tiempo promovió un debate de alta calidad académica entre los docentes participantes y los investigadores con experiencia.

**Key terms:** language teacher education, research in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), reflexive teaching practices, qualitative research in EFL in Colombia.

## INTRODUCTION

This article describes an experience of teacher education that aimed at developing graduate students' individual research projects. The purposes of this academic project were to promote awareness of graduate students' capacities to undertake research to respond to local needs in different EFL settings and to invite them to be part of the research community of the Masters program in Applied Linguistics at Universidad Distrital.

First, we report on the origin of the experience emphasizing the efforts to recruit students and increase retention in our graduate program. Second, we

describe the modules that were part of the academic structure of the one-semester seminar and discuss the processes and experiences in terms of pedagogical innovations of the seminars, tensions and achievements experienced by the novice researchers and research outcomes. Finally, the pedagogical implications of the experience are discussed in terms of professional growth.

## **DESCRIPTIONS OF THE MASTERS PROGRAM IN EFL IN COLOMBIA**

The Masters program in Applied Linguistics to TEFL belongs to the School of Science and Education of Distrital University, a public university located in Bogotá, Colombia. This is one of the few existing teacher education programs at the masters level that has been accredited by the National Accreditation Commission in Colombia.

The Colombian Constitution states that all Colombian citizens should study at least one foreign language in their basic education to help them become active participants of the global village (General Law of Education, 1992). English is the language taught in elementary, secondary and higher education institutions because it responds to social, political and economic needs of the country. Since English is the most common foreign language used in schools, the Masters program addresses particular needs to help teachers study the processes of learning and teaching in public and private Colombian schools.

The Masters program started in November 1992 with a group of 12 students and to this date more than 150 teachers of English have graduated. The instruction in the Masters program is given in English by PhD and Masters professors and it has the following goals:

- Promote reflection and action about the learning and teaching of English in Colombian schools in order to implement innovative practices and classroom research.
- Provide teacher researchers with a holistic education that aims at informing them about current theories and practices. The theoretical knowledge base constructed will empower teachers to formulate new policies regarding the teaching of English so that they can respond to local needs appropriately.
- Reorient the teaching of English considering students' literacy in Span-

ish as their mother tongue, a valuable resource in the development of literacy in a foreign language.

- Construct and consolidate a research community in which practicing teachers can become active participants and leaders of educational and research experiences in ELT.
- Provide practicing English teachers with opportunities to do interdisciplinary work that includes the use of technology in English classrooms so that they value the integration of knowledge from different fields.

Entrance and exit requirements in the Masters program are the official TOEFL examination to ensure a high proficiency level in English as the language of instruction and to be able to participate in international academic exchanges throughout the development of the program. Another entrance requirement is a research proposal that prospective students need to write and orally present in an interview to be admitted in the program. A final requirement is the completion of a thesis that includes a report of a research experience that graduate students carry out during the second year of studies followed by an oral defense. This a typical requirement of Masters program in Colombia.

In this final stage teachers in training are prone to quit their graduate studies due to different reasons. This concern led us to conduct an evaluation through which we identified the dropout rate of graduate students in the Masters program. The results of the evaluation indicated that they left the program before completing the thesis requirement due mainly to the difficulties and challenges that doing research implies.

Various graduate council meetings were held in order to analyze this situation and it was concluded that even though students were assigned a thesis director, they still felt they did not have enough support from the research community in the process of developing their research projects. Therefore, a different dynamics to guide and accompany graduate students in the research process was proposed. It was decided that research seminars during the second year of the graduate program would be conducted by a panel of two or more professors. The seminars were oriented towards promoting academic discussions about the topics of research developed by the students. The discussions included explanations, examples and feedback related to processes of formulating research questions, data collection and data analysis procedures.

This dynamics changed the traditional role in which the advisor was the leader and the main interlocutor. Instead, interaction among peers and advisors enriched the sessions and an academic platform was built to reflect on questions, issues, ways of collecting and analyzing data and writing strategies considering different perspectives. An important aspect of the structure of the research panel was that students were encouraged to present solid arguments to support the validity and usefulness of their research proposals as well as to provide feedback to other's research plans.

Both professors and students valued the experience of teamwork in this research panel and it was implemented for two consecutive years. A positive outcome was an increase in the number of students who graduated. Augmenting the number of faculty members was a key factor to obtain these results, but essentially it was their willingness to engage in the project what facilitated the process.

The director of the masters program initiated a campaign in May 2001 to recruit students who had dropped out. The strategies used in this campaign included calling the students by phone, finding e-mail addresses and sending e-mail messages, and looking for the teachers at their work places. They were invited to be part of a new academic proposal that would stimulate their intellectual potential as teacher researchers and would give them the opportunity to graduate. The plan for a professional updating seminar was presented to the Graduate Council in the School of Science and Education and received their approval.

The eleven students who responded to the call expressed that the most convincing arguments in the recruiting campaign were the themes offered for each one of the modules in the program, the flexibility of the schedule and tuition payment, and the fact that faculty members were all engaged in research projects.

They have all completed coursework except for the thesis and were out of the program an average of 3 years. In their responses to a survey<sup>4</sup> administered to them, (see appendix 1) students indicated that the type of professional experiences that they had during the time they were out of the program concentrated mainly on teaching at the university level. Their teaching experiences helped them build knowledge about an area of interest that they had already identified

as former graduate students. Their experience and knowledge was helpful in the development of the research project as a requirement for graduation.

The professional updating seminar was planned for a one academic semester and included three modules that were directed by two professors from the program and a visiting professor from the United States<sup>5</sup>.

## **ACADEMIC COMPONENTS OF THE GRADUATE SEMINAR**

The director of the Masters Program considered important to examine the courses that students had previously taken and the new courses of the Masters program in order to offer innovative academic options to the students. One of the main goals was to put the students back in touch with current developments in the teaching and learning of English and in research practices. Consequently, three modules were designed to provide graduate students with new orientations to research: qualitative research in education, literacy processes in English and assessment and evaluation processes.

## **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN EDUCATION**

Examine and reflect upon their own pedagogical work to identify areas for research as well as alternative views to English Language teaching and learning through 3 modules: Qualitative research, Literacy processes in English, Assessment and Evaluation

Through these three modules it was expected that students would reflect

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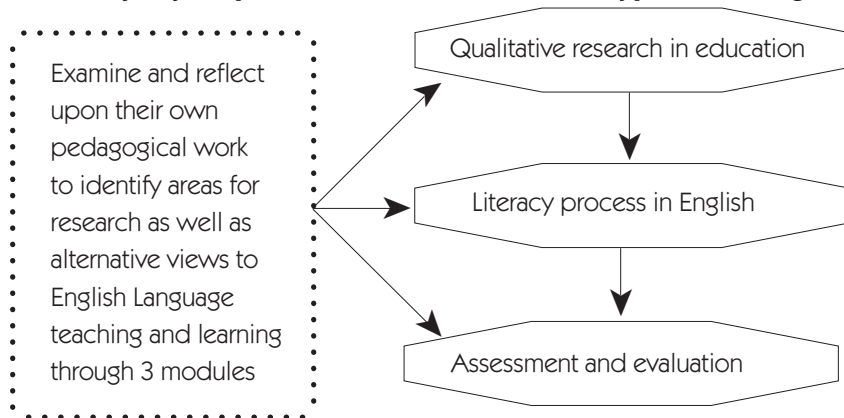
4 The survey was conducted ad-hoc.

5 Dr. Teresa Austin is a professor at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. She was a visiting professor in the Masters Program sponsored by Comisión Fulbright during October 2001 and March 2002. She was the thesis director of all the graduate students who participated in the Updating Graduate Seminar. We are thankful to her for her great contribution to our graduate program and to Comisión Fulbright for sponsoring her visit.

upon their pedagogical practices and try to identify areas that they would be interested in researching while examining alternative views to English language teaching (see figure 1).

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Graduate students in previous years had received instruction on the quantitative paradigm mainly. The number of theses that followed experimental and quasi-experimental research designs evidenced the strong emphasis on this paradigm. Teacher training was limited to quantitative approach to research because the majority of professors had received that type of training and



**Figure 1** Professional Updating Graduate Seminar

there were not many opportunities for other type of experiences. Research in Colombian schools was mainly designed to confirm or disconfirm the usefulness of particular educational practices. This approach, from our point of view, followed a positivist view of research.

Although the role of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to research is to explore a given phenomenon, the qualitative approach allows for a richer description and interpretation of a social reality. The researcher captures and preserves the meaning and practices of the participants in order to gain understanding about the nature of their behavior. It differs from the quantitative perspective in that the vision of the world is not related to a mechanical, pre-established order. There are not predictable outcomes that

need to be confirmed or disconfirmed (Freeman, 1998).

The shift from quantitative to qualitative research responded to the need to examine natural teaching and learning environments to understand the complexities of these processes and to value the knowledge created by school teachers. We wanted to orient students' research experiences to match the needs of their educational contexts. Therefore, we invited them to undertake qualitative research in order to present their interpretations of the social realities in which they were immersed. Also, we tried to raise awareness of some of the limitations of undertaking quantitative studies in education. We invited them to question if numerical descriptions and general statistics could reflect the subtleties of their classroom and the dynamics of learning and teaching in order to help them make informed choices.

An important issue that was addressed in this module was the rigorousness of the qualitative approach. The sessions emphasized the need to conduct disciplined inquiry that demanded from students collecting and analyzing data in a systematic way so as to produce valid and reliable results.

Each participant presented a proposal that was refined throughout the seminar. A key element was the feedback provided by the visiting professor in charge of advising students. She held regular meetings with the students to support and revise the progress of the projects, and after her departure in February 2002 she kept in touch with students and provided feedback via e-mail.

## **LITERACY PROCESSES IN ENGLISH**

A new orientation to the study of language was introduced in the seminar on literacy due to two main reasons. One was the necessity of exploring language from a perspective different from the study of syntax, phonology, and pragmatics. The other was graduate students' own literacy needs as readers and writers in two languages.

The seminar was developed considering the participation of students in two central activities: general readings and selections from a set of books that matched their research interest, and poster sessions. The readings selected had been identified as influential to other educators by professor Kathy Short in the doctoral program in Language, Reading and Culture at the University of Arizona. In general, the seminar was based on the following beliefs about learning:



- *Learning is an active process:*

Students immersed themselves in reading and responded to professional readings through journals. Journal writing was a driving force to push their understandings about reading and writing processes. Additionally, it was a way of creating and sharing meaning about their experiences. The purpose of the journal was to reflect on their learning about the readings and to enter into dialogue with others with an emphasis on personal responses rather than summaries.

- *Learning is a social process of collaborating with others:*

Students engaged in inquiry with others who had similar questions and concerns.

- *Learning occurs as we make connections to our own experiences:*

Students designed projects that fit their needs and interests. They searched for connections between their experiences as readers and writers and their experiences as teachers and teacher educators.

- *Choice allows learners to connect to their experiences and feel ownership in their learning:*

Students had choices in the books they read, in the responses to reading, and the specific focus of projects and small group activities.

- *Learning is reflective as well as active:*

Writing, talking, and self-evaluations gave students a myriad of opportunities to reflect on what they were learning.

- *Learning is a process of inquiry.*

As learners they searched out the questions that matter to them, developed those questions and shared their understandings with others. The structure of the class consisted of three moments: read aloud of children's literature, discussion of assigned readings with the whole group, and reflections in inquiry groups. The reading of children's literature promoted the joy for reading among participants and allowed making connections with the content of assigned readings in a unique and meaningful way.

## EVALUATION OF TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESSES

This module became part of the academic experience because it was an important component that allowed for reflection and application of new insights in this field. The objective was to depart from the traditional view of foreign language testing, and to focus on the understanding of the nature, purpose, strengths and limitations of different means of assessment and evaluation. It was also an effort to construct basic knowledge of evaluation in an EFL context that could respond to graduate students' particular needs and interests.

Even though there are strong pressures on foreign language programs to use internationally-accepted assessment and testing packages, we considered that it was necessary to focus on ways to gain information about the processes of learning by students. Thick descriptions obtained from alternative means of assessment such as portfolios, journals, and logs can enlighten teachers' decisions in terms of planning instruction. They also provide valuable information regarding who the learners are and in which stage of the learning process they are.

The methodology followed included an emphasis on classroom observation processes. In order to become good observers, the graduate students became familiar with various instruments to collect information that allowed them to gather detailed and more focused descriptions of particular classroom situations.

One of the goals of collecting data was to allow them to examine the dynamics of the class and to make connections to the readings so that they could implement changes in their evaluation practices. The analysis of the data collected through observations led them to reflect on both teaching and learning. Based on those reflections, students designed a proposal to introduce alternative means of assessment and evaluation in their classrooms. In the following excerpts there is evidence that graduate students found these alternative ways of assessment useful:

"In fact I do have my students do some of them. They find them interesting and enriching, and they understand that in doing them, they grow professionally" (A. McNeil).

They also identified feelings of rejection to new proposals for evaluation

from their colleagues:

“It is (was) difficult in terms of educators’ understanding because not all teachers devote time and life to do it. The result of this implementation only depends on your desire to change the way you evaluate” (M. Triana).

“I think for me personally it wouldn’t be difficult, but in my context there are some teachers who don’t know these techniques and also there are some of them who are very reluctant to change” (C. Granados).

## FEELINGS EXPERIENCED BY NOVICE RESEARCHERS

A common thread among these three modules was the idea to reposition teachers in terms of their role. Freeman (1998) emphasizes this idea by stating that teachers can become producers of knowledge and that they can shape the teaching and learning of English. A fundamental concern of the three professors who guided the seminar was to make sure that graduate students’ new understandings of theory were constructed on the basis of applications in their practice. Thus, the gap between theory, practice and research was diminished as students contributed to enlarge the existing body of knowledge in the EFL domain.

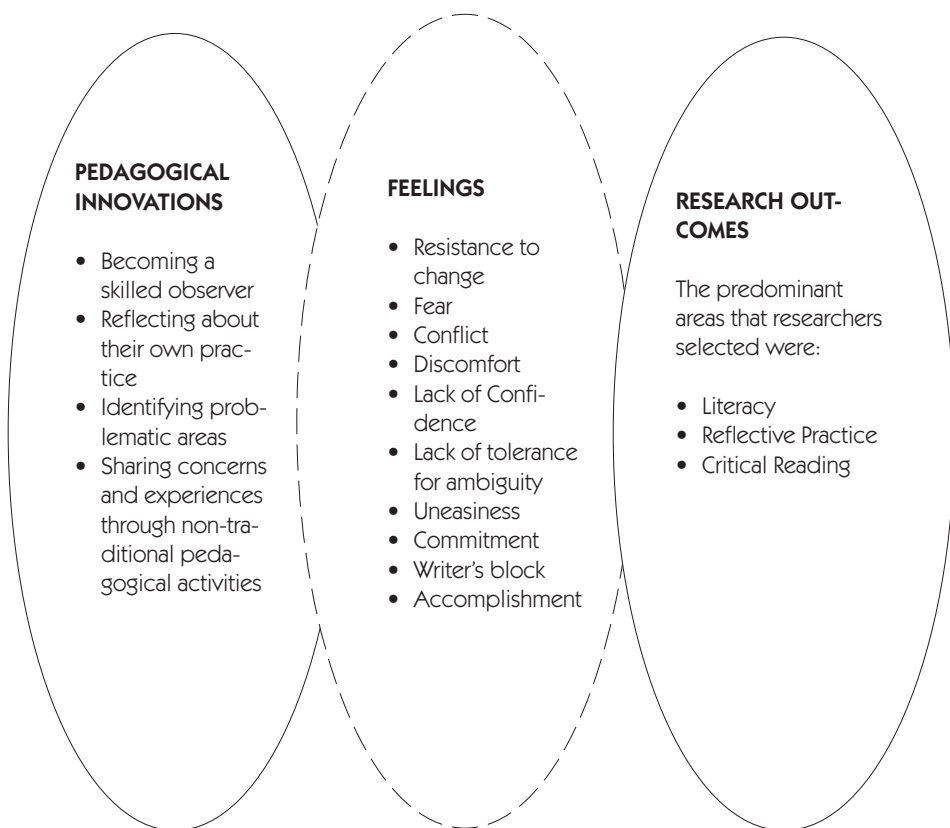
As graduate students were gaining insights from the reflection on the academic readings and the exchanges with peers and professors, they experienced different feelings related with tension, stress, commitment and accomplishment as teacher researchers doing qualitative research that are illustrated in the following excerpts:

“I understood that it is not the “happy” thing people tend to think it is (happy understood as easy and not consistent). Qualitative research is a serious thing. It can account for things that numbers cannot understand or enclose. Because of its “complex simplicity” it is appropriate for studying aspects that have to do with human beings... (A. McNeil)

“I feel well ‘cause it seems to be more in accordance with social sciences as education ‘cause humans are not measurable” (C. Granados).

The chart below shows the feelings students experienced in doing pedagogical innovations and in generating research outcomes.

The new teacher researcher role generated fear because students felt they could not do the two things simultaneously. Undertaking research and teaching were perceived as two separate and distant activities. This led to a feeling of uneasiness that was overcome by working on techniques that helped them collect the information they required without obstructing the normal flow of the class. The belief that the teacher was the doer in the classroom whereas the researcher is the outsider who generates knowledge based on the observations of particular contexts was challenged. Graduate students related opinions support this view:



**Figure 2.** Processes and Experiences lived by researchers

“Nothing better could have happened to me. What I liked the most of it was the fact that I began to see and experience being a teacher and a researcher (every teacher must be both at the same time). I liked it because we have been told again and again that researchers are... bla, bla bla. The truth is that there is a researcher in every teacher, and that it is our duty to better prepare to do our job in the best way possible, and this can only be achieved by doing research” (A. McNeil).

“It was easy because I could do and try new things and at the same time I could see myself as a teacher (introspective view)” (C. Clavijo).

Being uncertain about how research projects could unfold caused anxiety in students. It was difficult for them to accept that orientations to inquiry could take many forms and that they needed to move from teachable to researchable questions (Freeman, 1998). In addition, as soon as a preliminary question was identified, the tendency was to look for a concrete list of activities or to search for a fixed answer to the issue that was at stake.

The idea that research yields multiple answers and allows for multiple interpretations led to uneasiness. Qualitative research provided them with the opportunity to learn that there is a myriad of possibilities and that there is more than one way to explore an issue. They also noticed that multiple questions could emerge related to their initial queries than they first had anticipated.

Writing up the research report generated discomfort among students. They experienced writer’s block that was overcome by having regular meetings with the thesis director who encouraged peer reading. In the regular meetings the thesis director held with the group of students, she offered assistance in answering questions regarding the difficulties with writing and helped them build confidence in their writing capabilities.

We believe that the feelings experienced by students during the process of doing research are a normal part of understanding the complexities of the process. Recognizing their biases and how they influence the decisions and the interpretations they made, was an essential step in students’ research. Avoiding generalizations and prescriptions was another important realization when undertaking research. Being aware of these aspects resulted in learning and satisfaction.

“It was good; however, it was difficult to avoid the bias there is when you’re fulfilling both roles” (C. Granados).

“Sometimes I felt biased. But I had to overcome each detail that made me go wrong and realized I had to be a researcher first, then a teacher” (M. Triana).

“...practice and then share the experience with others, not prescribing what they “have to” do but what didn’t work in order to be avoided” (C. Clavijo).

## **RESEARCH OUTCOMES**

The research projects carried out by graduate students are related to the following areas:

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION**

One of the outcomes of this experience was that graduate students were immersed in an academic community that demanded and supported their growth as readers and writers. As teacher researchers, students were not only exposed to reading printed materials but also to reading their institutional context to understand the immediate needs that could be researched. As writers, they were asked to write reflections that connected the academic readings to their daily teaching. This process contributed to bridging the gap between reflective practice and research. Graduate students went beyond examining the superficial aspects of everyday teaching to finding ways to observe and interpret teaching and learning processes to better comprehend their realities.

<b>LITERACY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The Effect of Using Web Resources on the Development of Literacy(Alba Olaya)</li>   <li>• Once Upon a Time: Four Graders Approaching reading and writing narratives in a EFL Classroom(Doralba Pérez)</li>   <li>•A case Study of Emerging Literacy in Pre-school Students of a Bilingual School in Bogotá.(Carmenza Clavijo)</li> </ul>	<p>The aim of this research was to analyze how students developed literacy skills through out-of-class web based activities. The project was carried out with 17 student-teachers of a “Licenciatura” program. The research stresses the need to provide authentic resources and enhancing students’ opportunities to use their own experiences for successful learning.</p> <p>This study aimed at sharing the experience of fourth graders writing narratives in EFL. The findings show common features in children’s strategies for writing narratives, children’s beliefs about writing, the importance of interaction in text construction and the relevance of experiencing in students formative process.</p> <p>This study attempts to explore and understand preschool students writing in two languages and to observe the process they followed in order to master the writing system of English as a foreign language. Four basic categories were identified: creativity in children’s writing, children as inquirers, balance between invention and conven-</p>
<b>Reflective practitioners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How a Seventh Grade Teacher’s Decision-Making Affects her Students Opportunities to Learn English: A Retrospective Teaching Case Study. (Nora Rodriguez)</li> </ul>	<p>This research project aimed at describing the process by which an in-service secondary school teacher reflected on her teaching practice. The focus was on how a teacher’s decision-making affected her seventh graders’ opportunities to learn English in a democratic environment founded on negotiation factors. Ways to help students establish links with other areas of knowl-</p>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Reflective practitioners</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving and Receiving feedback on Academic Writing: How Students Accomplish the Task. (Marisol Triana)</li> </ul>	<p>This study investigated the effect of teacher written feedback on students' academic writing. Participants were a group of university students and their teacher. The report responds to the kind of feedback given by the teacher to students' compositions, the ways students use feedback provided, and how they incorporate it in their writings.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Critical Reading / Culture</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Towards an Understanding of culture in an EFL Colombian Classroom. (Carlo Granados)</li> <li>• An Exploration of Factors Affecting Critical Reading of Literary Texts (Alejandro McNeil)</li> </ul>	<p>This is an investigation carried out at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional with the purpose of observing how culture was perceived, manifested and constructed by students in the foreign language classroom. The model followed was that of a qualitative case study. The research argues for the importance of teachers as transmitters and modifiers of culture, with the recognition of difference as key aspects to be considered.</p> <p>This research project aimed at exploring some of the factors that a group of student-teachers involved in a course on British Literature at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, in Bogotá, reported as being most helpful to them in becoming critical readers of literary texts. Key factors were found to have positively influenced the students' overall development of</p>

The research process was also an opportunity to change the belief that teacher-researchers are consumers rather than producers of their own local knowledge. By writing their thesis graduate students contributed to enlarge the existing body of knowledge in the areas that they chose. The change of



beliefs is illustrated as follows:

“Yes, it made me aware of my responsibility as a professional to construct and communicate knowledge to my colleagues. Besides, being a producer I can create things that are really useful for my context” (C. Granados).

“Of course it did, at the end of my research I could notice that first errors have to be seen on my own practice and then share the experience with others..” (C. Clavijo).

The dynamics of the seminar promoted a high quality of academic debate based on critical thinking. Experiencing non-traditional pedagogical activities brought about discussions on their concerns about teaching and learning. The themes uncovered in the academic exchanges in the three modules included examining the differences between their expectations and those of their students, their own beliefs as teachers and researchers, misunderstandings, bureaucratic constraints, miscommunication among members of the academic community, and tensions experienced during the process. The discussions were not limited to basic descriptions of the problematic areas of schooling, but they aimed at searching for solutions, making decisions and evaluating the validity and feasibility of those solutions.

There are direct and indirect benefits of this innovative program for teachers and their educational community and for the University. On the one hand, graduate students had an opportunity to explore their realities, to incorporate research into their practices and to view it as an integral and energizing aspect of teaching. This represents a direct benefit for the students participating and for their pupils because it enhances the opportunities to improve the conditions for teaching and learning. On the other hand, this program had an indirect impact on the community of teacher educators because we keep ourselves informed about the most critical needs in public and private institutions in our country.

Another implication of this experience is that it contributed to demystifying the role of the teacher as a doer (Freeman, 1998). Teachers had an opportunity to become researchers and that permitted us teacher educators to solidify the new communities of teacher-researchers who are engaged in transforming educational practices at all levels.

In June, 2003 the Masters program in Applied Linguistics with the support of the School of Sciences and Education will offer a second updating professional seminar for 5 students who left the program in similar conditions to the previous group. Some questions for further inquiry regarding the impact of the updating professional programs include: how do the institutional contexts in which the teachers are embedded respond to their innovations and research? How do pedagogical practices influence the type of inquiries practicing teachers generate? How does being out of the program for a time influence their new understandings of teaching and researching? How can universities and research communities support students' process of undertaking research?

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**APPENDIX**

**UNIVERSIDAD DISTRITAL FRANCISCO JOSÉ DE CALDAS  
MASTERS PROGRAM IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS TO TEFL  
SURVEY**

Dear graduates,

We invite you to provide us with your insights about the experiences in the *Seminario de Actualización* that took place between October 2001 and March 2002. The information will be used in an article that has been approved for publication in the CALJ 2003.

We appreciate having your response before May 5th via e-mail so that the publication can be completed.

1. How long after completing your coursework at the Masters Program in Applied Linguistics were you out of the program before you returned to the Professional Updating seminar in October 2002?
2. What did you do during the time you were out of the program until you returned?
3. What type of professional experiences did you have while being out of the program that you used in your thesis when you came back?
4. What were the reasons for dropping out of the program?
5. What arguments in the recruiting campaign did you find convincing in order to go back and finish the program?
6. What made you want to return to finish up after being out of the program for a while?
7. From the methodology used in the literacy class journal writing was an activity. How did you find it? <sup>6</sup>
8. In the evaluation module alternative means of assessment (portfolios, journals, role plays, logs, projects) were examined. How easy or difficult did you consider implementing this ways of assessment would be in your teaching context?
9. Describe your feelings about the role of being both a teacher and a researcher in qualitative research?
10. Did qualitative research change your beliefs about being producer of knowledge rather than simply a consumer? If so, explain why?
11. How did you feel doing qualitative research? Explain why?



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6 Can you provide us with a sample of one of your journal entries that you found useful?