

# ***EFL preservice teachers' language teacher identity dilemmas during the practicum: The case of Chile***

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**Priscila Riffo-Salgado**  
*University of Leeds*

*Abstract: This article investigates two language teacher identity dilemmas encountered by EFL preservice teachers (PSTs) during their last practicum and how they navigated them to reconcile their identities. Dilemmas, characterised as inner conflicts and challenges PSTs face in resolving contradictory demands and different roles in their profession (Cabaroğlu & Tillema, 2011), can illuminate how PSTs understand their teaching roles and language teacher identity (LTI) amidst the complexities of the teaching practice. The article begins by contextualising the study, presenting an overview of the ELT national curriculum and how this is reflected in the practicum. Next, an exploration of LTI and how dilemmas can serve as tools for reconciling this identity will be drawn. Lastly, findings and conclusions will be presented. This study suggests that a locally responsive ELT pedagogy could empower PSTs to better navigate and transform challenges into valuable learning-to-teach opportunities. Accordingly, caring emerged as a tool for PSTs to better navigate political dilemmas in underprivileged contexts. By integrating contextual knowledge into curricula, PSTs could align their language teaching identities with specific needs, enhancing student engagement, motivation, and success in diverse educational settings.*

*Keywords: Language teacher identity, dilemmas, practicum, sociocultural theory, local ELT pedagogies*

## **Introduction**

Recognised as a tool for accessing the globalised realms of communication, technology, and business (Block, 2017), the teaching and learning of English have a pivotal role in Chilean educational policy. The national policy reforms for English Language Teaching (ELT) have democratised English language learning, ensuring access across schools, whether public or

private. However, despite this veneer of broader accessibility, a significant gap persists, primarily impacting those unable to afford private education. The post-dictatorship education reforms initiated in the 1990s, aligned with a neoliberal national constitution, have heightened inequalities, and deepened social segregation (Romero, 2022). The implementation of a voucher-school choice system in the 1990s has accelerated the privatisation of education in Chile, leading to the deterioration of public education (Barahona, 2016), transforming them into specialised institutions for low-income students (Gonzalez, 2017). This has resulted in significantly lower English learning outcomes in underprivileged schools. Teachers in such environments feel ill-equipped to meet the curricular language demands, especially in schools characterised by affective-behavioural problems (Yirlom & Acosta, 2016). Although many Chilean educational contexts exhibit these characteristics, limited attention has been given to the experiences of PSTs in these settings (Farrell, 2016), particularly in Latin America, which is marked by profound inequality (Romero, 2022). Despite the challenges and contradictions inherent in the practicum, these features of inequality add to its complexity. Some of these issues, such as inequitable distribution of resources, and teachers feeling unprepared in such environments can lead to LTI dilemmas. Dilemmas are internal conflicts and challenges that PSTs experience in reconciling contradictory demands and different roles in their profession to come up with a comfortable identity (Cabaroğlu & Tillema, 2011). Internal and external constraints, reflecting shared and individual conceptualisations of what good language teachers (GLT) are and do, shaped the challenges encountered by PSTs.

This article explores two dilemmas faced by nine EFL PSTs from a university in the capital of the Araucanía Region, Chile. This administrative division is characterised by high poverty rates and a substantial indigenous population, and it has consistently reported low academic performance on national standardised assessments, limiting social mobility prospects (Casen, 2014). The dilemmas that PSTs experienced are attributed to their understanding of a GLT given the language policy that appear to overlook local contextual issues, coupled with the socio-political context at the time of data collection. This study positions dilemmas as a framework not only for identifying the challenges faced by PSTs during the practicum but also as a tool for PSTs to reflect on their conceptualisation of GLTs.

### **The Chilean ELT curriculum and school contexts**

Since the 1990s, English Language has been mandatory in Chilean public education, encompassing eight years of instruction from year 5 to 12. Periodic standardised national examinations have revealed that many students fail to reach the expected learning outcomes, which should correspond to a B1 level by the end of secondary education (Mineduc, 2009, 2018), except for those in private institutions. According to Matear (2008) and Meckes and Bascope (2012), the difference in English instruction hours, material, and resources, such as the opportunity to sit for international exams and participate in exchange programs abroad, is the cause of the disparity in outcomes. However, these studies often overlook the significant role played by social and economic contextual factors in English teaching (Romero, 2022), which sometimes can result in teachers already harbouring low expectations from their students based on their underprivileged context (Archanjo et al., 2019).

For the past 30 years, the national ELT curriculum has undergone adaptations to meet international demands, particularly emphasising the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT), as outlined by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) guidelines (Mineduc, 2015). However, Kuhlman and Serrano (2017) have noted that the investigation into the suitability of this framework regarding context is limited. This has begun to gain attention in the region (see Banegas, 2017; Kamhi-Stein et al., 2017), in efforts to produce local models. One strategy for local models that has gained prominence is Translanguaging. Translanguaging involves the use of both the first language and English simultaneously during teaching sessions and has proven to be an effective method for developing bilingual or multilingual learners' ESL skills (Conteh, 2018). This approach allows learners to use their existing linguistic knowledge to enhance language acquisition and deeper thinking (Ting & Jintang, 2020), and it could be considered a key teaching practice in ELT (Barahona, 2020). Despite teachers who use the L1 as a scaffolding tool being criticised by monolingual-centric ideologies (Altalhab & Said, 2024), this strategy can enable PSTs to navigate their identity in diverse and challenging settings. However, there is still a gap in ELT programs addressing teaching in underprivileged contexts in superficial ways, which, as demonstrated, falls short in adequately preparing teachers to navigate and adapt to these specific circumstances (Sleeter et al., 2016).

### **The language teacher education programme**

The programme under study, like many Chilean LTE programmes, adopted a hybrid structure with linguistic and practicum components beginning in the second year of the five-year programme (Barahona, 2016). Despite the integral nature of linguistic and pedagogical skills in the language teacher knowledge base (LTKB), ELT training tends to disproportionately emphasise linguistic or disciplinary skills, validating non-native English teachers' expertise (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007). This linguistic emphasis perpetuates the misconception that English language mastery equates to better teaching practices. Despite Shulman's (1987) call for integrating content and pedagogical understanding, LTE programmes, particularly in non-native speaker contexts, still favour linguistic skills over pedagogical ones (Abrahams & Silva Rios, 2017). In Chile, the Guiding Standards for English Pedagogy (Mineduc, 2014) encompass both disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge. However, pedagogical standards cover the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for LTE programmes' graduates, regardless of their teaching subject (Mineduc, 2014), whereas seven out of the ten disciplinary standards focus solely on the knowledge of language and its constituents. This demonstrates the clear preference for language knowledge over teaching skills.

### **The practicum**

The practicum serves as a crucial platform for PSTs to familiarise themselves with diverse teaching environments, aiding in mediating learning and consolidating knowledge acquired through school placements and academic trajectories (Pennycook, 2004). However, Barahona (2019) highlights in her study on EFL Chilean practicums that many supervisors, often teacher educators, lack familiarity with the school context, potentially resulting in insufficient guidance for PSTs. Experiences during the practicum may diverge from anticipation, entailing incongruent expectations, contradictory messages, and emotional variability (Mattsson et al., 2011). PSTs may feel disempowered in their teaching roles, with the university and school exerting control, leading to ongoing friction and misaligned expectations (Nguyen, 2017). Despite increased practicum exposure and early immersion in the school setting (Schuster-Muñoz et al., 2010), translating learnt concepts into practice remains challenging for PSTs, compounded by limited authority and resulting in a lack of confidence in exercising agency. To address this, Glas (2014) suggests PSTs be offered

external avenues to navigate issues and personal constraints. The practicum also serves as a platform for PSTs to meet their imagined selves and form their professional identities, which is a critical focus of this study.

### **Language Teacher Identity**

Language teacher identity in LTE, has garnered significant attention in the past decades (Kayi-Aydar, 2019), drawing insights from diverse disciplines and ELT-related research areas like beliefs and cognitions, facilitating a nuanced understanding of LTI. Although until the socio-cultural turn in LTE (Freeman & Johnson, 1998), studies acknowledged that a sociocultural perspective allows to understand the complexities of LTI, particularly when incorporating context-related issues (Johnson, 2009). Sociocultural theory stresses that L2 teaching is not merely about applying linguistic theories but entails a dialogic process of co-constructing knowledge within specific sociocultural contexts. Scholars like Canagarajah (1999), and Kumaravadivelu (2003) have enriched this understanding, linking language teaching to neoliberal ideologies, power dynamics, and identity complexities, especially among non-native speaker teachers in ELT contexts. Recent research highlights the link between LTI and agency, emphasising the necessity of reflecting on personal practice and making informed contextual decisions (De Costa & Norton, 2017). Mockler (2011) contends that LTI serves to guide educators in aligning their beliefs with professional practice for enhanced effectiveness while politically positioning teachers against utilitarian and neoliberal ideologies and advocating for a more inclusive and transformative education system. Equally, Block and Gray (2012), have linked LTI to society's material and economic structures. Integrating social class into identity discourse has the potential to improve our understanding of professional identity. Despite international ELT discourses often neglecting challenges encountered by teachers in diverse contexts, Akbari (2008) sheds light on situations where teachers, grappling with long work hours and insufficient pay, prioritise familiar provision over embracing transformative social identities, considering the precariousness of their livelihoods.

When teachers enter the teaching profession, they actively negotiate their identities. Morton and Gray (2018) observe that in this dynamic journey of LTI, PSTs must reconcile compromises that challenge their personal beliefs or identity, which are usually

shaped by both external recognition and self-recognition. This process can involve a painful ontological shift, suggesting that PSTs undergo a profound and occasionally arduous transformation in self-understanding, existence, and purpose during their journey of learning to teach. Studies in Latin America (Kuhlman & Serrano, 2017) and similar (Altalhab & Said, 2024) demonstrate teachers struggles with identity conflicts and feelings of inadequacy, particularly regarding achieving 'native-like' language proficiency. These challenges diminish professional confidence, constrain exploration of pedagogical domains, and create a complex relationship between subject content and pedagogical knowledge in language teaching. Given its complexities and ongoing change, LTI could benefit from being understood as a dilemma to provide a framework that can illuminate the constraints faced by PSTs.

### **Understanding Dilemmas**

While the practicum is widely recognised as a crucial phase for PSTs to familiarise themselves with teaching practices, it is not without complexities and tensions, as mentioned earlier, which may influence the development of LTI. The significance of dilemmas in teaching and learning arises from the well-established gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Cabaroğlu & Tillema, 2011; Windschitl, 2002), and can provide a useful framework to understand the complexities encountered by PSTs. Investigating the origin and resolution of these dilemmas within the context of the practicum provides valuable insights, since it is essential to carefully consider the specific context in which the practicum takes place, as it significantly influences the nature of the dilemmas encountered by PSTs (Ponte et al., 2004).

Drawing on the broad literature on dilemmas, a LTI dilemma is characterised by teaching decisions needed to be made even in circumstances where none of the available choices are optimal. Examining LTI dilemmas can illuminate the daily challenges faced by PSTs during their placements, and comprehending these dilemmas can facilitate the reconstruction of learning-to-teach practices and the re-evaluation of LTKB within a national context.

### **The study**

This study shows part of my doctoral research, which aimed to explore what a GLT is from the PSTs' perspectives to explore LTI development. Employing qualitative research methods (Patton,

2023), a case study design was crafted to deeply examine the experiences of nine PSTs, alongside fourteen other participants including host teachers, mentors<sup>1</sup>, and supervisors, who played crucial roles in facilitating the practicum process and assisting PSTs in resolving dilemmas encountered during their training. PSTs were placed in secondary education classes from year 8 to year 11, where they were assigned one class and needed to support the host teacher or mentor with another class. They usually spent three to four hours of teaching per week with their class and had to complete some time at the placement, including head teacher duties. This study sought to comprehend the challenges faced by PSTs in aligning their professional identity as aspiring language educators with the practical realities encountered during the practicum.

To ensure the validity and reliability of this qualitative research, diverse methods were used to understand PSTs' perceptions of their teaching practices during their 16-week practicum in the second semester of 2019. These included semi-structured interviews (SSIs), direct lesson observation to be used for stimulated recall interviews (SRIs) and a focus group (FG). See Table 1 for a breakdown of methods used per participant.

Table 1. Methods used to collect data per participant.

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Number</b>
9 Preservice teachers	Semi-structured interviews	18 of each p/p
	Stimulated recall interviews	
	Focus group	1 as a group
5 Teacher educators (supervisors) 2 Mentors 5 Host teachers	Semi-structured interviews	18 of each p/p
Head of the programme	Semi-structured interviews	1 p/p

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<sup>(1)</sup> In this study, mentors are schoolteachers who underwent a mentoring programme-which does not exist anymore- offered by the same university. These mentors followed the supervisory guidance from the LTE programme but had a formation on mentoring.

The analysis began during data collection, with the first emerging themes identified through interviews and observations of PSTs, where the first emerging themes were identified. Identity, understood as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by participation in communities of practice (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1999), was explored in classifying themes within sociocultural tools (Johnson, 2009; Johnson & Golombek, 2003), namely cultural artefacts and activities, cultural concepts, and social relations. Through both inductive and deductive approaches, patterns and themes that encapsulated the LTIs encountered by PST were identified (Patton, 2023). Thematic analysis proved pertinent in presenting rich and detailed accounts of data (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Table 2. Participants distribution across schools.

School	Preservice teachers	Supervisors	Supervisor number	Mentors	Mentor number	Host teachers	Host teacher number
Sch1	Rose Josie	Pia	-	Pia	M1	Christopher	HT1
Sch2	Robert Norah Pamela	Gala  Cynthia	S1  S2	-  -	-  -	Amy Clarence N/A	HT2 HT3 HT4
Sch3	Carina Susan	-	-	Giannina	M2	-	-
Sch4	Frank	Cynthia	S2	-	-	Christian	HT5
Sch5	Beatriz	Lily Lydia	S3 S4	-	-	Claire	HT6

Five schools, either voucher-funded or public, served as placements for PSTs (See Table 2). Four of these schools concentrated high numbers of vulnerable students, which means they were facing social, economic, psychological, cultural, or environmental challenges (JUNAEB, 2005). It is also relevant to mention that a social uprising emerged as a spontaneous social movement by mid-October, sparked by a public transport price increase and demonstrations that quickly led to police brutality (Phillips, 2019). Chile witnessed a spontaneous nationwide movement challenging deep-rooted issues tied to the constitution established during Pinochet's regime. Neoliberal reforms and the weakening of the state have widened the gap between the wealthy and underprivileged in Chile. The 2019 social uprising, marked by



unprecedented violence and human rights violations (INDH, 2020), prompted calls for a new constitution. However, despite two referendums, the nation remains dissatisfied with the outcome. This backdrop influenced the PSTs experiences, giving rise to two key dilemmas during data collection.

### **Dilemmas encountered**

This section examines two key dilemmas faced by PSTs and the strategies they use to navigate them. The first dilemma involves PSTs' decisions to teach only in English, while the second dilemma arises from societal unrest, which influences their decisions on political identity in their teaching placements.

#### *Dilemma 1. Should I teach English in English only?*

*The ideal thing would be to speak in English 90-100% of the time. (Robert, SSII)*

During fieldwork, participants consistently stressed the importance of having a strong command of English to be considered a GLT. This section explores how the need for a proficient command of English, especially in its oral use in the classroom—reflecting the participants' understanding from the data—presented a persistent dilemma for PSTs.

PSTs may have viewed English-only instruction as essential to the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This could present a conceptual dilemma, reflecting a struggle with understanding the epistemological underpinnings of CLT (Windschitl, 2002). CLT prioritises meaningful communication as both the means and end of language learning, emphasising real-life communication and authentic language use (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Supervisors emphasised the significance of conducting English lessons exclusively in English, a concept that PSTs first endorsed in the SSIs conducted at the start of the practicum. This conceptualisation could stem from PSTs' instructional experiences and supervisor expectations, as well as being a requirement for assessment during lesson implementation. M1 expressed,

*A good language teacher should have a good domain of the four skills and use them at all times. (SSII)*

This GLT understanding, echoed by other mentors and supervisors, may explain why PSTs constructed the idea that

having a good command of the L2 entitled them and guaranteed them success at teaching English. Entrenched within the ELT programme, which heavily emphasises linguistic features (Veliz, 2021; Veliz & Veliz-Campos, 2019), PSTs believed that acquiring this knowledge would grant them the credibility and confidence needed to effectively deliver lessons in English and facilitate student learning. However, this practice presented more difficulties than expected for reasons pertaining to both the PSTs and the teaching contexts. The school context was the first issue encountered when attempting to use only English.

PSTs considered their placement to be too distant from what they had learned at university; underprivileged contexts, students' low English levels, and school culture expectations hindered them from embracing this LTI.

Pamela voiced,

*When we attended teaching seminars, language teacher educators presented videos featuring a classroom with eight highly motivated students proficient in English. However, our classrooms typically contain thirty-five students, (...). It's not comparable; how can I teach such a class without the same students, facilities, or even basic resources? (SSI1)*

This finding is consistent with that of Romero (2022), where she discovered that PSTs felt unprepared to face the reality of vulnerable contexts, describing their university instruction as unrealistic and impossible to apply in numerous classes. Given the prevalence of disadvantaged school placement contexts, PSTs did not believe they possessed the necessary tools to navigate the encountered situation, especially considering the requirement to always use English.

Following this same idea, another salient issue was realising students' level of English was significantly lower than they were supposed to as per national curriculum standards. This resulted in PSTs not having sufficient time to complete their lessons as scheduled, which was also a component of their assessment. PSTs found themselves between choosing to finish their lessons on time or using more English, which would sometimes result in students losing attention and PSTs not feeling in control of the class.

*The only way to shorten the activity and simplify it is by reducing the use of English in the classroom. (Rose, SRI1)*

This dilemma conflicted PSTs' language identity between what they were expected to do, wanted to do, and what they could actually do in the classroom. Some of the PSTs, after personal reflection or having discussed with mostly mentors, adapted the way they used the L2.

*My first implementations were... classes in English, as they should be, but students didn't understand much. (...) What I do now is something in English and something in Spanish.*  
(Susan, SRI2)

Adapting the way the L2 was used functioned as a strategy both to embrace PST's professional identity and to be able to carry out an effective class. This approach aimed to prevent students from feeling lost and facilitate better understanding. Even though this was not the way the university programme instructed, it proved effective in that context. Additionally, having a mentor who worked at this placement allowed for greater flexibility in implementing Susan's lessons in English, with the support of the L1, as the M2 was familiar with the context and understood why Susan would not use an English-only approach. This could be identified as the use of translanguaging (Conteh, 2018), which despite its criticism by monolingual-centric ideologies (Altalhab & Said, 2024), worked as a key ELT practice (Barahona, 2020) for Susan to scaffold the L2 and to engage language learning (Ting & Jintang, 2020). This strategy enabled her to navigate her LTI in this context (Glas, 2014), by drawing on her personal experiences and reflecting on what could truly be effective in her particular context.

In the same vein, another PST with a more equipped language skills repertoire was able to construct and reconcile her LTI by using past personal learning experiences (Malderez et al., 2007).

*I think it's good for them to listen to English as much as possible. (...) At least I learnt that way.* (SRI1)

Having studied in a bilingual school, Pamela demonstrated a willingness to create opportunities for students to learn, regardless of their low level of English. During lesson observations, Pamela noted varying English levels in the class. Instead of solely using Spanish, as some PSTs did for universal comprehension, she tailored the English language and vocabulary to the students' proficiency. She could relate her learning experiences to teaching

English using the L2, but judiciously (Cook, 2001). Susan, on the other hand, gradually increased the use of English by demonstrating consistency to her students, which over time demonstrated that learners became familiar with the vocabulary and expressions used frequently.

Despite having B2 or C1 English proficiency, PSTs still struggled to use L2 effectively in classrooms, demonstrating that the issue lies in their pedagogical content knowledge, revealing a gap in tailoring teaching to student needs. This highlights the need for LTE programs to address teaching in diverse, underprivileged contexts beyond aesthetic approaches (Sleeter et al., 2016).

When PSTs had the chance to try out strategies, with personal reflection and often guidance from host teachers and mentors, they made beneficial adaptations. Those who used more English found that increased exposure led to greater student learning, though they recognised it as a gradual process extending beyond the practicum.

*Dilemma 2. Affording a political identity as a preservice teacher.*

*There were times when tear gas was thrown near me, and I heard gunfire." I quickly fled the demonstration. (Pamela, SRI2)*

As previously stated, data collection occurred during a period of social turmoil, with PSTs halfway through their practicum when the upheaval struck. To ensure the wellbeing of PSTs, the university instructed them not to attend their placements during the two most turbulent weeks. On their return, PSTs encountered a scenario where the four out of the five school placements had a 'back-to-normal' agenda. PSTs were challenged by the socio-political context and the dilemma of adopting a political identity, understanding this as questioning institutional norms and disrupting privileged routines that may encounter resistance from school stakeholders (Windschitl, 2002).

The fact that four of the five school placements chose to blur the topic clashed with PSTs' language identities that identified as political and could have served to advocate for a more inclusive and transformative education system (Mockler, 2011). By addressing the deficit in a socially just education system for disadvantaged learners, the integration of critical thinking skills into English language pedagogy can play a significant role in

fostering more equitable learning opportunities for all students (Veliz, 2021; Veliz & Veliz-Campos, 2019). However, PSTs soon recognised how the school placements suppressed this event, and they were expected to follow accordingly.

*I didn't agree with teachers saying to students that everything was normal, as if these demonstrations were holidays. I thought, how are we creating this bubble at school? We know students are seeing violence every day, and they're not OK. One can't expect students to want to learn the present continuous because they have a test the following day. I didn't want to be that teacher, but I didn't think the school would have let me have some conversations with students.*  
(Pamela, SRI1)

Pamela expressed her disagreement with this situation, but as a PST, she understood she was not at a hierarchy level where she could start this conversation. It has been long reported that PSTs experience power issues during the practicum (Mattsson et al., 2011). These experiences may hinder appropriate reflection and do not offer opportunities for PSTs to embrace a political identity. However, Pamela herself found ways to address this in the private scene. She managed to get close to students and used care as a tool to navigate this dilemma.

*This has motivated me to get to know students more. It's important to know our students and how they are processing things. I think we have looked at each other more as humans.*  
(Pamela, SRI1)

Pamela found ways to broaden the spectrum of skills required to be a GLT and caring seemed to be a form of resistance towards the school agenda.

At Sch1, Rose argued,

*I haven't even heard conversations in the staff room when teachers know that most of this uprising has to do with inequalities in education, which we witness every day with students. I feel teachers are scared to lose their jobs.* (SSI2)

Although Rose did not agree with the school approach towards the social unrest, she did not feel she could do something about it and understood teachers were not in a position to get involved politically as they needed their job. The disengagement of a political identity from the school staff is comparable to the

findings of Akbari (2008), who highlighted that in precarious contexts, teachers cannot afford to be politically active at the expense of losing their jobs. This, in turn, supports the relationship between class and adopting a political identity (Gray & Block, 2012).

Other participants were also conflicted, and even though they were in a more powerful position than PSTs, they still struggled to adopt a political LTI. HT6 said,

*At school, there was not enough space for students to discuss. There was a feeling of I'm here teaching while there is a barricade on the corner. (SSI2)*

HT6 went on to explain that she was aware teachers should be agents of change but realised the school agenda was far from promoting democratic conversations in the classroom.

One of the placements provided spaces for students to discuss this matter in a safe environment. HT5 says,

*We had regular meetings (...). Then, both staff and students cast their votes, leading to a democratic strike. And students responded accordingly. (SSI2)*

This school took this as an opportunity to reflect collaboratively within the community. Unlike other schools, Sch4's school culture benefited from this experience and grew closer as a community.

As Frank voiced,

*There was a union and sense of community at school between teachers and students. And students had the space to demonstrate with the support of teachers. (SSI2)*

As Romero (2022) asserts, collaboration and community are very important in marginalised contexts. Frank's political identity helped him to develop a better relationship with students.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this article, two specific dilemmas were explored to understand how PSTs navigated the challenges that emerged for them to reconcile their professional identities. As articulated by Morton and Gray (2018), PSTs undergo ontological discomfort during this period, encountering mismatches between university instruction, how they understand the ELT profession, and their teaching context. Some of the strategies used by PSTs to navigate

those dilemmas were to use translanguaging to create more context-responsive lessons based on the school and students' needs. Notably, caring emerged as a valuable tool for PSTs, aiding not only in building connections with students but also in navigating conflicting political identities. But most importantly, having spaces to meaningfully reflect on practices and being provided spaces to manoeuvre were highly valued by PSTs.

One of the challenges stemmed from the LTE programme's structure and instruction, which, at times, failed to consider context, leaving PSTs to choose between concentrating on disciplinary knowledge, as required by university instruction, and addressing school-specific contextual issues. This led PSTs to a sense of discouragement and the realisation that their training may not align with local standards. However, PSTs who demonstrated awareness of their students' contexts, coupled with reflective and agentic approaches, exhibited better student engagement.

This constraint is a result of perceived control by either the school or the university. During the social uprising, PSTs were expected to conform to the school's norms without voicing concerns about injustice or irregularities. This conflicting expectation may have left PSTs in a confusing position, as they were urged to adopt a social justice identity in constrained and precarious contexts that they could not openly adopt in most cases. Although, in contexts where a political identity was embraced, it was proven meaningful to be used as a learning collaborative experience.

The study suggests that LTE programmes, often distant from the reality of disadvantaged schools, should adopt a more flexible approach involving the school community in co-creating a suitable language professional identity (Romero, 2022). The findings call for a rethinking of contextualised LTE programmes to better support PSTs in their professional identity transformation. Some recommendations include providing opportunities for PSTs to reflect on LTI dilemmas. During the practicum, recognising PSTs as professionals with agency can have a significant impact on their ability to construct a context-responsive LTI. Collaborative spaces involving researchers, teachers, and PSTs can help produce a more context-responsive framework, creating a more aligned local LTI.

Overall, this study contributes to understanding the complexity of PSTs' language identity transformation, highlighting

that the use of dilemmas can help in reflecting and understanding these complexities and serve as a tool for language teacher educators, teacher practitioners, and PSTs to reflect on their conceptualisation of good language teachers.

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*Dr Priscila Riffo-Salgado* is a Teaching Fellow in TESOL at the University of Leeds, UK. With broad experience in ELT teaching and training, her expertise encompasses language teacher education and inclusive education in ELT, focusing on preservice teachers' professional identity formation during practicum. With

a PhD in Education from the University of Southampton, and a RICELT board member, she is dedicated to advancing ELT research and discussions from Global South contexts.

p.a.riffosalgado@leeds.ac.uk

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