Teachers´ construction of their professional self-image while working in an autonomous learning setting.

Ana Milena Morales Sossa[1]
Luis Gabriel Díaz Luna[2]
Jairo Alberto Carrillo Carrillo[3]

Abstract

This article presents the results of a research project which aims at exploring teachers' narratives regarding the construction of their professional self-image whilst working in an autonomous learning setting. This study was conducted in a public university in Boyacá Colombia, with a sample of four full time teachers. The results of the study indicate that those who work in an autonomous learning setting construct their self-image throughout their professional lives; this process is the result of the impressions from their own teachers, their previous and current teaching experiences, and their expectations about the future. Likewise, the participants defined autonomy in accordance with their reality at the Language Institute as follows: Firstly, as a utopian possibility for teachers, due to the very restricted scope to propose, make choices and act freely in academic activities. Secondly, as a real happening, possible to occur in external contexts when conducting research and attending conferences.

Key words: Teachers' self-image, teachers' beliefs, teachers' identity, and teachers' autonomy.

Introduction

Teaching English in Colombia has been a challenge, since different policies have forced teachers to accomplish several aims to have a bilingual country. For this reason, many studies have been dedicated to students as well as learning processes, materials' design, ICT's in education, among some other topics. However, teachers' beliefs, perceptions, points of view, including their practices have been less explored.

This study was conducted at a Language Institute from a public university in Boyacá in 2015 with full four time teachers who voluntarily decided to be part of it, and who were reported with the

following pseudonyms chosen by them in order to protect their identity:

Participant 1: Rose
Participant 2: Freedom
Participant 3: Ghost
Participant 4: SSV

Through this project we wanted to describe how teachers construct their professional self-image when working in an autonomous learning setting, how they relate their own experience as students in the parameters they adopt today in their professional practices, how their past and present experiences have influenced their identity as teachers, and what they believe about teachers' autonomy since they are participants of an autonomous teaching environment.

The problematic area of this study was recognized through our own experiences when we, as English teachers, asked ourselves about our own self-image and also because it was easily detected that this concern was also inquired by some other colleagues through a constant question regarding "who we are". Having the problem of this study well established, it is evident that these findings will contribute to the local, national, and, international community of teacher-researchers who are interested in this topic.

Theoretical framework

The main theories reviewed to enlighten this study were directly related to teachers' self-image, teachers' beliefs, teachers' identity, and teachers' autonomy. These article contains only the essential approaches to these theories.

Teachers' self-image

Teachers' self-image involves a wide range of complex issues which help them construct who they are. To understand this, it is necessary to know what the self is. Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons (2006) conclude that the self could be conceived of as a singular, unified, and stable essence directly affected by the context or the biography. The self is also an unpredictable and more or less fragmented part of the identity which builds up the self of someone. The authors agree that the self could be understood from different approaches to different social experiences based on the particular part played by the individual. In short, Day et al (2006) consider the self as a fundamental core of how a person thinks about himself or herself. This process involves the different understandings people may have. In the case of the self of the participants of this study, and regarding the definitions proposed by Day et al (2006) the self depends on the roles developed by each teacher in the setting where they work.

Warin, Maddock, Pell, & Hargreaves, (2006) expand the concept about the construction of the self. For them, it is developed according to the individuals' biographical, historical, social, and situational issues. The self not only depends on those roles people play in the society, as Day et al (2006) mention, but it also integrates the influence of other "external" aspects such as different conditions of teachers' work and lives that contribute positively or negatively in the construction of the self.

Teachers' self-image has also been explored from the cognitive psychological point of view. William & Burden (1999) introduce the term of self-image as a branch of the self-concept. For them, self-image is the particular view that a person has about himself or herself. In the case of teachers, self-image is the view that teachers construct about themselves from all the personal

and professional experiences they may have. Considering this perspective, it could be said that teachers bring to teaching not only their personal biographies but also, as it was mentioned by Britzman (1986) in Weber & Mitchell (2004) teachers bring their institutional biographies, the cumulative experience of school lives. Those authors agree that all the experience teachers have, contributes to the sensible images of teachers' work, and serves as the frame of reference for future teachers' self-images. In short, the construction of the self-image that teachers have in an autonomous learning setting is based on their personal and professional experiences.

At the same time, five interrelated characteristics of the self, proposed by Kelchtermans (1993) were also taken into consideration:

- o Te*achers' self-image:* It refers to how teachers describe themselves as teachers through their career stories.
- o *Self-esteem:* The evolution of the self as a teacher, how good or otherwise could a teacher feel when he/she is defined by others.
- o *Job-motivation:* what makes teachers choose, remain committed to or leave their job.
- o *Task perception:* How teachers define their jobs.
- o *Further perspective:* Teachers' expectations for the future development of their jobs.

According to the different theories and concepts highlighted above, the "self" refers to the essence of the human being that has a positive or negative effect on each one depending on aspects

such as: biography, life experiences, social issues, the context where the person is, and the different situations that the person lives throughout time. Under this perspective, the self is considered as a scope which encloses different elements of the human being, not only based on his/her role in the society. Self-image is a branch of this scope.

Towards a definition of teachers' beliefs

One point of departure to approach the constructs about beliefs was stablished by Pepitone (1994) in Shek (2004) who indicates that "beliefs are concepts about the nature, the causes, and the consequences of things; persons, events, and processes" and the social constructions that are part of a culture. On the other hand, Quintana (2001) defines beliefs as the group of meta-empiric realities and the idea that a single person or a group of people accept, recognize, and affirm something as a principle to think and do.

Considering this perspective, beliefs can be built in a personal or social way. Personal beliefs consist of those each human being has along his/her life which can be transformed. Social beliefs are those presented in small or big groups of people that can influence personal beliefs. Nevertheless, Shek (2004) states that personal beliefs; especially those about culture and about the future, are related to resilience. It refers to the capacity human beings have to be adapted to the culture and the adaptation we have in order to constantly imagine our own future.

At the same time, López (2006) also defines teachers' beliefs such as the interpretation and the values about the world we assimilate and we make part of our daily life. In other words, beliefs are the judgments we accept that could be transformed according to our professional practices.

On the other hand, Kindsvatter, Willen, and Ishler (1988) in Richards and Lockhart (2007) declare that beliefs emerge from a system built up over the time and consist of both subjective and objective dimensions that are derived from the following sources:

1. *Teachers' own experience as language learners*
2. *Experience of what works best*
3. *Established practice*
4. *Personality factors*
5. *Educationally based or research principle*
6. *Principle derived from an approach or method*

Pajares (1992) affirms that since defining beliefs from the Educational psychology is something complicated, the term belief is defined as a game of players' choice, because beliefs pass through an alias. In most of the cases beliefs wear a mask that could be called: perceptions, ideology, strategies, perspectives, and experiences, among others, depending on the discipline interested in studying beliefs.

Having all these definitions in mind, then, we asked ourselves about the differences between beliefs and knowledge, because those two words were apparently similar to us. Quintana (2001) mentions that beliefs usually emerge as the result of education or knowledge, other beliefs come from personal experiences, and few of them emerge from impositions. Richards and Lockhart (2007) argue that 'what teachers do is a reflection of what they do and believe'.

To sum up, beliefs in this article refer to the assumptions, theories, principles, ideas, knowledge, and thoughts that teachers consider in their professional practices and which force them to act and behave in a certain way.

Teachers' identity

Having in mind the definition about beliefs, and the assertion proposed by Posada & Patino (2007) when they affirm that teaching is a social practice in which people's behavior depends on their beliefs, it is important to inquiry about teachers' identities.

According to Mayer (1999) in Walkington (2005) Teachers' identity is a personal issue based on those beliefs teachers hold about teaching and being a teacher. In other words, teachers' identities deal with all the factors that involve a teacher. This assertion leads to ask what the relationship among identity and self-image is.

As a reference point to elucidate this inquiry Cooley (1992) in C. Day et al (2006) highlights how people construct their sense of self departing from the basics of identity. For this author, identity means making a pattern of experiences through the time; he says that identity is the description of patterns that are frequently associated to the behavior. These patterns are developed according to individuals' biographical, historical, social and situational construction of the self. Other form of describing identity, according to him, refers to the way people copy models from others; those models could be from the past, the present and even the future.

For the purpose of this study, identity was considered as the models teachers adopt based on life stories they have lived along their lives. This definition also agrees with Warin et al (2006) who states that the construction and integration of personal and professional identities embark on teachers' professional lives, and practices.

Another inquiry emerged by exploring the issue of discussion is the place where teachers' identity

emerged from. As Cooley (1992) in C. Day et al (2006) concludes that the nature of identity goes through the continuous reflection teachers have. He explains through a metaphor, that teachers' identity should be understood from the diverse range of mirrors in which teachers find themselves reflected. He considers that government, pupils, colleagues, and media have idealized the ever changing images of teachers' professional identities which may compete with teachers' personal selves, and which may therefore reflect distorted self-images. Those changing images generate a need for reflection.

From the assertion mentioned before, it should be clarified that each human being holds an identity that comes out along individuals' lives, this identity changes consistent with experiences and it is influenced by everything around. Teachers' identity is influenced not only due to personal identity but it is also built up every single day by teachers' beliefs and the setting where they work. It results very interesting to know what kind of mirror teachers who work in an autonomous learning setting look at and what images are captured in their minds to construct their self-image as teachers in this work setting.

Autonomy and teachers' autonomy

Understanding teachers' autonomy involves the perceptions teachers have about themselves both: as professionals and as human beings; the comprised perceptions they and others have about teachers in and outside the classroom setting. Under this assumption, it can be said that roles and autonomy are, among others, salient aspects to be considered when researching about teachers' self-image.

For decades there has been a changing idea about the teachers' functions and, responsibilities in and outside the classroom. Those different changes in teachers' roles and behaviors have affected teachers' beliefs and identities, and evidently their professional self-image. Some years ago, teachers were considered as those who owned all universal knowledge and were able to transmit the truth, for some other teacher-researchers, they were considered just as knowledge transmitters, this idea about changes in teachers' roles was also mentioned by some authors Ariza (2007) and Freire (2004). Nowadays, we, as English teachers, face different roles which have also determined the way we are addressed. That is why some people call us tutors, guides, advisors, among others. Most of these concepts have been drawn from a view of teachers in relation to students, which is undoubtedly of paramount importance, but, at the same time, it is not enough to account for teachers' image, owing to the fact that there are other individual matters underlying the self of teachers.

Towards an understanding of autonomy

Different debates have been done throughout time in regard to autonomy; that is why there are a lot of positions to define it. Benson (2001) points out that autonomy is the capacity to take control over one's learning, Little (2001) considers autonomy like a conscious intention done by means of abilities learnt and applied in a setting, Posada (2006) asserts that autonomy is an attitude which involves a series of characteristics identified on learners.

On the other hand, teachers' autonomy has been defined by Luna & Sanchez (2005) as an essential condition for the development of learners'

autonomy. In this sense, an autonomous teacher is the one who helps students discover learning strategies, and someone who helps their students become risk-takers. Fandino (2009) affirms that teachers' autonomy should not be considered as a modern suggestion that promotes teachers' development, research, etc. He considers that teachers' autonomy is a relatively new initiative which aims at developing autonomy through reflective teacher-learning based on critical reflections on where, when, how, and from what sources teachers learn. This autonomy is well reflected when teachers learn by themselves, when they use action research and reflective teacher-learning as a methodology to develop the capacity to see their own work in introspection, to build up valid reports of their educational development and, to foster learners' autonomy.

On the other hand, Usma and Correa (2009) highlight that teachers' autonomy should be seen as the capacity teachers have to take control of curriculum, evaluation, professional development, and the functioning of the institution where they work.

Teachers' autonomy at the language Institute is regarded in two ways: First, the panorama about autonomy in the classroom is very restricted for teachers. As it was quoted by Ramos (2008) in environments that promote autonomous learning, teachers are passive agents in students' learning process; one of the roles teachers have at the institute is working with individual or peer tutorials, where teachers listen and advice students only for eight minutes per meeting. During those eight minutes, teachers cannot develop any different task to help students in their learning process, other than listening to approve or disapprove oral reports done by students.

Secondly, teachers' autonomy refers to the opportunities teachers have outside the classroom in order to conduct research and to share their experiences with the EFL community. This issue is called autonomy outside the classroom.

Data collection

This is a qualitative case study due to the fact that it is not focused on fixing results, but on the contrary, it is focused on interpreting findings. The research described useful grounded information which permitted to describe the way in which teachers working in an autonomous setting construct their self-image. According to Bell (1993) a qualitative perspective is concerned about understanding individuals' perceptions of the world. At the same time, Merriam (1991) concluded that this perspective establishes particular characteristics for qualitative research, case study, such as: It is concerned with process rather than outcomes or products, it is interested in meaning, the role of the researcher is being the primary instrument for data collection, analysis, and also, she/he is involved in fieldwork. Burns (1999) proposes that a qualitative approach offers descriptions, interpretations, and, clarifications of naturalistic social contexts and typically involves a small number of research contexts or subjects.

In addition, Bell (1993) says that a case study is definitely appropriate for individual researches because it permits to study in depth a specific instance or situation and to identify the various processes at work within a limited time scale. In this sense, this paper attempts to provide a description and an explanation in a grounded approach about different aspects teachers encompass to construct their professional self-image asthey participate in an autonomous

learning setting by means of using interviews, questionnaires, and diaries.

Analysis of findings

The process of data analysis followed the grounded approach proposed by Freeman (1998) where categories emerge from common patterns and any previous category was taken into account. At the same time, this approach followed the next steps: naming, grouping, finding relations, and displaying the basic elements of the data.

The following chart summarizes the categories grounded based on the questions proposed:

Research question	Main Categories
What do teachers ' narratives reveal about teachers' construction of their professional self-image while working in an autonomous learning setting?	Shaping the self-image
Sub-questions	**Sub-categories**
To what extent different teaching experiences influence teachers' self-image construction wh ile working in an autonomous learning setting?	I do therefore I am.
To what extent was teachers' self-image built by impressions from others throughout time?	I am the mirror of my teachers
How do teachers perceive themselves as participants of an autonomous teaching experience?	I hold forth on autonomy.

Figure 1

Core category and sub-categories that emerged from the data analysis.

Shaping the self-image

The first category responds to the research question: what do teachers' narratives reveal about teachers' construction of their professional self-image while working in an autonomous learning setting?

This category was metaphorically called: "shaping the self-image" based on two important issues. On one hand, as it was already discussed in the theoretical framework, all of us hold a specific self-image. We, as human beings are not born with this self-image; on the contrary, this self-image is constructed through an unconscious process resulting from the combination of experiences we have as individuals. On the second hand, all participants agree that childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are certainly important stages in the process of recognition of ourselves as unique human beings, but our profession definitely traces a path which changes our lives and the image we hold of ourselves.

This core category evidences how there is a strong connection among the participants' description of their self-image as human beings and the description they make to illustrate how they perceive themselves as teachers. From the characteristics proposed by Kelchtermans (1993), teachers' self-image refers to how teachers describe themselves as teachers in their professional life. The next piece of information revealed Rose's own perceptions about herself in both senses: as a teacher and as human being.

> …*I perceive myself as a kind person, I am sociable, I like to be surrounded by friends. I do not like loneliness; I need a lot of company.* (interview lines 8-10)

> *"When students meet me they say I am a kind of teacher... what happens is that probably my appearance is a bit serious, therefore, when they talk to me and when they start knowing who I am they realize I am not serious. I think students have a good image of me and it gives me a lot of satisfaction* (Rose Diary)

Rose considered herself as a kind person and she firmly believed her students considered she was kind too, in her role as teacher. She felt satisfaction because she could be with students as kind as she behaved with friends, for that reason, she considered she had a positive image with her students. The same pattern was observed with Freedom. She showed how influenced is her self-image as teacher by the image she had as a person. She conferred the following description:

> *"I perceive myself such as a person of trust. I am pleasant, sociable, and engaged with what I do.* (interview. Lines: 168 -169)

From the samples given before, it could be said that defining ourselves is not simple, for teachers it took some time to think of the appropriate words that matched what they thought about themselves and what they did. At the same time, it was noticeable that teachers perceive themselves as professionals according to what they think about themselves as human beings. This assertion was also mentioned by Keltchermans (1993) when he displayed the five interrelated parts of the self of teachers proposed in the theoretical framework of this work. There, it was explained that teachers' self-image is like a frame where they enclose what they are, in other words, part of this frame is the teachers' self-image, which emerges from the self

and encapsulates experiences, beliefs, thoughts, feelings, among others, from inner self and social self.

I do therefore I am

This sub-category expressed in a metaphor symbolizes how the actions we take as teachers in our setting reflect what we are, not only as professionals, but also as human beings. This name emerged because, as it was mentioned by Moreno (2007) "we believe not because we think we do, but because we act according to what we believe". The name of this category was inspired throughout this research because it was commonly observed how teachers' beliefs and their belief systems have been changing because of different teachers' experiences. Moving from one place to another, working with different populations, meeting new people, adopting new methodologies, interacting with kids, adolescents, and adults, among others; are experiences that have definitely impacted the lives of the participants of this study.

We, as human beings, are a compound of life experiences and stories, and the only way to let those stories be known, is going back to earlier periods, doing retrospection and remembering past events. We asked teachers in the journals to write in a detailed way, a memorable experience they remembered about their professional life. The same question was paraphrased and asked again after ten weeks in a questionnaire. The idea of knowing past experiences from teachers was very important in this study, because the philosophy of teaching started to be intertwined there. In both, the questionnaire and one prompt developed in the journal, teachers went back to the first years of experience and they mentioned different events they had at the moment they

started working. Knowing teachers' experiences is important also because trough those experiences we can recognize to what extend different events in teachers' lives influence the construction of their self-image. Here there are some examples:

> English equivalent: *"The first year of experience I believed students should have well English level, then I realized it was not so and I developed many activities such as Christmas carols and celebrations such as Halloween, song festivals, etc. to help my students improve their level".* (Journal, entry # 1 Ghost)
> SSV said: "*A memorable teaching experience was with a medicine students' group. Classes were dynamic because I brought videos and listening activities".* (Sample from the questionnaire #1)

Participants mentioned how in those first years of work their beliefs were focused on how as novice teachers, they tended to assume that their students had the same level of English they had, when they realized this situation was no like that, they took different actions. In one hand, they mentioned how working in a dynamic way was important for them as well as integrating materials and activities to promote English. To continue exploring beliefs emerged in different experiences from teachers who work in an autonomous learning setting, narratives illustrated how teachers' beliefs changed over time.

> *"Thanks to my experience I have built my own philosophy that is not radical, obviously with time, reflection, and study it has been changing".* (Journal, entry # 2)
> *"All of us are different. I do some many similar things to my professors but with my*

own style and ways of approaching the topic". (Sample from the questionnaire # 1)

Regarding the philosophy of teaching, Moreno (2007) highlights that it involves the teachers' beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning. Data gathered among teachers proved that there were meaningful insights into the nature of teachers who work in an autonomous learning setting according to the experiences they may have had during their professional lives.

Every single teacher possesses a philosophy of teaching which emerged from personal beliefs and that also contributes to shape the self-image. We inquired about those beliefs that appeared on the teachers who work in an autonomous learning setting the first time they faced the educative model in a setting such as the Institute, and how the experiences of moving from a more "conventional" educational system to another, influenced the teaching philosophy and the belief systems of teachers. Two different entries from a journal revealed the following clippings:

> *"My arrival to the university was interesting, I found valuable things in the methodology but I also found frustrating things. At the beginning it was not comfortable to make efforts for not to teach but I understood and I understand the importance of autonomy".* (Journal, entry # 2 Freedom)
> *"At the beginning it was frustrating when you had to listen to a student who has a lot of problems of pronunciation or grammar and you feel that there was no time to make clarifications".* (Journal entry # 3 Freedom)

The description provided by this participant showed how affective beliefs emerged since she felt frustration towards the fact that this participant considered she was no teaching under this methodology. Once again after affective beliefs, behavioral beliefs emerged. The following clippings confirmed this assertion that was established along this sub-category and was proposed by Richards and Lockhart (2007):

> *"Even if the Institute seeks that the students learn from their own with little contact with the teacher I look for alternatives to guide them".* (Journal, entry # 2 Freedom)
> *"In the place where I currently work I feel that I am the repeater of a methodology someone created for me, nevertheless, I try to show other useful aids for my students".* (Sample from questionnaire # 1 Ghost)

A teacher who looks for strategies to guide students in the process of learning assumes, because of previous practices, that those strategies work better than any others. In the belief systems of teachers who work at the language Institute beliefs about "Experience of what works best" are essential to approach the new methodology, samples provided by Ghost and Freedom in the previous page confirm this declaration.

On the other hand, teachers show how their belief systems are affected by their daily practices and the feelings teachers face by repeating the same tasks every day. "*Established practices*" is the name of another source of the belief systems evidenced by participants in this study as follows:

> *"I would like to have my own groups and to have the autonomy to do whatever I want rather than to always follow the same*

rules and activities". (Sample from questionnaire # 2 Rose)

"I believe that time after time we become alienated to what others do or do not do, we stay into the four walls and just work on the topics proposed, we do not get involved in activities that make the interaction among teachers and students possible". (Journal, entry # 2 Ghost)

Comments from teachers working in an autonomous learning setting presented two different perspectives that affected their initial beliefs which were redundant in the construction of their self-image. Firstly, they mentioned pessimistic impressions about the work at the institute. Secondly, they manifested they were adapted to that work; evidences are provided by two participants in the following clipping:

"I believe that at the moment I adjust myself with the activities conducted at the Institute and to the methodology". (Journal, entry # 1 Freedom)

English equivalent: *"I am familiarized with the model and its comprehension. The main goal is that the model works and produces new learning proposals applicable in different contexts"*. (Journal, entry # 4 Rose)

The extract displayed before presents the participants' assertions about the process of adaptation, Bolívar, A. Gallego, M. León, M. & Pérez, P. (2005) called this phenomenon recognized identity but in crisis. This fact, describes teachers who try to build up a professional identity in the process of reconversion.

I am the mirror of my teachers

The second sub-category was called: "I am the mirror of my teachers" because participants divulged insights about what they were as teachers according to the kind of teachers they had as pupils and the models they copied from others to teach today. William and Burden (1999) proposed that we are influenced to compare ourselves with others. At the same time, it is necessary to consider that teachers' identity not only deals with personal identity but it also includes the beliefs previously established in this data analysis to shape their self-image. Simultaneously, this sub-category is derived from the core category and answers the question: To what extent was teachers' self-image built by impressions from others throughout time?

Participants in this research coincided in saying that becoming a teacher was a decision taken from a close image of teaching, in this case, all the participants had father, mother or both who worked or are working as teachers, for that reason, parental influences were considered in this research to be one of the main causes when making that decision. In an interview, the following comments were done by Ghost:

R: *Why did you decide to become a teacher?*
Ghost: *"Many times I have addressed the same question. I have concluded that in my particular case it was born from my mother who was one of first educators at Sutatenza broadcasting here in Boyacá. She could not continue working as a teacher so she became frustrated and she transmitted to us the same frustration. I think that 8 from 6 siblings are teachers… my father was good enough that people looked for him to become the teacher, at*

that time he worked with 100 children from different places''. (interview, lines: 273-288)

This participant illustrated how she received an influence from a parental image to make the decision of becoming a teacher; her first image of a teacher was her mother, then her father, and that image was transmitted to her since she was a child, for that reason she said metaphorically "being a teacher is something genetic". Another important finding concerning being a teacher emerged from the image held by SSV when she was a student.

English equivalent*: "I decided to become a teacher because of a teacher I had who exempted me of the exams due to the good image she had of me as student rather than the knowledge I really had about English''.* (Interview, lines: 445-447)

The participant considered important not only the image a student holds of a teacher but also, in her particular case, she mentioned how important and meaningful the image teachers hold from their students was. Another form of describing identity according to Cooley (1992) in C. Day et al (2006) is the way people copy or integrate models from others to construct their own self-image. At this point, Rose commented the following:

"My first years of experience were based on the way I learnt at the University. It happens that in the way that a person learns or in the way that someone teaches you, has a lot to do with how you want others to learn". (Journal, entry # 2)

From this sample it could be concluded that in the teachers' construction of their self-image teachers' own experiences as pupils was definitively

important. The process of identification agrees with Castellanos (2005) she says that the more we see other people as being like ourselves, or the more significant a part that people plays in our lives is, the more likely we are to compare ourselves with them. This second sub-category called: "I am the mirror of my teachers", emerged from a reflection about identity that allowed participants not only to go back in time and remember those experiences that stamped on them, the criterions to teach in a certain way, but also, it was a reflection that went beyond the lives of teachers as pupils and explored biographical and historical events which directly influenced the construction of their self-image.

I hold forth on autonomy

The last sub-category was called: "I hold forth on autonomy" because data suggested along the process of analysis that participants had their own concepts about the role they carried out at the languages institute, also they had their own beliefs about the setting, and from those reflections, they had their own understanding of autonomy. This sub-category responds to the last sub-question: "how do in-service teachers perceive themselves as participants of an autonomous teaching environment". Here are some examples:

"The autonomous learning environment is favorable for students, students can be autonomous, and it is a restricted or controlled learning. I would like to have more freedom to do what I want but I cannot because the Institute is a system and you have to adapt yourself to it". (Interview, lines: 138-144 Rose)

"At the institute there is not enough freedom because the institute is a system

already organized with its own goals. If the system is already established, we have to follow the rules and the parameters proposed there because you have to fulfill its purposes. I do not feel there is a professional freedom at the hundred per cent, there is not. (Interview, sample: 362-268 Ghost)

Rose considered that the learning environment proposed at the Language Institute was good enough for students because they could be autonomous in the way they developed their tasks. On the other hand, Ghost agreed with Rose in the sense that there was no freedom for teachers to develop diverse activities with students. For both participants, the teacher was the one who followed rules and parameters in a system. They did not consider teachers were totally free. At the same time, they were conscious they had to adapt themselves to a system someone prepared for them without listening to their voices, for that reason, they did not feel professional freedom as teachers.

The view of teacher autonomy highlighted before, differs a lot from what Usma & Orrego (2009) proposed. Those researchers understand autonomy as a process of decision making to adapt contents, methodologies, and evaluation, to respond to the students' needs. Teachers cannot propose or alter the regulations already established in this setting even if those teachers realized about different students' expectations, desires, or interests for learning a foreign language.

Moreover, teachers saw their role as teachers from two different sides, as quoted by Ramos (2008) and reported on section three of this document: a

passive role that teachers develop into the language institute, and an active role which is developed outside the institute. The following clippings provided by Rose and Freedom supported this assertion as follows:

"There are two roles, a passive one in terms of counseling to the students because they are who came and look for advise as well as to take oral or written tests. We are not into the classroom, in front of students like in the traditional courses, we do not plan classes but we have an active role because we are always busy, each of us works on their tasks: Diploma courses, research, and extension courses". (Journal, entry # 4 Rose)

"At the Institute I do not plan the classes, I get informed about the materials and I check the listening tests proposed on each one of the units". (journal, entry # 4 Freedom)

"From those activities (Development of virtual courses, research, diploma courses outside the Institute, among others) I can say that I enjoy them a lot, those activities encourage me to continue doing activities in the virtual platform that generate new learning expectations at those currently developed". (Journal, entry # 3 SSV).

From this perspective, it could be said that teachers who work under the autonomous learning paradigm at the institute of languages divided their daily routine in two: a traditional position in which teachers only adapt themselves to follow a system, and another extremely different in which those teachers who adapt

themselves to a system are active and conduct research, share their experiences create virtual courses, and develop different activities that can be developed at the institute or outside but those activities cannot go beyond the already established system. According to Cardenas (2006) teachers' autonomy is the capacity for self-directed teachers-learning professional development as one of the main sources of personal and professional satisfaction. From the narratives collected, teachers expressed that they did many different activities outside the Institute that helped them to see their work different but those activities never changed their practices in this setting due to the rules prepared for them, those they had to assume.

On the other hand, Fandino (2009) asserts that if teachers cannot develop activities to promote reflection in what they do, they cannot see their own work in introspection, they cannot build suitable reports of their educational development and, finally, they cannot foster learners' autonomy. From those assertions, it could be understood that if teachers do not develop teachers' autonomy in the setting where they work, difficultly, those teachers will contribute to help students to become autonomous. In other words, if teachers do not experiment autonomy by being autonomous themselves, then, the term autonomous learning will be complex to understand and it will be difficult to approach it as well.

Conclusions

This research revealed that the construction of the teachers' self-image is a process built up of different components that make part of the self. For this reason; the main category that grounded

this study, was named "shaping the self-image". This category embodies individuals' biographical, historical, social, professional and situational issues, unveiled from relevant narratives depicted by the participants.

The sub-category "I do therefore I am" disclosed the finding that in the construction of the self-image, teachers create a philosophy of teaching along their professional lives. This philosophy changes a lot when teachers, who were used to develop their classes in a conventional model, arrive to the Institute and go through process of adaptation to the new setting where they cannot propose changes or transformations owing to this is the way to keep the system working. As a result, teachers alter their philosophy of teaching which is always there but cannot be part of what they do with the new grounded in the restricted setting.

The second sub-category called "I am the mirror of my teachers", reveals that teachers' self-image construction has been influenced by the participants' teachers when they were pupils, by their own previous and current teaching experiences, and by a strong parental influence in the decision teachers who work at the language institute made to become teachers due to the fact that one of their parents was a teacher. Even though, their own experience as pupils was definitely of crucial importance in the construction of the professional image they have today.

The last sub-category called: "I hold forth on autonomy", bears from one hand, the participants' concept about autonomy that in sum entails freedom to make decisions in their role as teachers. On the other hand, the two ways they regarded teachers' autonomy at the language

Institute. First, as a utopian possibility for teachers, due to the very restricted scope to propose, make choices and act autonomously in academic activities with students. Secondly, as a real happening, possible to occur outside when they conduct research projects and attend to conferences selected and assumed by them, which unfortunately because of the system of the institute, could hardly be implemented there. What the participants voiced in their narratives gave a sense of mismatch between their concept of autonomy and the way they exert it in the setting they work, and leads to assert that they have restricted teachers' autonomy.

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