



Project-based pedagogy and teacher identity in the Escuelas Populares de Inglés case

La pedagogía basada en proyectos y la identidad docente en el caso de las Escuelas Populares de Inglés

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Joselyn Aracely De La Cruz De La Cruz^{1*}

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4590-6315>

Marcia Janeth Chiluisa Chiluisa²

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3968-0977>

1. Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi; Pujilí, Ecuador.
2. Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi; Pujilí, Ecuador.

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***Correspondencia autor:** joselyn.de418o@utc.edu.ec

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes how pre-service language teachers construct and negotiate professional identity through sustained community-based project pedagogy in initial teacher education. Although teacher identity has been widely examined from sociocultural perspectives, less attention has been paid to the formative role of institutional outreach projects in Latin American contexts. A qualitative multi-site design was adopted, based on a two-year systematization of pedagogical experiences in selected universities from Cuba, Ecuador, and Peru. The sample comprised 140 pre-service language teachers, including 45 Ecuadorian participants linked to the Escuelas Populares de Inglés project at Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi. Data sources included reflective writings, pedagogical artifacts, field notes, institutional documents, and analytic memos. Thematic analysis showed that project-based environments mediated identity formation through professional positioning, pedagogical agency, multilingual resource use, reflective practice, and situated participation. The Ecuadorian case showed that community engagement strengthened identity construction by connecting English teaching with local educational needs, collaborative planning, didactic resource design, and social responsibility. The study concludes that community-based project pedagogy can support teacher education when it integrates methodological preparation, reflection, and socially meaningful pedagogical action.

Keywords: Teacher identity, Pre-service teachers, Project-based pedagogy, Community engagement, Teacher education.

RESUMEN

Pedagogía basada en proyectos e identidad docente en el caso Escuelas Populares de Inglés. Este estudio analiza cómo los docentes de lenguas en formación construyen y negocian su identidad profesional mediante una pedagogía sostenida de proyectos con orientación comunitaria. Aunque la identidad docente ha sido estudiada desde enfoques socioculturales, existe menor atención al papel formativo de los proyectos institucionales de vinculación en contextos latinoamericanos. Se adoptó un diseño cualitativo multisede, basado en una sistematización de experiencias pedagógicas desarrollada durante dos años en universidades seleccionadas de Cuba, Ecuador y Perú. La muestra estuvo compuesta por 140 docentes de lenguas en formación, incluidos 45 participantes ecuatorianos vinculados al proyecto Escuelas Populares de Inglés de la Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi. Las fuentes incluyeron escritos reflexivos, artefactos pedagógicos, notas de campo, documentos institucionales y memorandos analíticos. El análisis temático mostró que los entornos basados en proyectos mediaron la formación identitaria mediante posicionamiento profesional, agencia pedagógica, uso de recursos multilingües, práctica reflexiva y participación situada. El caso ecuatoriano evidenció que la vinculación comunitaria fortaleció la identidad al conectar la enseñanza del inglés con necesidades educativas locales, planificación colaborativa, diseño de recursos didácticos y responsabilidad social.

Palabras clave: Identidad docente, Docentes en formación, Pedagogía basada en proyectos, Vinculación comunitaria, Formación docente.



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Introduction

Teacher identity has become a central construct in language education because becoming a teacher involves more than acquiring methods, linguistic knowledge, or classroom techniques. It also implies constructing a professional self in relation to institutional expectations, learners, communities, language ideologies, and personal histories. In language teaching, this process is especially complex because language is connected with culture, power, legitimacy, and social participation (Norton, 2013; Varghese et al., 2005).

Sociocultural perspectives have contributed to this debate by understanding professional identity as dynamic, relational, and situated. From this standpoint, identity emerges through participation in practices, relationships, and communities where future teachers interpret what teaching means and how they can position themselves as legitimate professionals (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Initial teacher education therefore constitutes a formative space in which pre-service teachers negotiate agency, belonging, and imagined professional futures.

Recent studies have shown that teacher identity is influenced by reflection, practicum experiences, disruptions, institutional discourses, and opportunities for professional agency (Farrell, 2019; Yuan & Lee, 2021; Zhang & Hwang, 2023). However, identity research remains geographically uneven. A considerable part of the literature has been produced in North American, European, and Asian contexts, while Latin American teacher education remains less visible in international discussions (Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). This imbalance matters because identity is strongly shaped by local institutional cultures, language hierarchies, educational policies, and social expectations.

Another relevant gap concerns the role of pedagogical design in identity formation. Project-based learning and other practice-oriented pedagogies can create spa-

ces where pre-service teachers make decisions, collaborate, reflect, and respond to authentic situations. These experiences may support professional identity development because they allow future teachers to move from simulated learning tasks toward situated pedagogical action (Tsybulsky & Muchnik-Rozanov, 2023). Nevertheless, further empirical work is needed to explain how sustained project work mediates identity negotiation, particularly when projects are connected with community engagement and social responsibility.

In Ecuadorian higher education, university-community engagement provides a significant institutional framework for linking academic preparation with local educational needs. Within this setting, the Escuelas Populares de Inglés project, developed at Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi through the Career of Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages, offers a relevant case. The project seeks to strengthen English learning opportunities in urban and rural communities of Latacunga and Pujilí while involving pre-service English teachers in diagnosis, collaborative planning, didactic resource design, situated teaching, and reflective practice.

This study aims to analyze how project-based pedagogies mediate the construction of professional identity among pre-service language teachers in Latin American teacher education contexts, with particular emphasis on the Ecuadorian experience of Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi. The study asks how future language teachers construct their professional identities through project-based work, what tensions and resources emerge during these experiences, and how reflective, collaborative, and community-oriented practices mediate their positioning as future English teachers.

Materials and methods

The study adopted a qualitative multi-site design informed by a systematization-of-experiences approach. This design was selected because professional identity is understood

as a dynamic and contextually mediated process that cannot be reduced to isolated variables. Systematization made it possible to reconstruct, interpret, and theorize pedagogical experiences developed over time, linking participants' meaning-making with the institutional and community conditions in which project work occurred.

The research was based on a two-year systematization of project-based pedagogical experiences developed in selected universities from Cuba, Ecuador, and Peru. The multi-site perspective allowed the study to identify shared and context-specific patterns in language teacher identity construction. Within this regional frame, the Ecuadorian case of Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi received particular analytical attention because of its connection with the Escuelas Populares de Inglés project and its institutional orientation toward university-community engagement.

The sample comprised 140 pre-service language teachers. Sixty participants were from Cuba, 45 from Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi in Ecuador, and 35 from Peru. Participants were enrolled in language teacher education programs and participated in structured project-based pedagogical activities as part of their professional preparation. In the Ecuadorian case, the 45 participants were pre-service English teachers whose experiences were associated with activities aligned with community diagnosis, collaborative lesson planning, resource design, implementation of English learning activities, and reflective analysis.

Data sources were selected to allow triangulation and to capture identity construction from complementary perspectives. They included student project reports and pedagogical artifacts, reflective writings, field notes from implementation processes, institutional documents related to project-based and community-oriented teacher education, documents from the Escuelas Populares de Inglés project, and researcher analytic

memos. These sources made it possible to connect observable pedagogical practices with participants' interpretations of their roles as future teachers.

Data were examined through qualitative thematic analysis informed by sociocultural and identity-oriented frameworks. The analysis followed an iterative and abductive process that moved between data and theory. First, all materials were repeatedly reviewed to gain a general understanding of participants' experiences. Second, open coding identified instances of identity positioning, agency, tensions, reflective meaning-making, language use, and community-oriented teaching. Third, thematic categories were developed across participants and sites. Fourth, the Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi case was analyzed in greater depth to understand how the institutional outreach project mediated identity construction.

Analytical credibility was strengthened through triangulation across data sources, comparison of codes across sites, reflexive memo writing, and review of emerging themes against the original materials. The researcher adopted a participant-observer position in the pedagogical processes under study; therefore, reflexive notes were used to monitor interpretive decisions and make the analysis more transparent. Ethical procedures followed standards for educational research. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and identifying information was removed from reflective writings, pedagogical artifacts, and field notes. Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi is named because it constitutes the formal institutional context of the focal project.

Results and discussion

Identity negotiation across institutional expectations

The first theme shows that becoming a language teacher involved continuous negotiation between personal beliefs and institutio-

nally defined expectations. Participants did not describe identity as a stable role acquired at the end of training. Instead, they presented it as a process of interpreting curricular demands, evaluation criteria, professional discourses, and community-based pedagogical responsibilities. One Ecuadorian participant stated that being a teacher was initially associated with explaining grammar, but project work revealed expectations related to facilitation, research, and guidance.

This finding supports sociocultural views of identity as positioning within social practices (Wenger, 1998; Kayi-Aydar, 2015). In the Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi case, this negotiation became more visible because the Escuelas Populares de Inglés project required students to move beyond conventional learner roles. They had to diagnose community needs, plan lessons, design didactic resources, teach in situated contexts, and reflect on the social meaning of English education. Identity work therefore emerged through the tension between imagined professional selves and real pedagogical responsibilities.

Project work as a space for pedagogical agency

The second theme concerns the development of agency. Across the Cuban, Ecuadorian, and Peruvian cases, participants described project work as a space where they could make instructional decisions, adapt plans, and respond to learners' needs. Agency appeared not as unrestricted autonomy but as situated decision-making within institutional conditions. Participants frequently referred to teacher supervision, curricular requirements, and classroom realities, showing that agency was relational and negotiated.

This result is consistent with research that understands agency as socially mediated rather than purely individual (Darvin & Norton, 2021). In the Ecuadorian focal case, agency was linked to community-based action. Pre-service teachers interpreted learners' needs, selected methodological

strategies, adapted materials, and responded to urban and rural educational realities. Through Escuelas Populares de Inglés, agency became a formative experience because it required students to connect methodological knowledge with responsible pedagogical action.

Community engagement and professional positioning

The Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi case provided a particularly relevant example of identity construction through community engagement. Unlike conventional classroom simulations, the project placed pre-service teachers in direct contact with communities where access to English learning opportunities was limited. This contact allowed participants to experience teaching as a socially situated practice rather than only a technical activity.

Through diagnostic activities, students identified learning needs; through collaborative planning, they designed context-sensitive strategies; and through implementation, they confronted the responsibilities associated with being future English teachers. The project therefore worked as a mediational space where university expectations, community realities, and professional self-understanding interacted. This extends prior work on project-based learning by showing that pedagogical projects can mediate not only content learning but also identity formation (Tsybulsky & Muchnik-Rozanov, 2023).

Multilingual repertoires as identity resources

A fourth theme shows that multilingual repertoires were not merely instructional tools. Participants gradually began to understand their linguistic histories and their strategic use of Spanish and English as resources for professional meaning-making. Some accounts showed a shift from seeing the first language as interference to recognizing it as pedagogically valuable when used according to learners' needs.

This finding resonates with research on investment, identity, and multilingual resources (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Banegas, 2024). In the Ecuadorian case, flexible language use became part of professional reasoning because community-based teaching required attention to learners' previous knowledge, confidence, and communicative possibilities. Professional legitimacy was therefore not equated with target-language exclusivity, but with the capacity to make informed pedagogical decisions in context.

Reflection and temporal development of identity

The two-year systematization showed that identity development was uneven and recursive. Early reflections frequently expressed uncertainty and self-doubt, whereas later accounts showed greater confidence and pedagogical intentionality. One participant moved from stating that they did not yet feel like a teacher to later describing themselves as capable of designing meaningful learning experiences. This shift illustrates how identity was reconstructed through repeated participation, reflection, and interaction.

The findings contribute to language teacher identity research by showing that project-based environments can act as structured spaces for positioning, agency, reflection, and professional meaning-making. They also suggest that community outreach projects may be especially powerful when they articulate academic preparation with social responsibility. In this sense, the Escuelas Populares de Inglés project operated simultaneously as community service, English language education, and professional formation. Teacher education programs may therefore benefit from treating identity development as an explicit pedagogical objective rather than as an incidental outcome of training.

The study also has limitations. Although the design included several Latin American sites, the findings are context-sensitive and should not be interpreted as statistically ge-

neralizable. The focal emphasis on Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi provides analytical depth, but it also means that other Ecuadorian or regional experiences may show different institutional dynamics. Future research could follow participants into their first years of teaching to examine whether the identity trajectories observed during project work are sustained, transformed, or weakened in formal school contexts.

Conclusions

1. Project-based pedagogy mediated professional identity formation by creating sustained spaces for participation, reflection, positioning, and pedagogical decision-making among pre-service language teachers.
2. The Escuelas Populares de Inglés case showed that community engagement strengthened identity construction by connecting English teacher education with local educational needs, collaborative planning, didactic resource design, and social responsibility.
3. Pedagogical agency emerged as a situated and relational process, shaped by institutional expectations, learner needs, teacher supervision, and the demands of community-based teaching.
4. Multilingual repertoires functioned as identity resources because participants learned to interpret strategic language use as part of professional judgment rather than as a limitation of English teaching.
5. Teacher education programs can intentionally support identity development when project work is integrated with reflection, collaboration, community engagement, and context-sensitive methodological preparation.

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