

Belonging, Identity and Agency of EFL Instructors on Regional Campuses¹

(El sentido de pertenencia, identidad
y agencia de docentes del ILE
en sedes regionales)

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of research based on a life-history narrative research of the complexities involved in being a university teacher at a regional campus. Nine English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university instructors participated in this study. The data were analyzed and organized by following the three-dimensional, temporal-relational perspective on teacher agency offered by the ecological approach. Findings suggest that factors from the past that gave instructors a broad repertoire of responses to engage and act mainly included participants' institutional and community belonging. Power differentials and the need for association and recognition stood out in participants' stories.



RESUMEN

El artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio de historia de vida de nueve docentes universitarios de inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE), de diferentes campus regionales. Se analizaron y organizaron los datos

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siguiendo la perspectiva tridimensional, temporal-relacional de la agencia docente, que ofrece la aproximación ecológica. Se concluye que los factores del pasado dieron a los profesores un amplio repertorio de respuestas para participar y actuar, principalmente sentido de pertenencia institucional y a la comunidad. Se destacaron en las historias de los participantes diferenciales de poder y la necesidad de asociación y reconocimiento.

Palabras clave: docentes ILE, sentido de pertenencia, agencia profesional, identidad

Keywords: EFL instructors, belonging, professional agency, identity

Introduction

One central concern in critical applied linguistics (CAL) is exposing the political dimensions and power relations in language teaching and learning. In the words of Pennycook,³ CAL “focuses on questions of power, difference, access, and domination.” In a further contribution, Pennycook explained that connected to ideas of language practices, there is a need to investigate language “as social activity, regulated as much by social contexts as by underlying systems.”⁴ Under this premise, a deeper understanding of how belonging impacts EFL university instructors contributes to conversations around the construction of identity and exercise of agency of these instructors on regional campuses in Costa Rica. In achieving professional agency, EFL instructors manage to juggle their individualistic explanations of social action, the particularities of their regional and local communities, and their institutional ethos. Workplace boundaries are marked by each individual’s activities and duties.⁵ These boundaries can also be seen as potential challenges for some instructors who, instead of being indifferent, decide to contest their established roles and responsibilities. The attitude of EFL instructors regarding their agency

3 Alastair Pennycook, *Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Introduction* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2001) 21.

4 Alastair Pennycook, *Language at a Local Practice* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010) 114.

5 Kathryn Ecclestone, Gert Biesta and Martin Hughes, “Transitions in the Lifecourse: The Role of Identity, Agency and Structure,” *Transitions and Learning Through the Life-Course* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2010) 1-15.

may be linked to the extent to which they place work at the center of their personal and collective identities.⁶ Their attitude may also be linked to their language teacher identity construction, one that includes their social, ideological and historical beings that permeate their “being and doing, feeling and imagining, and storying.”⁷ EFL instructors’ agency and identity are contested and resisted as a result of individual self and external others.

Therefore, current article examines issues of belonging, identity and power through the eyes of agency. This is accomplished by exploring how nine EFL instructors negotiate with their surroundings to achieve professional agency. Their exercise of agency has been shaped by power relations that have reproduced images of the “superior Self” over the “inferior Other.” To this end, a brief overview of contributions around professional agency become the theoretical foundation for this article. Then, a description of life-history narrative as the methodological lens for research is provided. The main findings, a discussion on power, recognition, association and social structure shed light on how EFL instructors have built their identity while exercising agency. In the conclusion, a reflection on the data offers implications for research and practice in the form of possible applications to EFL in higher education.

Living in the World: Context and Agency

As Jarvis⁸ stressed, we live in a complex world where it is difficult to isolate individual factors from our surroundings. Living in the world means that we must interact with it. University instructors’ professional agency is a product of that interaction and presupposes a degree of autonomy, “but it does not mean that individuals will be able to exercise that autonomy since we live in rule-governed society.”⁹

6 Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 1-15.

7 Gary Barkhuizen, “Narrative Approaches to Exploring Language, Identity and Power in Language Teacher Education,” *RELC Journal* 47, 1 (2016): 25-42. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688216631222>.

8 Peter Jarvis, *Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 126.

9 Jarvis (2006), 126.

The idea of individuals as “choosers” exemplifies how they are free to choose what to do in given situations.

Language instructors around the world are called to become agents of change despite what that might mean in each institutional context. The movement of educators along their life course requires attention to their trajectories and pathways. While *trajectories* are attributed to the individual, *pathways* are an attribute of a social system. Individuals, then, navigate their institutional pathways as systems that are moulded by cultural and structural forces.¹⁰ Groen and Kawalilak¹¹ offered the metaphor of pathways of adult learning to illustrate the diverse landscape of the journey of adult learners and educators, where the diversity of experiences and activities guide and inform them. These pathways lead to a series of connected human networks, where factors, elements, and influences impact university instructors’ and learners’ life narratives. High agentic individuals are recognized for their courage to go beyond their assumptions, beliefs, agendas, and practices to exert an intentional influence on their lives, careers, and circumstances of living.

The idea of institutional ethos as a set of ideals¹² adds precision to the understanding of institutions as it offers an account of unique historical experiences and a set of cultural values, norms, religious precepts, and taboos. Institutional ethos refers to implicit or unwritten codes of conduct.¹³ In higher education, institutional ethos is usually defined as the patterns (mission, beliefs, practices, assumptions) guiding the behavior of individuals or groups within an institution, and illuminating the frames of reference so that the meanings of events and

10 Aaron Pallas, “Educational Transitions, Trajectories, and Pathways,” *Handbook of the Life Course* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2003): 165-184.

11 Janet Groen and Colleen Kawalilak, *Pathways of Adult Learning: Professional and Education Narratives* (Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2014) 1-229.

12 Maxim Voronov and Klaus Weber. “Emotional Competence, Institutional Ethos, and the Heart of Institutions.” *Academy of Management Review* 42, 3 (2017): 556-560. DOI: <http://10.5465/amr.2016.0522>.

13 Charles Lusthaus, M. Marie-Hélène Adrien, Gary Anderson, Fred Carden and George Plinio, *Organizational Assessment. A Framework for Improving Performance* (Ottawa, ON: International Development Research Centre/Inter-American Development Bank, 2002) 36-41.

actions on and off campus can be interpreted.¹⁴ Only by acknowledging each institution's frame of reference can the professional agency of EFL university instructors be interpreted.

Higher educational institutions are situated within dominant forces of the global economy. Jarvis¹⁵ elaborated on the idea of globalization by explaining the multilayered model of society¹⁶ that ranks international, national, regional, and local forces, as well as how greater power and influence stem from international organizations. This power makes higher educational institutions vulnerable to the pressures of their own ethos and to the external inequalities. These pressures influence the opportunities and constraints of university instructors. Drawing on the Freirean notion of conscious beings, university instructors exist in a dialectical relationship between their determination of limits in their contexts and their own freedom to make decisions and construct their life within their social conditions.¹⁷

Achieving EFL Professional Agency in Rural Higher Education

Although there is a collective understanding of the concept of a rural area, there is no uniform definition. However, a multi-criteria effort to define it concluded that rural areas are spaces where a small landscape is occupied by human settlement and infrastructure, communities have low demographic density, and where activities are affected by a high transaction cost caused by long distances from cities.¹⁸ Bracken¹⁹ elabo-

14 George Kuh and Jennes Hall, "Using Cultural Perspectives in Student Affairs," *Cultural Perspectives in Student Affairs Work* (Lanham, MD: American College Personnel Association, 1993) 21-87.

15 Peter Jarvis, *Democracy, Lifelong Learning and the Learning Society: Active Citizenship in a Late Modern Age* (New York: Routledge, 2008) 34-67.

16 Jarvis (2008), 34-67.

17 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: The Continuum International, 2002) 11-182; and Anneli Eteläpelto, "Perspectives, Prospects and Progress in Work-Related Learning," *Emerging Perspectives of Workplace Learning* (Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense, 2008) 233-247.

18 David Atchoarena and Lavinia Gasperini, *Education for Rural Development: Towards New Policy Responses* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2003) 27-34. <<http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/publication/education-rural-development-towards-new-policy-responses>>.

19 Susan Bracken, "Defining Rural Community(ies): Future Considerations for Informal and Nonformal Adult Education in Rural Communities," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 117 (2008): 83-92. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.288>.

rated on Galbraith's²⁰ definition by describing rural areas as those that have limited resource bases and have cultural and ethnic homogeneity. They also agreed that rural areas are subject to a lack of acknowledgment of issues such as poverty, conflict, transportation challenges, and brain drain. In this scenario education has been recognized as a primary point of intervention in addressing the needs of rural communities.²¹ Higher education, particularly in those areas, requires well-designed academic programs, a clear mission, high-quality faculty, committed students, and sufficient resources to be able to perform at a consistently high standard.²²

The challenges of higher education institutions in rural areas are determined by the characteristics of the region. For Latin American higher education, Holm-Nielsen, Thorn, Brunner, and Bal reported that one of these challenges is "to provide learning, research, and job opportunities for talented individuals to ensure a sufficient supply of advanced skills to their national economies."²³ In this quest, the Latin American region has seen enrollment in higher education double in the past decades. However, higher enrollment numbers do not translate into high quality education. Rural higher education is challenged by the conflict over the two-sided purpose of schooling. One side encourages the preparation of students to contribute to national interests and needs, while the other side advocates for rural education that serves local community interests.²⁴ Regional campuses, located in rural communities, deal with conflict between national and local forces that have their own agendas, and only by recognizing these forces can agents

20 Michael Galbraith, *Education in the Rural American Community: A Lifelong Process* (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 1992) 20.

21 Kai Schafft, "Conclusion: Economics, Community, and Rural Education: Rethinking the Nature of Accountability in the Twenty-First Century," *Rural Education for the Twenty-First Century* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010) 275-289.

22 David Atchoarena and Lavinia Gasperini, 28.

23 Lauritz Holm-Nielsen, Kristian Thorn, Jose Joaquín Brunner and Jorge Balán, "Regional and International Challenges to Higher Education in Latin America," *Higher Education in Latin America the International Dimension* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2005) 39.

24 Laura Portnoi and Silvia Bagley, "A Critical Analysis of Global Competition in Higher Education: Synthesizing Themes," *New Directions for Higher Education*, 168, (2014): 97-100. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20116>.

be accountable and recognize the real challenges.²⁵ By questioning to whom education is accountable, higher education institutions may understand how to effectively respond to challenges.²⁶

University professors in rural communities are the ones in the trenches. In those settings, there are no universal standards that can measure their success. They can take a myriad of avenues to their teaching; however, they should not forget the role of local traditions and the public voice.²⁷ Rural EFL university instructors are challenged by the uneven distribution and concentration of resources within main/central campuses, which usually have the highest social strata of students,²⁸ while they struggle with limited academic offerings and programs.²⁹ This concentration of resources and information outside the rural areas may negatively influence their ability to attend to social justice. The main reason is that this unfair concentration of resources limits access and challenges both equality and equity. To confront their challenges, university instructors must reflect on their current practice and improve their knowledge and skills.³⁰ Here is where agency plays a determinant role in their profession since active exertion of influence elucidates their ability to transform themselves and their environment.

To achieve active agency, rural EFL university instructors should consider its nature and manifestations. These manifestations are always specified in terms of the multiple ways that agency is exercised (and its purposes) in accordance with local contextual conditions,

25 Jarvis (2006), 23.

26 Schafft, 275.

27 Portnoi and Bagley, 87.

28 Roy Atencio and Kevin Brand, "Situación de la regionalización universitaria en Costa Rica," *Revista Congreso* 5, 3 (2016): 21-32; and Jussi Valimaa, Helena Aittola y Jani Ursin, "University Mergers in Finland: Mediating Global Competition," *New Directions for Higher Education* 168 (2014): 41-53. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20112>.

29 Francisco Rodríguez, "La práctica docente en el contexto de la regionalización: Las sedes de la Universidad de Costa Rica," *Revista Comunicación* 15, 1, (2006): 79-83. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18845/rc.v15i1.1076>; and Atencio and Brand, 30.

30 Vera Brancato, "Professional development in higher education," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 98 (2003): 59-65; and Rodríguez, 80. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.100>.

the material circumstances, physical artefacts, power relations, work cultures, dominant discourses, and subject positions available.³¹

An Ecological Approach for EFL Instructors Professional Agency

The ecological approach to the understanding of teacher agency acknowledges the interplay between educators' individual characteristics, their surroundings, and the emergence and transformation of their engagement inherent in their life histories. Drawing on the fact that educators' exercise of agency cannot be understood by looking only at their past, present and future. Priestley, Robinson and Biesta³² defined the ecological view of teacher agency in relation to habitual aspects of the past, present contingencies, and future orientations. Following Biesta and Tedder,³³ three-dimensional, temporal-relational perspective on agency, Priestley, Robinson and Biesta³⁴ guide the way through possibilities to generate rich understandings of how university instructors achieve agency in their professional contexts, identifying it as both a methodological and a theoretical framework.

This framework has three dimensions: iterational, practical-evaluative and projective. Regarding the iterational dimension, the authors distinguished "between the influence of more general life histories... and their more specific professional histories (which include both their own education as a teacher and the accumulated experience of being a teacher)."³⁵ This dimension accounts for past experience. The practical-evaluative dimension, hence, accounts for the present in the form of culture (ways of speaking/thinking, beliefs), materials

31 Anneli Eteläpelto, Katja Vähäsantanen, Päivi Hökkä and Susanna Paloniemi, "What is Agency? Conceptualizing Professional Agency at Work," *Educational Research Review* 10 (2013): 45-65. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2013.05.001>; and Silvia Castro, "Costa Rica frente a la regionalización de la educación superior," *Revista InterSedes* 10,18 (2011): 174-204.

32 Mark Priestley, Gert Biesta and Sarah Robinson, *Teacher Agency: An Ecological Approach* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) 19-164.

33 Gert Biesta and Michael Tedder, "Agency and Learning in the Life Course: Towards an Ecological Perspective," *Studies in the Education of Adults* 39, 2 (2007): 132-149. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2007.11661545>.

34 Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 23.

35 Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 30.

(resources/physical environment) and structures (society and relations). The projective dimension encompasses the future by concerning for short-term and long-term orientations of action.

Guided by this ecological view, this article frames professional agency as an achievement rather than a capacity of EFL instructors. How the participants in this study perceive the impact of their context (regional campus) helps answer the research question about how their perceptions of their life experiences impact their existing and potential professional agency. The link between agency and identity is rooted in how teachers constructed self-understandings of what it means to be a professional on a regional university campus in Costa Rica.

Research Methodology

Life history was the type of narrative chosen for this study. As explained by Cole and Knowles,³⁶ this analysis opted for “depth over breadth” and intentionally placed a small number of individuals for an intensive exploration of how university EFL teachers subjectively experience, make sense of and account for their exercise of professional agency.³⁷ The participants were identified and selected using the following criteria: self-identification as non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), work experience on a regional campus for at least five years, and stabilization in their career.³⁸

Life history interviews were the main source of data followed by documents and a researcher’s reflexivity journal. Three interviews were conducted with each participant, thus enabling them to reflect upon their stories as university professors and their experiences with exercising agency in the dimensions of their workplace and community. The

36 Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles, *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2001) 70.

37 Ivor Goodson and Pat Sikes, “Techniques for Doing Life History,” *The Routledge International Handbook on Narrative and Life History* (London: Routledge, 2007) 72-88.

38 Michael Huberman, Marie-Madeleine Grounauer and Jürg Marti, *The Lives of Teachers* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1993) 150.

participants were asked to reflect upon four areas: personal and career histories, early experiences of being a university language instructor, the context, and issues associated with professional agency. Another source of data was public documents created by each campus. The list included brochures, reports, hiring posts and official guidelines. Through the reflexivity journal, the researcher collected field notes that recorded “impressions, thoughts, ideas, questions and puzzles”³⁹ before, during and after the interview process.

Participants

Those taking part in this study were nine EFL NNESTs from five different regional university campuses in Costa Rica. The purposeful sampling criteria used to select the participants required EFL university instructors to be defined by their role as formal instructors⁴⁰ of postsecondary students of any age,⁴¹ by having passed the stabilization stage in their career cycle⁴² and by self-identifying as NNESTs. Table 1 summarizes the participants’ demographic information. Pseudonyms were used at all times to assure confidentiality.

Table 1. Participants’ Demographic Information

Pseudo-nym	Degree	Campus and teaching load	Teaching experience on a regional campus	Current positions on the regional campus
María	Master’s in Second Languages and Culture	Coto campus Part time	6 years	Language instructor
Miguel	Master’s in ESP	Coto campus Full time	6 years	Language instructor
Jaime	Master’s in Second Languages and Culture	Sarapiquí campus Part time	10 years	Language instructor

39 Cole and Knowles, 90.

40 Groen and Kawalilak, 225.

41 Stephenn Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons 2015) 15-41.

42 Michael Huberman, “The Professional Life Cycles of Teachers,” *Teachers College Record* 91, 1 (1989): 31-57.

Pseudo-nym	Degree	Campus and teaching load	Teaching experience on a regional campus	Current positions on the regional campus
David	Master's in English Teaching	Sarapiquí campus Full time	11 years	Language instructor, Administrative position
Rosy	Master's in English Teaching	Liberia campus Part-time	29 years	Language instructor
Rafael	Master's in English Teaching	Liberia campus Full time	6 years	Language instructor
Andrés	Master's English Literature	Pérez Zeledón campus Full time	12 years	Language instructor, Administrative position
Gary	Master's in Second Languages and Culture	Pérez Zeledón campus Full time	15 years	Language instructor, Project developer
Freddie	Master's in EFL	Coto campus Full time	8 years	Language instructor

Note: This table is based on data from the interviews with each participant.

Data Collection

After obtaining approval from the ethics committee of the school and consent from each participant, data were collected through life history interviews, a researcher's reflective journal and supplementary documentation. The whole interview process was composed of one initial meeting followed by three separate interviews. The key principles of life history narrative—relationality, mutuality, empathy and care—explain the researcher's and participants' commitment to working together over a period of several months. This inquiry process requires hours of guided conversations with participants to ensure authentic engagement.

The purpose of the first meeting was to invite the research participant into an understanding of the topic, purpose, expectations, research design, consent, and procedures. Subsequently, the first interview was the opening step in the sharing and collection of data. The second one focused on expanding the information generated from the

initial interview and obtaining more detailed information about the participant. The participants were invited to suggest topics that they thought might contribute to the construction of their histories. The last interview was a space for a dialogue in which participants and the researcher exchanged opinions about the accuracy of representation in their narratives. To do this, the researcher sent, prior to the interview, both the transcripts of all previous interviews and her analysis with a list of codes. Each interview varied in duration and ranged from one hour and twenty minutes to two hours and fifteen minutes.

The researcher's reflexivity journal took the form of field notes. The interest in using this method was rooted in the idea that this process of reflection would bring the unconscious into consciousness to avoid the influence of a personal agenda on the collection and analysis of data. The journal process included three stages: before, during, and after the interviews, and was guided by Lamb's⁴³ structure for research journals. This structure divides each journal entry into four sections that allowed the researcher to acknowledge thoughts and emotions, communicate feelings and opinions, and encourage critical analysis and critical thinking about the research process.

Private and public documents were also reviewed to confirm insights gained through the interviews and the journal. Some private documents were provided at the researcher's request and took the form of reflexive personal documents adapted from reflective activities as suggested by Woodward et al.⁴⁴ Examples of public documents include websites, brochures, event invitations, and institutional documents. The purpose behind collecting documents was to enrich the understanding of the data from perspectives other than those of the participants.

43 David Lamb, "Promoting the Case for Using a Research Journal to Document and Reflect on the Research Experience," *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Method* 11, 2 (2013): 84-91.

44 Tessa Woodward, Kathleen Graves and Donald Freeman, *Teacher Development over Time: Practical Activities for Language Teachers* (New York: Routledge, 2018) 9-145.

Findings

The life history narratives in this study raised issues of belonging that answered the question of how the context of EFL teachers' professional lives informs their existing and potential professional agency. To belong to a place or institution, as was the case of those participating in this study, first the EFL teachers had to identify themselves as members of a group or community. Being a member entails feeling welcome, wanted and respected by other members. Coulon⁴⁵ represented one contemporary tendency of associating membership with agency or embodiment, commenting that "a member is not only a person who breathes and who thinks, but a person with a whole ensemble of processes, methods, activities and know-how that enables her to invent adjusting devices to give some sense to the surrounding world."

Rural Belonging

All the participants were born in rural communities; most of them were born, raised, and educated in the same community they are teaching in. Growing up in rural communities meant that they faced limited school and job opportunities; however, their interest in formal education was informed by their parents' beliefs that education would make a difference in their lives. Either through explicit discourse or modeled through example, the participants were guided earlier in their lives to attend the university.

Andrés alluded to the implicit valuing of formal learning in his home, stating: "It was understood and it was an underlying belief that I was to study. I was going to go to school. And later on, it became really clear that I was going to become a professional." David shared his father's hope that he and his brother would be able to study. It was important for his father that he and his brother do better than their father and that education was the path to take. Both of Freddie's parents were professors and he grew up witnessing their tight schedules

45 Alain Coulon, *Ethnomethodology* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995) 27.

and busy lives. Gary's story went beyond her parents and involved her grandparents. She recalled: "My grandparents always wanted my aunts and uncles to study.... They [my parents] were talking to me like not pushing me to go to the university, but I was following I don't know who or what. I just knew that I had to go to school."

In contrast, María's mother explicitly advised her in this regard, by telling her that she had to study. Miguel recognized that his parents did place a lot of value on a formal education, while Rafael remembered the influence of his mother, noting that "she always loved studying because it was an opportunity to grow in life, to be somebody. Studies are really important in my family because it is a bridge to achieve things." At different times during our conversations, the participants expressed a strong sense of belonging to the rural community in which they work. This sense of belonging was shown in crucial decisions they made. María, for example, got married two years earlier and at the time of our interview had moved to the capital city, San José, but she decided to commute nine hours every week to get to the campus where she teaches because that is where she has found a true passion.

Miguel also lived in a different community, but he decided to commute four hours to work on his campus. David made a drastic decision when he declined a highly paid and socially recognized position with the Ministry of Public Education (MPE) because it would have required him to move to another town and quit working in the community where he had always lived. These decisions speak to the participants' active efforts to make choices and intentional action to stay and have an active role in their communities. In addition to these decisions, belonging is linked to feelings of empathy toward the community. In the case of Andrés, he expressed his empathy as follows: "Teaching in the same town where I was born and where I grew up definitely influence the way I teach because I can understand what most of these kids come from. I belong to the same social class." Rafael has lived all his life in the same border town. Growing up in the same community as where he now teaches has given him a broad

understanding of the social challenges that the locals face, mainly violence and limited education opportunities. More specifically, he shared how violence has always been a social marker in his town.

Institutional Belonging

The participants shared a similar sense of belonging to the regional campuses where they currently work. Most of them have studied at the same institution; this gives them a greater emotional attachment. In their stories, they shared deep gratitude for the opportunities that the institution has provided for them to grow. Jaime said, “I belonged to this university. It marked the path which I have walked along. It opened a door to me to have a better lifestyle, position, stable job. It helped me to be more open-minded.” Freddie completed his undergraduate and licentiate’s program, and is now completing a master’s degree, in the same institution as he now works. He described his gratitude towards the institution as follows: “I think if I were working on a different place, I wouldn’t have the opportunity to share my experiences with my students. I wouldn’t have the chance to study or to know a different culture.”

Miguel has completed all his degrees at the same institution, but at different campuses. He expressed his deep feelings by noting: “I love this university. I studied my bachelor’s program, my licentiate’s program there and I am about to study the master’s there.” Like Miguel, Gary has completed her degrees at the same institution. She was also emphatic about her sense of fitting, “I really feel that I belong to this university.” Even though Andrés completed two of his degrees at a different university, he stressed his deep sense of belonging to the campus he is working. He admitted:

I do feel a strong sense of belonging even though I didn’t study at this university and I worked 8 years parallelly for this other regional campus which is my alma mater. I do have a strong sense of belonging and it is because of two main reasons. One that I grew up here.

It's my town. It is the university of my town. Second... my dad also took some classes here. There is a strong connection with my family and now I definitely feel identified with this institution professionally more than with the university I graduated.

David expressed a deep sense of commitment to do his best for quality and academic improvement. He said, "I love this university. I love what I do. I want to make it better... I am always looking for ways to improve." Rosy, who has the most teaching experience (19 years) on her campus, explained her emotional attachment: "This university is something I would defend and fight for anywhere because I know that we work hard, and that the public university is the answer for every single student."

Participants in this study recognized higher education as an essential and valuable part of personal growth, which aligns well with the purposes of rural higher education in Costa Rica. There, education is a key social and economic driver; it is seen as the basis for justice, competitiveness, equity, and quality to forge conditions and opportunities for better well-being, contributing to the reduction of poverty and marginalization.⁴⁶ Comments made by these participants reveal feelings of attachment to the community and institution that encouraged them to stay and take an active role. In so doing, these instructors were constructing their individual sense of identity and collective consciousness through their identification with place and strengthening their values, norms, and social practices.⁴⁷

46 Ileana Schmidt-Fonseca, "La Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica y las sedes regionales como mecanismo de inclusión social," *Revista Universidad en Diálogo* 62 (2016): 193-203. <https://doi.org/10.15359/udre.6-2.11>; and Reanato Operti, *Inclusión educativa: El camino del futuro* (OIE-UNESCO, 20 setiembre 2019).

47 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986): 241-258.

Belonging Despite Inequality: The Impact of Rurality on Professional Agency

Priestley, Robinson, and Biesta⁴⁸ claimed that educators who exercise high agency are better able to respond in a meaningful way to new and unique situations in their surroundings. Indeed, highly agentic educators are capable of judgement in the here and now and have the flexibility that is needed in complex scenarios. They also share the ability to implement programs; this contributes to making teaching a meaningful profession instead of just a job to be done.⁴⁹ Highly engaged EFL university instructors have a positive impact on their local communities and on their institution. A positive impact is highly valued in rural communities that are usually defined in terms of deficit.⁵⁰ Hence, the professional agency of university instructors on regional campuses has an enormous significance on the local landscape.

My second research sub-question inquired into how the rural context of participants' professional lives informs their existing and potential professional agency. To that end, participants' stories revealed the direct impact their rural and institutional context have on their professional lives and on their professional agency. As Jarvis proposed, "we do not have perfect freedom in our life-world since there are a variety of obstacles and many other people inhibiting our spontaneity; we only have a relative degree of autonomy."⁵¹ Participants highlighted certain dimensions of power relationships that established a dominant group, in this case the administration on the main campus, and a minority group, instructors on regional campuses. By self-identifying as "the Others," rural EFL university instructors acknowledged that there is an implicit recognition of social differentiation by which they felt excluded. Crucial to the understanding of

48 Priestley, Robinson and Biesta, 23.

49 Priestley, Robinson and Biesta, 27.

50 Hernán Cuervo, *Understanding Social Justice in Rural Education* (Melbourne: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 79-110.

51 Peter Jarvis, *Globalisation, Lifelong Learning and the Learning Society: Sociological Perspectives* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007) 21.

professional agency is the way in which university instructors interact with this relatively small degree of autonomy associated with their location on a regional campus.

Rurality can have an impact on professional agency. Those involved in regional planning in Costa Rica promote the social and civic participation of all citizens. One of the ways they hope to accomplish participation is through making higher education accessible to as many people as possible across the country. The Planning Program from the Ministry of National Planning identified six regions with development challenges that required governmental intervention to ensure the equal distribution of resources.⁵² As a result, public universities in Costa Rica are required to provide equal opportunities to all students in the regions mentioned above.⁵³

Formal higher education is seen as a key to social mobility in Costa Rica, said Miguel. Having a degree from a public university allows students to move to a higher social stratum since it provides a stable income and recognition in their communities. Higher education in Costa Rica, especially on regional campuses, directly promotes social mobility.⁵⁴ Participants were committed to positively influencing the learning experiences of their students and to making decisions that would have this effect. They mentioned their commitment to influence learners' linguistic achievement by making well-informed teaching decisions regarding assessment, class work, assignments, and field trips. Eventually, these decisions directly contribute to their students' success in completing their programs.

52 Ileana Arauz, Ileana Schmidt and Alexandra Tabash, "Mirando el pasado: Soñando el futuro," *Universidad en Diálogo* 2, 1 (2012): 15-30.

53 Atencio and Brand, 30.

54 Carmen Caamaño, "Aportes de la Universidad de Costa Rica a la movilidad social," *Semanario Universidad*. 16 setiembre 2019, <<https://semanariouniversidad.com/ideasdebates/aportes-la-universidad-costa-rica-la-movilidad-social/>>; and Jose Roberto Padilla, La educación, instrumento clave de movilidad social y pilar fundamental del desarrollo humano y el IVA. *El Mundo*, 20 setiembre 2019, <<https://www.elmundo.cr/opinion/la-educacion-instrumento-clave-de-movilidad-social-y-pilar-fundamental-del-desarrollo-humano-y-el-iva/>>.

To secure students' program completion and successful linguistic competence, the participants described the need to become well-qualified professionals. Atchoarena and Gasperini⁵⁵ referred to this as a need specifically in developing countries where higher education institutions require not only well-designed academic programs and a clear mission but also a high-quality faculty.

The participants recognized the role of professional development in their constant search for growth. Their experiences resonated with Jarvis's ideas on the topic, for whom there are instances when professional development provides opportunity "for self-growth, career advancement and social development."⁵⁶ Their initiatives, albeit not many, to complete more degrees and participate in conferences and workshops speak to their interest in being a source of reliable knowledge and being seen as high-quality faculty. Miguel, Freddie, Jaime, and Andrés noted their desire to advance their skills through formal education. In fact, Miguel, Jaime, and Freddie are all enrolled in their second master's program. María and Gary insisted on their interest in participating in conferences to update their knowledge.

The issue of geographic distance—between cities and rural areas, between the main campus and regional campuses, and between institutions in rural communities—is an important consideration in understanding university instructors' negotiation of their agency in rural contexts. In this study, geographic variation was closely related to instructors' professional agency inasmuch as their decisions were determined by issues of mobility in their location. Atchoarena and Gasperini⁵⁷ pointed out how long distances from cities to rural areas usually affect many types of activities. In this case, long distances between regional campuses and the main campus, and short distances between institutions within rural communities, shaped how participants exercised agency. More specifically, campus location was both

55 Atchoarena and Gasperini, 28.

56 Jarvis (2008), 156.

57 Atchoarena and Gasperini, 28.

a benefit and a burden. Jaime pointed out that the proximity of the two institutions where he worked, the campus and the primary school, allowed him to move easily and engage deeply.

Rafael also said that the short distance between his home and campus facilitated his mobility and participation on campus. However, the long distance between the main campus and all regional campuses turned their location into a burden when participants expressed their feeling of being ignored by the main campus's administration. They discussed how the administration was reluctant to accept invitations to participate in official events on regional campuses, and how the long distance impeded their participation in events held on the main campus.

In addition, distance limited all participants' accessibility to both professional development opportunities and library material. Miguel pointed out that libraries on the regional campuses are smaller and have fewer resources and that borrowing books and textbooks from the main campus can take too long. He argued that specialized literature to teach certain courses, such as his Linguistics class, was not easily available. Taking up the challenge of access, Cuervo⁵⁸ saw this unequal distribution of resources as a threat to social justice in education since this creates a lack of opportunity where barriers stop rural agents (teachers and students) from achieving their best. Although social justice goes beyond distribution of resources, this is the first stumbling block that individuals in rural higher education face when they want to be something or become something. This reflects unfairness and reveals inequality in the system.

Jarvis⁵⁹ explored the role of physical space in learning environments. For him, space plays a part in affecting individuals' experiences. University instructors' participation in professional development activities was jeopardized by geographical distance. Their rural locations make it difficult to travel to the main campus or other close campuses and participate in the extensive list of workshops offered. In fact, Gary was

58 Cuervo, 103.

59 Jarvis (2007), 126.

aware of this disadvantage and reproached the unequal opportunities. At a local level, even though their campuses are making efforts to provide similar opportunities, they fall short in their initiatives. The participants said that they are interested in attending more workshops. On the Pérez Zeledón and Coto campuses, only one conference is organized for their specialty, once every two years. Although they had participated in international conferences and conferences on the main campus, their professional agency is negatively influenced by their limited budgets and the lack of funding opportunities to support their participation.

This lack of professional development jeopardizes participants' progress in linguistic skills and updated teaching techniques, as well as their opportunities to learn with others. Holm-Nielsen, Thorn, Brunner, and Bal⁶⁰ addressed this lack by outlining specific challenges for Latin American higher education and mentioned the pressing need to offer opportunities to students and instructors to ensure advanced skills that would impact national economies. Not having the same access to professional development opportunities as faculty on the main campus represents a conflict regarding the aim of equality in regionalization planning as explained by Arauz, Schmidt and Tabash⁶¹ and Atencio and Brand.⁶²

Discussion

Data analysis suggested that participants are clear about issues of power differentials. On the one hand, they call for equity that goes beyond equal distribution of resources and espouses active participation through association and recognition. On the other hand, they saw themselves as influenced by the institution's historical proclamation of humanism as a driving philosophy that directs teaching and learning practices to fulfill the mission of a publicly funded university for all citizens nationwide with no social stratification.

60 Holm-Nielsen, Thorn, Brunner and Balán, 39.

61 Arauz, Schmidt and Tabash, 29.

62 Atencio and Brand, 30.

Power in Rural Higher Education: A Call for Association and Recognition

Because of their lack of participation in important program decisions, participants in this study made strong demands about their need for association and recognition within the institution. For Cuervo, this is a social justice issue, specifically when it “is strongly tied to issues of participation in the democratic processes in the construction of the purpose and content of education.”⁶³ Atencio and Brand⁶⁴ referred to this uneven treatment not only of students on regional campuses but also of university instructors, and demanded stronger institutional policies that would foster academic growth. Participants in this study felt they did not have any active degree of participation in the changes made in language programs. They compared their participation with that of instructors on the main campus, who do have a say and an active role in all changes and initiatives. Their relationship with the main campus administration is tinged with an awareness of the power dynamics, which Andrés expressed in terms of the local administration being “down” and the main campus “up.”

The participants explicitly insisted they are not involved in the decisions made by the faculty of the College of Philosophy and Letters, on the main campus that “owns” this major. Their agency in curricular decisions is limited to being a witness, one who is informed about changes and expected to follow new guidelines without having an opportunity to critically contribute to the conversations behind these decisions or object to them. It seems that EFL instructors on the main campus are the ones leading those faculty meetings where new ideas generate change. A feeling of invisibility characterized participants at these moments, during which they found themselves completely on the outside.

63 Cuervo, 103.

64 Atencio and Brand, 27.

Structural context, in the form of history, socio-economic conditions, institutional ethos, and cultural patterns, has influenced participants' exercise of agency. As noted above, Jarvis⁶⁵ described this idea as "living in the world," in a complex world where it is difficult to isolate individual factors from their surroundings. The process of understanding agency within a structural context, in fact, is seen as a socially constrained process already influenced by social relations which, at the same time, are an outcome of power relations. This power also places the struggle for resources on the map since it recognizes the way in which relations between their professional practice and their institution are linked. In this case, participants perceived the main campus to be a dominant, imposing voice.

At the same time, because of their lack of active participation, EFL university instructors received little acknowledgment of their value. This need for acknowledgment is what Cuervo defined as recognition. He explained that recognition is "the need for acknowledgment of different cultures and values, which form the core of dignity, self-esteem and self-respect."⁶⁶ The participants expressed this negative self-identification when referring to the obstacles they might have if they decided to teach on the main campus. They seem to have created a hypothetical representation of their reality where they are "the Others" from regional campuses. Their interest in completing a PhD speaks to this thirst for recognition. This resonates with myself as the author of this work and as an instructor on a regional campus; I have also witnessed the prestige that comes with pursuing a doctorate. Part of my interest in completing this degree is to earn recognition for the work we do on our regional campuses. The participants indicated that having more faculty members with doctoral degrees would bring important research, knowledge, and recognition to their campuses.

65 Jarvis (2008), 126.

66 Cuervo, 91.

Higher Education Institutional Structure and EFL Instructors' Professional Agency

Turning to policies at regional campuses, the university's mission is to generate, share, and socialize knowledge, and to develop humanist professionals with a creative and critical attitude⁶⁷ on all campuses. According to this mission, the university intends to contribute to the democratic and progressive transformation of communities to promote greater well-being for society. There is evidence that this mission is being applied in the current outreach projects in which Gary, Rosy, David, and Andrés' are involved. More specifically, Gary, Rosy, and David mentioned projects that are aimed at vulnerable communities and that have expanded due to their success. Freddie and Miguel visualized their future involvement on the campus through projects that reach out to vulnerable communities as well. The institution aims to contribute to an eco-social and peaceful coexistence where the focus is on social groups that are underprivileged or at-risk of social exclusion.

EFL instructors' agency was influenced by the institution's historical proclamation of humanism as a driving philosophy. This philosophical perspective directs higher education to fulfill the mission of a public university for all citizens. This ideal was influenced by the Latin American revolutionary movement in the 1970s that envisioned an institution free of social segregation.⁶⁸ In contrast to Knowles's⁶⁹ conceptualization of humanism that sees the individual at the center and where there is virtually no attention to the socio-cultural context, this university pays close attention to the socio-cultural context and positionality (culture, gender, or class) difference of each learner. With a strong commitment, the institution has created a culture of humanistic orientation by pursuing students' personal fulfillment

67 Universidad Nacional. *Misión y visión*. <<http://www.transparencia.una.ac.cr/index.php/categorias/institucional/mision-y-vision>>

68 Carlos Pochet, *La Universidad Nacional y la educación superior estatal en veinte años de historia (1973-1993)* (Heredia, CR: EUNA, 1993): 1-198.

69 Malcolm Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy* (New York, NY: Cambridge Books, 1980) 82-108.

and critical thinking first so that they can commit and contribute to their country's development.⁷⁰ This perspective is less individualistic and more collective. These principles shaped participants' decisions, such as their commitment to be qualified professionals that should contribute to their surroundings, with empathy toward their students' disadvantaged backgrounds and challenges.

Although to some extent opinions may differ on this organization as an instrument for high quality education and social equality for Costa Rica, the efforts made to reach out to students from rural locations speaks to its success. Drawing on this university's latest statistical report,⁷¹ from 2012 to 2017, funding for scholarships doubled; this is evidence of a commitment to reach more students every year. Regional campuses have the highest percentage of fully and partially funded students; the Sarapiquí campus leads with 86% of its students receiving various types of funding, followed by the Brunca campus with 82% and the Chorotega campus with 71%. The university's commitment to reaching less privileged students can be seen in the number of students who come from geographically remote locations. To foster this intention, new student residences were opened recently on the three regional campuses. This initiative has provided more opportunities for prospective and current students from remote locations.

In the light of the above efforts, university instructors need opportunities to direct their professional agency toward actions that reflect and support institutional trends. Consequently, a humanistic focus that encourages a whole-learner approach determines university instructors' agency in their surroundings both inside and outside the language classroom. Miguel and Jaime indicated that their language teaching should be informed by notions of fairness and social commitment. They did not limit their teaching to the language, but like

70 Benjamín Núñez, *Hacia la universidad necesaria* (Heredia, Costa Rica, 1974) 18-19.

71 Universidad Nacional. UNA en cifras: Compromiso con los sectores menos favorecidos <<http://www.transparencia.una.ac.cr/index.php/categorias/una-en-cifras/380-una-promueve-la-calidad-academica-4>>

David, they mentioned that they feel accountable for students' moral and professional growth. Gary and María went beyond linguistic knowledge and skills to describe the role of emotions and positive rapport in their students' professional growth. By taking this stance, they defied traditional notions of education⁷² that focus on academic skills and are usually linked to university formation. Andrés, Gary, Freddie, David, and Jaime linked their agency to the need to initiate more programs on campus to nurture young adults' sense of self, identity, and purpose. Right now, all campuses offer a similar, limited list of programs, but the participants noted that there are powerful economic influences on the main campus, making those decisions from a distance.

EFL instructors' freedom to act in the classroom and make assessment and teaching decisions speak to the institutional belief in promoting autonomy in instructors' action. Andrés pointed out how he felt teaching on a regional campus benefitted his agency in the classroom. Being the only Literature instructor on the campus allowed him to make his own decisions regarding textbooks, tasks and assessment. Miguel expressed that teaching on a regional campus gave him a greater scope for developing his linguistic competence and knowledge about processes in the language programs since he has taught almost 20 different courses.

Conclusions and Implications for Institutional Practice and Research

In exercising professional agency, EFL university instructors are required to make decisions and take stances within socio-cultural contexts that directly influence those decisions and stances. Rural differentiation, power differentials, and geographical barriers were challenges that participants felt they should overcome in order to move toward better teaching practices. Exercising professional agency on regional campuses comes with social responsibility to assure that

⁷² Freire, 72.

students have access to education that will secure social mobility through a university degree and successful linguistic competence that will provide them with better job opportunities.

Although power differential pushbacks, in the form of strapped budgets and negative mental representations, interfere with professional agency, instructors can show an awareness of their role by promoting equity and quality of opportunities for students' and the community's growth. In exercising professional agency, EFL university instructors produce their own system of meaning by taking opportunities in their surroundings, supporting different processes, and making informed plans for their future. With respect to the influence of geographical location, professional agency is exercised within certain limitations. The participants felt that their decisions about professional development and involvement in curriculum planning are limited by their lack of access to the main campus, where more opportunities were offered.

Institutional support is a key to foster EFL university instructors' professional agency and belonging. To encourage community and institutional belonging, the institution itself should include tasks and events that intentionally foster instructors' agency and identity construction. On the individual level, EFL university instructors can be asked to engage in personal identity reflection tasks such as writing their own educational biographies, and teaching dossiers. Collective spaces for self-reflection on teacher identity may be established through collective involvement in communities of practice (CoPs). Active participation in community events promoting regional identity is also important. Throughout historical and territorial socialization, this type of event guides people through the process of identifying with the social system of their region. Participating and volunteering in events organized in their communities also may help EFL instructors develop a strong sense of accountability and service. Involvement of this type is a way to deepen their *connection* to the local community, be informed of specific context issues, and thereby execute assertive action required to deal with prospective situations.

