

## **Implementing Dialogic Gatherings in TESOL teacher education**

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## **Implementing Dialogic Gatherings in TESOL teacher education**

*Purpose:* This article reports the implementation of a series of Dialogic Gatherings (DGs), a course component in the education of pre-service secondary-education TESOL teachers in Spain. DGs are a successful educational action based on the reading and discussion of books and academic works, which leads to a dialogic construction of knowledge among participants.

*Design/methodology/approach:* Our case study involved seven students, enrolled on a Master's Degree in Secondary Education, with a specialization in teaching English. Information was gathered during 10 DG sessions and from initial and final reports and student notebooks, as well as from the trainer's observations.

*Findings:* The findings suggested that DGs engaged participants in a critical understanding of the teaching-learning process of English as a Foreign Language, assisting their teacher identity construction process. In addition, the findings pointed both to the reading of scientific sources and to the dialogic methodology as key inputs for the promotion of critically responsive practices for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

*Originality/value:* This exploratory study illustrates the relevance of providing future teachers with meaningful opportunities to reflect upon and to build critical knowledge through the dialogic reading of primary scientific sources as part of the TESOL process.

**Keywords:** pre-service teacher education; TESOL; dialogic gatherings; teacher professional identity; Higher Education.

## **Introduction**

Educational programmes for teacher education must ensure that future professionals acquire a deep knowledge of the latest theoretical and practical developments related to their areas of expertise together with adequate field-based experiences (Heineke, Ryan & Tocci, 2015; Ríos, García, Jiménez & Ignatiou, 2019). The development of an ethical perspective for teacher education has also been recognized as a necessary feature, so that student teachers can cultivate the moral commitment that must be at the core of their professional identity (Moses, Berry, Saab, & Admiraal, 2017). Equally, research on language teacher education has also incorporated a critical focus on the teacher as a transformative agent (Hawkins & Norton, 2009; Norton & Toohey, 2011).

Following those trends, the exploratory study of a specific teacher education programme based on the Dialogic Gatherings (DG) is reported in this paper. DGs are based on the findings of the EU-funded project INCLUD-ED (2006-2011)<sup>1</sup>, which identified a set of successful educational actions for school contexts that improve academic attainment and coexistence (Flecha, 2015). Among those successful educational actions, DGs are based on the reading and shared discussion of books and academic works, which result in a dialogic construction of knowledge among participants. In the present study, DGs were implemented in a Master's programme for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in secondary education. In Spain, future secondary education teachers must hold a Bachelor's Degree. They are then required to study a Masters' degree for training in the pedagogical foundations of teaching. This study is focused on analysing the impact of DGs on the initial training of

future teachers of English, in relation to the development of a critical perspective of the teaching-learning process and the teacher identity construction process of participants. The study also aims to shed light on those features of DGs that favour this training process among pre-service TESOL teachers.

### **Pre-service teacher education in TESOL in Spain**

In Spain, initial teacher training for secondary school level is regulated in the form of a one-year Master's degree offered by universities. It is a consecutive model where students receive scientific-disciplinary training in their area of specialization, followed by another training oriented towards professional practice<sup>2</sup>. This teacher training certification is a requirement to enter the teaching profession in secondary education.

Despite the influence of the European Union educational policy in the field of initial teacher education over the past few years (Manso & Valle, 2013; European Union, 2007), major shortcomings have been detected in the initial teacher training system in Spain. First, initial teacher training should provide tools, skills and resources, so that professionals are able to adapt to the continuous transformations taking place in a changing and dynamic society, with complex, multicultural, and socially diverse learning scenarios (Hernández 2011). Also, professionalization, specificity, and autonomy are key elements for initial teacher training programmes that require more detailed attention in Spain (Madrid, 2004; Montero & Vez, 1998; Vez, 2001). Other sources have likewise pointed to more demanding pre-service teacher selection as another area that needs improvement (Ramírez Carpeño & Mekichi, 2015).<sup>3</sup>

Those considerations are particularly evident in the initial teacher training of language teachers. Indeed, the relation between language, culture, and identity has largely

been studied from a critical perspective and has finally converged on a central idea: language teaching and learning processes are social practices and, in consequence, embedded with underlying ideologies and values (Johnston, 2003; Norton, 1997). Accordingly, teaching a language entails political implications (Ramanathan, 2002), and practitioners should consider their social and cultural engagement in a changing and globalized world (Delano-Oriaran, 2014; Norton & Toohey, 2011). These ideas permeate the role of the language teachers, not only in the classroom but also in society, impacting on their professional identity (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Gu & Benson, 2015).

We agree with Morgan and Clarke (2011) that language teacher identity is ‘a potential site of pedagogical intervention and an area of explicit focus in teacher preparation’ (p. 825). In the belief that pre-service teacher training is a crucial stage in the construction of teacher identity (Gu & Benson, 2014), we conceptualize the development of teacher identities through three interrelated dimensions, namely, mastery of the subject matter, classroom management and managing learning in the classroom, and self-understanding as teachers (Pennington & Richards, 2016). The last-mentioned dimension is particularly challenging and prone to variation, as stressed by Pennington and Richards: ‘Through processes of negotiation and interpretation of their experiences and interactions with others, teachers’ personal, autobiographical identities and narratives become connected to their work-related, instructional and professional identities and narratives’ (p. 9). Furthermore, during their pre-service training, student teachers are particularly influenced by their prior learning experiences, their own teaching experiences, if any, and the teacher identity construction process created by the group.

Consequently, initial teacher training can benefit from instructional approaches that promote interaction and negotiation around identity issues.

In the light of the above considerations, this study explored the implementation of a series of DGs as a highly effective training strategy during pre-service teacher training in the field of TESOL.

### **Dialogic learning to educate pre-service teachers: Dialogic Gatherings**

DGs appeared in Spain as a cultural activity (Dialogic Literary Gatherings) in the field of adult education consisting of the reading and the discussion of classic literary works. The initial purpose was to overcome cultural and educational inequalities (Flecha, 2000).

Recent implementations have widened their scope to other social and educational contexts in different countries (Garcia, Gairal, Munté, & Plaja, 2018; Hargreaves & García-Carrión, 2016; López de Aguilera, 2019; Soler, 2019; Villardón-Gallego, García-Carrión, Yáñez-Marquina, & Estévez, 2018).

DGs are organised around the contributions of participants, who share ideas extracted from their individual reading of a previously selected work. Each contribution is discussed in a process of dialogic construction of knowledge. In DGs, all contributions are taken into consideration, according to the validity of each participant's reasoning rather than their positions of power. The role of the person moderating the DGs consists of facilitating turn-taking and ensuring respect for the procedural principles of egalitarian dialogue and intersubjectivity. The dialogic learning approach (Flecha, 2000) which underpins DGs is closely linked to Freire's theory of dialogic action (1970), and acknowledges the ability of all subjects to engage in a process of dialogue and reflection. DGs combine personal and collective emancipatory processes. As individual conclusions

are expressed and discussed within the group, richer and more complex ideas are built up that, in turn, result in higher levels of understanding, leading to a general improvement of self-consciousness, knowledge, and awareness (Tellado, 2017).

In Spain, prior implementations of DGs for the training of in-service teachers have demonstrated their effectiveness at promoting self-reflection among participants, inspiring greater commitment towards the teaching profession (Flecha, Roca & López de Aguilera, 2019; Roca, Gómez & Burgués, 2015). However, the implementation of DGs within the initial teacher training programmes has been studied far less, and no previous study has explored the implementation of DGs in the field of TESOL. To address this gap, an exploratory study was designed, to analyse the implementation of DGs for TESOL teacher training. Our research questions were formulated as follows:

- (1) What are the impacts of DGs on the critical understanding of teaching and learning practice in TESOL among pre-service teachers, and on the development of a socially responsive professional practice?
- (2) What are the impacts of DGs on the identity construction processes of pre-service teachers as secondary level teachers of English?
- (3) What features of DGs enable participating pre-service teachers to engage in a critically responsive attitude towards TESOL teaching?

## **The study**

### ***Research context***

A case study was designed (Stake, 1995), to assess the potential of DGs for the initial training of pre-service teachers of English, based on a DG implementation analysis of a

group enrolled on a 4-month training module called 'Foreign Language: English, Contexts and Situations.' Hence, the implementation of the DGs methodology was founded upon linguistic and pedagogical contents in the TESOL field. This module was part of a one-year Master's programme in full-time education at a university in Spain. The approval of the Institutional Review Board was obtained for the study.

### ***Participants***

The group formed by 7 students was heterogeneous. It consisted of 4 females (Maria, Jennifer, Valery, and Caroline) and 3 males (Salvador, Fran, and Jonas) whose ages ranged between 22 and 30 years old<sup>4</sup>.

All participants were non-native English speakers, and had obtained their Bachelor's Degree at other universities. Participants had not therefore met each other before the course, although they all shared enthusiasm and interest in becoming English teachers. Regarding their fields of study, Caroline had specialised in Politics in Romania, and the rest held a degree in English Studies from a Spanish university. Their experience in teaching English was limited to private tuition. Except for one person, all of them had had teaching/working experience abroad. Maria and Fran had worked as teaching assistants of Spanish in the UK for the summer, and Jennifer had done the same in the Czech Republic. Valery had volunteered in the UK on several occasions working with elderly people, Jonas had been a waiter in Liverpool, and Caroline had worked at a kindergarten in Turkey. Salvador had only been abroad on holidays and had no formal work experience whatsoever.

### ***Data Collection***

Drawing from the arguments of Morgan and Clarke (2011) on language teacher identity, and following the views of Norton and Toohey (2011) on qualitative research, a diverse set of data collection methods was designed, using four complementary instruments:

- (1) *Initial reports*. Participants were asked to write personal life history reports including their academic background and teaching experiences. Besides inviting them to reflect on their personal histories, these reports gave the trainers an overview of their experiences and expectations.
- (2) *Trainer's observation notes*. During the implementation of the gatherings, the trainer took notes on the development of each session, considering aspects such as peer management, student fluency and participation, and discussion topics. Observation notes were also taken in a general meeting at the end of the course, where the group's perceptions of DGs were shared.
- (3) *Personal notebooks*. After every session, participants devoted some time to record the main ideas, feelings and experiences, resulting in a total of ten contributions per person. The trainer received a copy of these notebooks at the end of the term.
- (4) *Final personal report*. The reflections recorded in the personal notebook of each participant guided the design of a final survey, to evaluate the implementation, evolution, and utility of DGs for the participants.

The purpose of these different data sources was twofold. First, they allowed us to gather a rich set of qualitative information for our research. Second, they served as personal and collective reviews of the training methodology.

### ***Procedure***

The syllabus of the training course was designed according to the 3 categories proposed by Hawkins and Norton (2009), i.e., Critical Awareness, as a ‘way in which power relations are constructed and function in society’ (p. 33); Critical Self-Reflection, for ‘teacher-learners to critically reflect on their own identities and positioning in society’ (p. 34); and Critical Pedagogical Relations, that would ‘encourage teacher-learners to consider ways in which their own teaching can enhance opportunities for language learners in their classrooms’ (p. 35). Thus, 10 academic articles on English language teaching that included linguistic, cultural and pedagogical contents were selected by the trainer for further reading, and grouped accordingly under three main headings: 1) Varieties of World Englishes; 2) Contextual strategies for TESOL; and 3) Teaching strategies for ESL/EFL. All the academic articles selected for the DGs are listed in the Appendix.

The implementation of the whole module covered 24 sessions structured into 3 distinctive phases. In phase one, we conducted 2 introductory sessions to introduce the principles and methodology behind DG implementation. The trainee teachers discussed and agreed to the proposed programme and their permission and consent to participate in the programme was obtained. Having given their agreement and before starting the programme, the trainee teachers completed their initial reports.

During phase two, 10 DG sessions were conducted. Formally, one introductory 50-minute session was planned to take place on Wednesdays, in which key concepts were explained relating to the contents of the particular article. The series of DGs were programmed every week on Thursdays. On each occasion, a 100-minute session was dedicated to DG implementation. Firstly, a few minutes would be used for the physical

arrangement of the classroom into a circle of chairs. Secondly, a moderator would be chosen from among the participants, as only the first DG session was led by the trainer. By fulfilling all roles, the participants were better placed to assimilate the patterns that emerged.

Once a DG had started, each student would share a paragraph or idea previously chosen during the individual reading, followed by a personal reflection on the subject matter. In turns, the others would freely comment on the idea or on the considerations voiced by the participant to foster reflective thinking (Schoffner, 2008). Once the selected idea had been fully explored, the moderator would encourage the rest of the participants to present their contributions. The role of the trainer during the gatherings was to support the moderator in the discussion, by ensuring the participation of all participants. At the end of each DG, participants had some time to write down their personal reflections.

In phase three, a final personal report was produced. Then, participants shared their personal perceptions of DG methodology in the final session.

### ***Data analysis***

A thorough examination of the information gathered throughout the whole process of DG implementation was conducted, using the transcripts of the collected materials (the initial and final reports from the participants, the trainer's notes and the personal notebooks of each participant). Thematic analysis (Cortazzi, 2014; Riessman, 2005) was used for this qualitative approach, which 'focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or organization' (Aronson 1995, 1) and consists of 'conceptual groupings from the data' (Riessman, 2005, p. 2). Following the research questions, we focused our analysis on three main areas: the impact of the DGs on the critical awareness of participants towards

TESOL, their teacher identity construction processes, and the impact of DG methodology on the critical responsive attitudes of participants towards TESOL teaching.

## **Results**

In this section, we present the main findings of our analysis of DGs and their impact on the teacher training of participants. Excerpts from the notebooks and reports of participants are quoted to illustrate how they progressively engaged in critical dialogues.

### ***Critical understanding among participants of teaching-learning practice in TESOL***

Under the first heading (Varieties of World English), participants were encouraged to deal with selected content knowledge that could foster a critical attitude towards the language they would be teaching. The acknowledgment of the rapid growth of the English language as a means of communication, its globalization, and its relation to power and dominance struck them in two ways, as Salvador explained:

[...] we all think that it would be necessary to explain in our future class how English started to develop and all the possible language variations. I never learnt about this in the school and now after reading this article I think that is absolutely necessary. (Personal notebook).

Similarly, Jonas wrote: ‘[...] I liked it because it makes me think about what is best for our students, what I want to teach and how I want to teach.’, (Personal notebook).

As several studies have noted (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Freeman, 2013), personal histories and life trajectories exert an important role in the formation of a teacher’s professional identity. Accordingly, the previous remarks revealed a reflective process that was intimately linked to the learning experiences of participants and their

negotiations with content teaching as future teachers of English. This matter was also present in Maria's personal notebook where she wrote: 'We, as future teachers have to stay aware of this situation and help our students by introducing them to the different cultures along with the different Englishes.' Equally, Jennifer wondered 'Should we teach a global English? If so, what kind of global values would it include?' and later concluded that the advantage of teaching standard or formal English to students would benefit their communicative skills. These reflections fell within Abendroth-Timmer and Henning's claims (2015) for initiating and guiding teachers at every stage of their careers 'to tackle in a reflexive manner the complexity of teaching situations in a pluralistic society' (p. 32). In our understanding, the above reflections critically addressed the complexity of teaching and learning English in a globalized and changing world.

In subsequent discussions, participants acknowledged the interrelation between power and language. The trainer's notes recorded that Maria, sharing her experience as a Language Assistant, affirmed that being a native speaker does not imply being a qualified teacher. As the discussion continued, Salvador and Caroline argued that non-native teachers may identify better with students and develop appropriate strategies for second language acquisition processes. This idea was rapidly shared by all the participants, indicating their identification with the argument and revealing their empowerment as legitimate teachers of English.

As recorded by the trainer, gathering 4 was significant in highlighting unspoken voices and minorities that do not normally appear in conventional teaching materials. Controversial opinions arose from that issue. According to Salvador, 'Minorities should not have a special treatment in the classroom, because that would enhance their

marginalization.’ But Maria and Fran disagreed and affirmed that the acknowledgement of minorities would at least reveal their existence. After some debate, the group wondered whether the mere inclusion of excluded voices would be enough to solve the imbalance in the English-speaking world, a question that remained unresolved.

In all, the participants became aware of the continuous transformations that the English language is undergoing. Moreover, these gatherings shed light on the shift from no orientation to a critical orientation among the participants of their teaching and learning practices. By admitting: ‘I never learnt about this in the school.’ (Personal notebook), Salvador was acknowledging the relevance of his prior learning experiences and their effect on his training to become a teacher. Likewise, Jonas wrote: ‘it makes me think about [...] what I want to teach and how I want to teach.’ (Personal notebook), and Fran concluded: ‘[...] somehow, I have realized that teaching is not all about contents, but about helping students understand the world in which we live.’ (Final personal report). It all showed evidence that the dynamics of the DGs promoted awareness of the importance of taking decisions regarding personal teaching praxis.

The reflective nature of DGs proved sufficient to raise awareness of the importance of adapting the teaching and learning practice to meet the needs of a transformative context. Moreover, the format of the DGs also meant that participants saw themselves as non-neutral teaching agents (Abednia, 2012), as Maria’s own words implied: ‘We [...] have to stay aware of this situation.’ (Personal notebook). It suggests that DGs fostered adaptation to continuous transformations among the prospective teachers of English, a shortcoming that Hernández (2011) had already detected in initial teacher training in Spain.

Several methodologies were analysed under the third heading of the DGs (Teaching strategies for ESL/EFL), to provide the participants with practical teaching strategies. Cooperative learning, co-teaching and collaboration, and meaningful learning were the main issues under discussion. Participants found them useful to break with individualism, both in their teaching and in their learning practices, as Jennifer remarked: ‘You can get further using the expertise of two or more teachers.’ (Personal notebook). Likewise, Maria wrote: ‘Sharing experiences and learning new methods may be of much help for us.’ (Personal notebook), to which Caroline added:

These methods would specially help recently graduate teachers like us, without much experience, to feel supported by other colleagues and not left alone in front of the students. But it would also help teachers with a long experience to be in touch with new ideas and ways of doing things. (Personal notebook).

Interestingly, Valery indicated the benefits of these methodologies for the sake of integration: ‘Co-teaching and collaboration allow teachers to better relate their subjects to real life. [...] in life, we have to use different skills and information simultaneously.’ (Personal notebook). All in all, these readings set examples of practical ways to improve teaching and learning, and were perceived as positive means for ‘non-experienced teachers,’ in Caroline’s words. But despite the above-mentioned advances, the discussions also brought some difficulties to the fore. Caroline detected that none of the readings had mentioned the weaknesses of those methods. In turn, Jennifer shared her fear of other teachers appearing ‘cooler’ to the students when practicing co-teaching. The difficulties of working together with other colleagues were also mentioned. Those

remarks implied an awareness among the students of the inherent difficulties of the teaching profession, a practice that navigates between autonomy and collaboration.

Considering that the initial teacher education programmes in Spain and other countries are consecutive, we considered that DGs had a positive the impact on the way participants shaped their teaching and learning practice at a stage prior to in-service practice. The reflective nature of DGs, particularly evident in the personal notebooks of participants, contributed to the development of self-reflection. For example, group empathy and self-identification as teachers were key issues that Caroline noted. The positive impact of the structure of the DG was also underlined in Valery's Final personal report where she affirmed that 'it made us read the texts more carefully, since we had to comment them afterwards. It was also useful to exchange opinions.' Finally, DGs allowed the participants to call into question their capacity to implement a range of pedagogical methodologies in educational contexts.

### ***The teacher identity construction process among the trainee secondary school TESOL teachers***

The DGs falling under the second heading (contextual strategies for TESOL) were oriented towards practical teaching situations, so that the participants could jointly reflect on their role as future teachers and at the same time critically assess their personal experiences and expectations. In that regard, issues of authority and democracy within the classroom generated much debate. Caroline considered that teachers deserve a certain degree of authority due to their age, but other participants argued that authority is an attribute which, unless granted by others, would otherwise turn into an imposition. Motivation and pressure were also two thought-provoking concepts. For Jennifer, the

former was linked to empathy. For Caroline, some degree of the latter was needed ‘to be able to know and evaluate a student, never pushing into aggression...’ (Personal notebook). Another vivid discussion evolved around the concept of democratic and critical teaching. During those gatherings, the question emerged of how to teach critically, leaving aside the ideology of the teacher. Jonas answered in his notebook:

[...] with the help of the language we should be able to educate and prepare our students for their future, for their better future, in a vision of a more human life for them. In my opinion, we teachers should be aware of having such a great responsibility, which is often underestimated or even forgotten. (Personal Notebook).

Jonas’ words illustrates the transformative essence of the teaching task: an aware and responsible agent whose approach is student-centred. Along the same lines, Valery affirmed: ‘If education means opening your mind to new ideas, teachers have an emancipatory and transformative mission.’ (Personal notebook). Although most of the participants agreed with the role of the teacher as a transformative practitioner (Morgan, 2010), some of them voiced their objections to a critical teaching practice. In particular, Jennifer wondered: ‘How to swim against the tide? [...] I fear the response of the families if we use these methodologies.’ (Trainer’s observation notes). This type of concern falls within Pennington and Richards’ (2016) discussion on institutional and individual teacher identities. Earlier on, both Jennifer and Caroline were clearly voicing their caution over deviating from an institutional construction of teacher identity. Adhesion to this default framework is common with little or no teaching experience and it appears to be the safest way for novice teachers at the initial stages of their careers (Pennington & Richards,

2016). While these reactions were natural, the nature of the selected readings tended to inspire a more critical and innovative attitude in the teaching profession. That is why Jonas and Valery simultaneously affirmed the need of every teacher to negotiate classroom management and use democratic pedagogies (Trainer's observation notes). Already at this early stage of their education, the concept of the teacher as a transformative agent revealed itself to be a conflict point for participants that affected their construction of language teacher identity.

As the gatherings continued, the debates shed some interesting light on certain questions posed in the previous sessions. Through the dialogues, autonomous learning was seen as an appropriate solution to the question of power. Hence, when the trainer asked them how students could become more autonomous, Valery answered: 'It requires a committed teacher' and Caroline added: 'To teach to think is to show the ways and let the students choose...', (Trainer's observation notes). Pivotal issues in the construction of an identity, such as autonomy, motivation and agency, were the underlying themes embedded in the reflections of the participants. Their statements were aligned with the commitment to the teaching profession demanded by Moses et al. (2017), and proved the importance of training critical and responsive professionals (Abednia, 2012).

At the end of the gatherings, all participants acknowledged their lack of training for a task beyond knowledge transfer and showed their willingness to learn how to bring this critical thinking into the teaching practice. In view of these matters, we concluded that the implementation of DGs had contributed to the construction of a critical professional identity among the trainee teachers.

***DGs as a tool to foster a critically responsive teaching practice in TESOL***

Our analysis of the information suggested that DG implementation is an opportunity for the development of a critically responsive teaching practice in TESOL among the participants.

In that regard, the results revealed some of the decisive methodological features of DGs. First, the nature of the selected readings. The opportunity to read and to discuss relevant scientific works in the field of TESOL, which respond to diverse topics and perspectives, afforded the students with an opportunity to embrace new knowledge in the field, building bridges between theory and practice. Notably, the selection and sequencing of the selected readings that followed the proposals of Hawkins and Norton (2009) fostered a critical awareness of the trainee teachers towards the teaching of English, supported critical self-reflection of their role as educators, and encouraged debates on inclusive and democratic teaching strategies, which would eventually enhance opportunities for learning. Formally, they were perceived as difficult to read, due to their high academic level but the topics were regarded as very useful. They all appreciated the diversity and novelty of the different methodologies explored as well as the particular examples under study. Jennifer said ‘I was familiar with some methodologies but had never thought how to implement them.’ They felt they had improved as responsive teachers: ‘You made me re-consider education and methodology!’, exclaimed Jonas.

Second, the dialogic procedure followed in DGs are based on egalitarian dialogue (Flecha, 2000). In their final reports, the participants concluded that dialogic and egalitarian interactions in DGs facilitated the sharing of complementary ideas and that, in turn, helped them understand the readings at a higher level. Maria commented: ‘The gatherings draw the text closer and the dialogue makes it more ‘human’ or more

understandable', while Valery said: 'Sharing ideas makes you better understand the readings and link them with personal experiences and contexts.' Similarly, after gathering 5 Fran admitted: '[...] I need to say that I didn't understand the paper totally. I have understood it during the gathering, thanks to my partners' help. We are continuously helping each other, explaining when someone does not understand.' (Personal notebook). In the light of these words, we can conclude that the procedure followed in the DGs accommodates democratic learning dynamics and informal reflection practice (Schoffner, 2008).

Furthermore, participants noticed an evolution of their own attitude towards participation based on egalitarian dialogue. Early on in her notebook, Jennifer confessed: 'I was very nervous at the first DG: the trainer was sitting nearby and I had a feeling of being observed. That soon changed because she acted as any other participant.' Naturally, there were different levels of engagement, an issue that had been systematically recorded in the trainer's observation notes. However, that source of information revealed that all the participants had, as requested, selected at least one paragraph before attending the gatherings and all of them had engaged in conversation at least once in every DG.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

The aim of this study was to analyse DG implementation in a teacher education programme as a distinctive methodology, unlike conventional group work and seminars. It was also to assess its impact on the critical approach of participants to the English language and their self-understanding as teachers. Accordingly, critical thinking awareness and teacher identity processes were examined. Furthermore, this study also

sought to identify what features of DGs enabled participants' engagement in a critically responsive attitude in TESOL.

Our findings revealed that the reading and discussion of primary scientific knowledge promoted the intersubjective construction of meaning among participants, together with increased reflection on the different theoretical and practical foundations of that field. Aided by a selection of critical texts and the dialogic dynamics of DGs, the participants joined a stimulating space of democratic interaction, where autonomous and collaborative learning was promoted and cultural and instrumental knowledge was shared. Our findings coincide with those of prior research on the implementation of DGs for in-service teacher training (Flecha, et al., 2019; Roca, et al., 2015) that places this program as a powerful tool to enrich the training of pre-service teachers in TESOL, since DGs give access to scientific knowledge and participants attribute collective meaning to the ways it can be applied to their future professional roles as teachers.

Added to the above, the dialogic process fostered by the DGs stimulated critical reflection among the trainee teachers. As the thought-provoking readings unveiled the complexity of English as a language that is taught, issues of power, dominance, oppression, and legitimacy came to the fore. Interestingly, the critical reflections on content also affected their understanding of themselves as teachers. Thanks to the DG methodology, they progressively negotiated and redefined their individual and collective conceptualizations of their identities as prospective teachers of English.

Hence, a heightened awareness of their responsibilities, not only content-wise, but also in relation to the pedagogies they would use, and their teaching styles, clearly intersected with their teacher identity construction process. DG procedure for language

teacher training combined individual and collective learning by means of egalitarian dialogue and intersubjectivity. Aided by democratic feedback, the participants benefited from self-awareness and a more critical knowledge of the teaching practice. Hence, our findings suggest that DGs create opportunities for future teachers to delve into their identity development process as future secondary teachers in TESOL, and consequently, this educational programme positively supports the area of teacher identity construction in pre-service courses.

In the Spanish context, DGs particularly offer appropriate means for trainers and participants to adapt to the continuous transformations in the field of TESOL. They are a useful strategy to foster autonomy in individuals and they cultivate a bottom-up construction of the teaching profession. Such positive outcomes highlight DGs as particularly suitable for overcoming some of the shortcomings detected in initial teacher training in TESOL.

As a cautionary note, the relatively small group of participants in this study is an important limitation, which could be addressed through further research analysing the implementation of DG methodology in initial teacher training programmes. Also, subsequent research would be desirable to test to what extent engagement in DGs may result in socially responsive teachers, a task that can only be undertaken after they graduate. Altogether, further research on the implementation of DG methodology in initial teacher training programmes can contribute to the field of critical and responsive teaching approaches in TESOL.

## **Notes**

1. The FP6 project INCLUD-ED (2006-2011) was the only Social Sciences and Humanities project highlighted by the EC among a list of European research projects that were ‘success stories’. Its main results were included in the Social Impact Open Repository (SIOR) (Flecha, Soler-Gallart & Sordé, 2015).
2. The consecutive model is not exclusive to Spain. On the contrary, it is currently in force in many European countries (see Musset, 2010).
3. In other countries such as Finland, these goals are met through the organization of seminars for joint reflection on in-service experiences, which have become a very important strategy for professional identity development (Rebolledo, 2015).
4. To protect their privacy, all participants have been given pseudonyms.
5. In Spain, this option encounters difficulties, due to the consecutive model of the programs. The fragmentation of the pre-service and in-service phases results in a loss of contact with the student teachers after pre-service training.

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Appendix. Readings used for the gatherings

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Section	Gathering and Reading
1. Variations of World Englishes (Critical Awareness)	<p>Gathering 1. Crystal, D. (2012). A global language. In P. Seargeant and J. Swann, <i>English in the world: history, diversity, change</i> (p. 151-177). London &amp; New York: Routledge.</p> <p>Gathering 2. Crystal, D. (2012). Plurilingualism, pluridialectism, pluriformity. <i>Plenary paper read at the annual conference of TESOL Spain, Bilbao</i>. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.davidcrystal.com/">http://www.davidcrystal.com/</a></p> <p>Gathering 3. Xiaoqiong, B. H., &amp; Xianxing, J. (2011). Kachru's Three Concentric Circles and English Teaching Fallacies in EFL and ESL Contexts. <i>Changing English, 18</i>(2), 219-228.</p> <p>Gathering 4. Sandhu, G. (2012). Creating Inclusive Classrooms Using Postcolonial and Culturally Relevant Literacy. <i>Journal of Critical Race Inquiry, 2</i>(1), 26-53.</p>
2. Contextual strategies for TESOL (Critical Self-Reflection)	<p>Gathering 5. Shor, I., &amp; P. Freire. (1987). What is the Dialogical Method of Teaching? <i>Journal of Education 169</i>(3), 11-31.</p> <p>Gathering 6. Pennycook, A. (1990). Critical pedagogy and second language education. <i>System, 18</i>(3), 303-314.</p> <p>Gathering 7. Barros-del Río, M. A. (2015). Promoting Critical Awareness in Spanish Pre-service ELT Training: A Chance to Change the World? <i>International Journal of English and Education, 4</i>(3), 252-263.</p>
3. Teaching strategies for ESL/EFL (Critical Pedagogical Relations)	<p>Gathering 8. DelliCarpini, M. (2009). Enhancing Cooperative Learning in TESOL Teacher Education. <i>ELT Journal, 63</i>(1), 42-50.</p> <p>Gathering 9. Dove, M., &amp; Honigsfeld. A. (2010). ESL Coteaching and Collaboration: Opportunities to Develop Teacher Leadership and Enhance Student Learning. <i>TESOL Journal, 1</i>(1): 3-22.</p> <p>Gathering 10. Díaz Romero, M. (2007). Meaningful Learning and the EFL/ESL Classroom. <i>Episteme, 12</i>(3).</p>

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