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ESOL teacher educators' learning initiatives and perceived learning needs: still a pending task

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ABSTRACT

Even though international research has offered a rich account of teacher educators' professional learning, it has overlooked the implications of the disciplines they teach for their professional learning engagement. Therefore, it is timely to examine teacher educators from different fields of expertise to offer a more specific and subject-related understanding of their professional learning involvement. This study investigates the initiatives that Chilean university-based ESOL teacher educators engage in to continue learning and their perceived professional learning needs. Data are drawn from a national web-based survey and a focus group. The results suggest that individual formal learning opportunities that are highly valued, and sometimes prescribed, by higher education institutions are predominant. Their professional learning needs, however, relate mainly to promoting collaborative peer-learning, advancing knowledge about diversity in the classroom and technology literacy, and enhancing their research skills and practice in language teaching. This study highlights the importance of identifying these needs as a foundation to design learning opportunities that meet the demands of the profession and the particularities of each discipline. Recommendations to enhance their continuous education towards a view of professionalism that recognises their ability to manifest ideas and agency to effect change are discussed.

Introduction

This research article offers a space for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher educators to reclaim their pivotal role in teacher education, examining their ongoing learning initiatives and their professional learning needs. The interest in the lives of teacher educators and their continuous learning increased after Smith's (2003) ground-breaking article and stimulating call for more research in this field. However, in the Chilean context there has been little local research about teacher educators' Professional Development and Learning (PDL) (e.g. Cornejo-Abarca 2007; Aliaga-Salas 2015; Hinostroza-Paredes 2020) and even more limited attention to the professionals that educate future ESOL teachers. While claiming a slight local surge in the interest in teacher educators' lives, Cornejo-Abarca (2007) argued that there is still limited attention and practical implications to promote their professional learning. Likewise, as part of her

analysis of a Chilean initial ESOL teacher education programme, Aliaga-Salas (2015) supported this view and called for more professional learning opportunities to support ESOL teacher educators' work.

Inspired by the work conducted in the northern hemisphere (e.g. Cochran-Smith et al. 2020; De Wever et al. 2016; Flores 2017; Kelchtermans, Smith, and Vanderlinde 2018; Koster et al. 2008; MacPhail et al. 2019) I examined the PDL initiatives and professional learning needs of Chilean university-based ESOL teacher educators. This was done primarily to raise local awareness of these professionals and to contribute to the literature in language education from a context that has not been actively part of mainstream studies in teacher education. Most of the current studies discuss the work of teacher educators generically, not addressing the uniqueness of a specific discipline. ESOL teacher educators are a heterogeneous group of professionals with diverse background language experiences (e.g. native and non-native English speakers) who prepare English language teachers using English as the means and end of instruction. Their work moves between teaching about the language and teaching how to teach the language while using it as the means of communication. Hence, their professional learning initiatives and needs may differ from what general research about teacher educators have specified.

This article aims to contribute to knowledge 'glocally' which means advancing global knowledge about ESOL teacher educators and regional knowledge about teacher educators. This will assist in decentralising knowledge generation from developed countries and give more attention to other contexts that may indeed add a new perspective towards language teacher education. These findings could also serve as a basis to generate more bottom-up, tailored and self-directed PDL activities while offering these professionals the possibility to reclaim their professionalism (Hinostroza-Paredes 2020).

Literature review

Who is a teacher educator?

The first aspect that needs to be examined is who teacher educators are. What the term teacher educator means still seems to be considered as an umbrella concept that encompasses all the professionals involved in teacher education, suggesting that they are the ones who educate pre-service and in-service teachers. The vagueness in defining what it means to be a teacher educator has still not disappeared and it needs to be urgently reconsidered (Lunenberg, Korthagen, and Zwart 2011; Smith 2003; White 2019). In an attempt to determine a broader definition for this group of teachers, Snoek, Swennen, and van der Klink (2011, 653) refer to a teacher educator 'as someone who contributes in a formal way to the learning and development of teachers' including all those who work in higher education and schools. In this article, I refer to teacher educators as those who facilitate the learning of student teachers and teachers (Koster et al. 2008; Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Korthagen 2014) working in university-based student teacher preparation programmes (Loughran 2014; Selkrig and Keamy 2015).

As there is not a formal route to become a teacher educator, most of them learn how to educate student teachers on the job as induction and mentoring are usually not offered (Koster et al. 2008). Montenegro Maggio (2016) found that Chilean teacher educators are

university-based teachers whose professional entry to academia has not been regulated by clearly defined mechanisms. Some are invited to join teacher education programmes based on their successful school teaching experiences while others are recruited through national public job calls, and a large amount of them have unstable part-time contracts (Reyes & Santos 2011).

Teacher educators' PDL

Research from the northern hemisphere has shown the array of opportunities for teacher educators' PDL . Maaranen et al. (2020) studied experienced Finnish university-based teacher educators' views on their professional development and found that these practitioners were all active in producing research, which was what they valued as professional development. In the Netherlands, Dengerink, Lunenberg, and Kools (2015) showed that teacher educators, both school-based and university-based, had a preference for informal learning (e.g. reading scientific articles and having conversations with colleagues). However, how and with whom they wanted to continue learning differed significantly considering the context they work in (i.e. school or university) and their career phase. In this aspect, Van der Klink et al. (2017) showed that teacher educators' concerns shifted during the course of their teaching career from attempting to survive in a new context as a beginner teacher educator to a more mature perspective on their identity and the pedagogy for preparing teachers.

In a cross-national research article, MacPhail et al. (2019) reported that teacher educators from six jurisdictions (England, Ireland, Israel, Norway, Scotland, and The Netherlands) referred to the lack of opportunities for PDL and the strong reliance on the individuals to seek out learning opportunities. International attempts have been made to address the gap between the existing PDL opportunities and teacher educators' beliefs and concerns. All of this has resulted in the establishment of official standards and profiles to define the knowledge and skills these teachers need to operate alongside the creation of supportive Ministerial and/or private bodies. The MOFET Institute in Israel, the VELON association in the Netherlands, the S-STEP community in USA and the European project INFO-TED have been pioneers in recognising the need of support for the professional learning of these practitioners.

In Chile, conversely, Hinostroza-Paredes (2020) found that teacher educators' professionalism have been overlooked by national policies and higher education institutions, reflecting teacher educators' marginal position in teacher education policies. Her findings imply a managerial and functionalist perspective towards professional learning converting it into another performativity indicator. Some years ago, the National Commission Report of Initial Teacher Education (Ministerio de Educacion, 2005) reported that there was a lack of initiatives for teacher educators' professional learning considering their limited school experience and lengthy careers in universities. It also claimed that their professional learning was affected by the political decisions of the institutions and the low value they were provided within these constrained environments that might discourage their commitment to continuous learning.

In a local study about language teacher educators' cognition regarding a curriculum change, Aliaga-Salas (2015) raised awareness of the ample knowledge base that these professionals are expected to have as part of their role as teachers of teachers. This raises

the question of what these knowledge bases are and how (if so) language teacher educators are prepared to fulfil this role. If there is no preparation to become a teacher educator then continuous professional learning opportunities turn out to be crucial to support these professionals. Barahona (2019) studied university supervisors (i.e. casually employed ESOL teacher educators) and their contribution to student teachers' professional learning. Her findings suggested that these academics, whose main role was to supervise student teacher practicum, require learning spaces to advance into new knowledge and strengthen their competencies and skills to teach about teaching. Nevertheless, Sepulveda-Escobar (2020) found that the learning opportunities for ESOL teachers are usually de-contextualised, unadapted to teachers' roles and characteristics, and not addressing their needs.

In sum, teacher educators' PDL is of supreme importance and needs further local and global attention (McGee and Lawrence 2009). This is mainly because they do not only teach about a field of specialisation, but they also teach about teaching. For ESOL teacher educators, they also teach the discipline by actually using it as a means of instruction. Hence, their professional learning activities and needs could range from learning how to use the language, how to use it while teaching and how to make it 'teachable'. If they are the ones that support pre- and in-service teachers' professional learning, their own PDL does require extensive examination and need to be integral to their work. This study aims to address the gap in the literature describing what ESOL teacher educators do to keep learning and what their professional learning needs are. The question that guided this research study is:

What are ESOL teacher educators professional learning needs?

This study

Method

A mixed-method case study design guided the data collection and analysis of this study where both quantitative and qualitative data were used to provide evidence for a particular case (Guetterman and Fetters 2018). This kind of design combines elements of two types of methodologies requiring additional time, resources and knowledge to collect and analyse two different types of data (McKim 2017). The rationale for choosing this 'inclusive research methodology' (Riazi and Christopher 2014, 139) relies upon the need to integrate quantitative and qualitative data where the results from the latter were built upon the analysis obtained from the quantitative data. This mixed-method research follows Bryman's (2014) guidelines as it has been technically-competent implemented, transparent, linked to the research question and clear about the design, the rationale for choosing it, and the integration between the two data sets.

The data presented in this article corresponds to the first phase of a larger Design-Based Research (DBR) project that sought to design and build an online learning community for ESOL teacher educators. The aim of this first stage was to explore the characteristics, roles, PDL initiatives and needs of ESOL teacher educators in Chile to later design a learning community that addressed their professional learning needs. Thus, this phase provided the foundations for the collaborative design of the community. The

enactment and evaluation of the designed intervention occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and offered a great opportunity for these professionals to reflect on their actual practices in a time of change and uncertainty.

Participants

There were two groups of participants in this study: those who completed the quantitative stage (i.e. online survey) and those who took part in the qualitative phase (i.e. focus group interview). A description of both groups is provided below.

A non-probabilistic snowballing sampling procedure was used to contact the participants of the quantitative stage. In this type of sampling, researchers contact a few initial participants who are invited to take part in a research project. These participants then recommend and refer to other participants who could potentially be interested in the project, and so on (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019). This chain sampling method enables the access to specific networks that we know that exist and fit in the research criteria (Emmel 2013). An invitation to complete the online survey was both sent to ESOL teacher educators from a local network of research in ELT and posted on the network's social media. They were asked to identify more teachers who would potentially be interested in participating. ESOL teacher educators who accessed the online survey tool were 83.

Data were collected and analysed based on complete surveys only, as partially-completed surveys were not considered. Of this sample, 53 (64%) answered it completely. Most of the participants (n = 27) were middle-career teachers between 36 and 50 years old followed by participants who were over 51 (n = 14). Only 12 were found to be between 26–30 years old and no one under 25. This sample consisted of 37 female, 15 male and 1 participant who preferred not to state their gender. Regarding their teaching experience at school and higher education, the survey participants' background is quite varied (see Figure 1). 66% of participants have more than four years of school teaching experience and 81% of the sample has more than four years of higher education teaching experience. When asked about their path to teacher education, 38 out of 53 (72%) ESOL teacher educators were invited to join the initial ESOL teacher education programme either by a colleague or the programme director, based on the participants' school teaching experience, scholarly background or academic degree. Only 15 respondents stated that they were recruited through a national job call published either online or in a newspaper. Regarding their professional role (see Figure 2), most of the survey participants identified themselves as teachers of teachers (81%), teachers (79%) and researchers (55%).

For the qualitative stage, which was carried out after the quantitative phase, a convenience sampling method was used due to the geographic proximity of the participants and the researcher (Lavrakas 2008). A group of teacher educators from one specific ESOL teacher education programme was selected to take part in a focus group interview. They were contacted by email asking for their interest in this study. The eight participants who took part in this phase had a full-time contract (i.e. 45 hour-contract) at a private university in Chile and work exclusively for the ESOL initial teaching programme (see Table 1). Most of them had several years of school teaching experience and
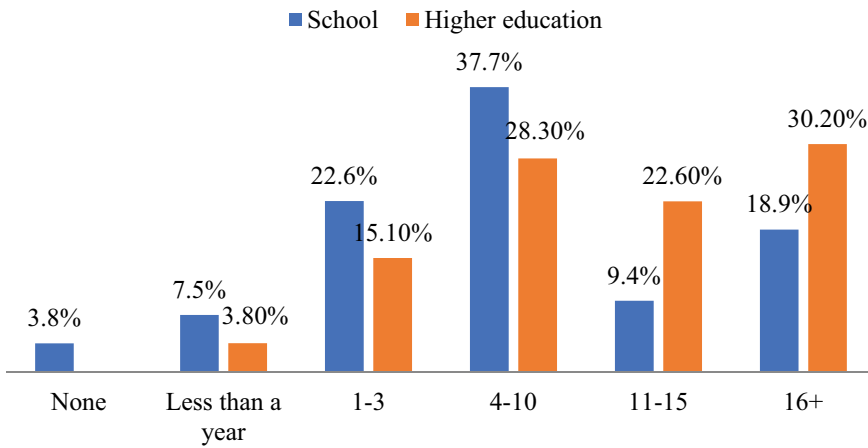
Years of teaching experience

■ School ■ Higher education

Figure 1. Years of teaching experience.

How would you identify yourself? Tick all that apply

- ■ Teacher
- ■ Teacher of teachers
- ■ Coach
- ■ Researcher
- ■ Academic administrator
- ■ Curriculum developer
- ■ Broker (i.e. link between the university and schools)
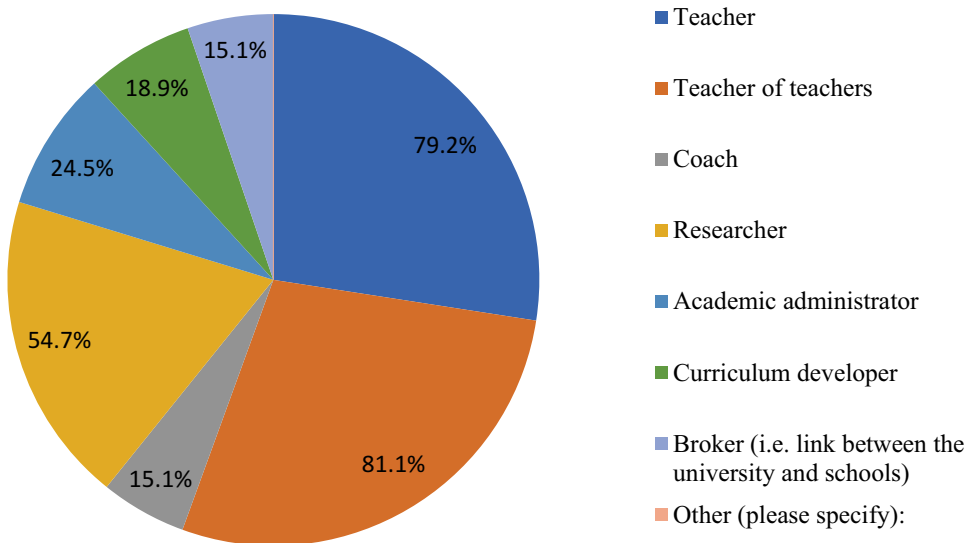- ■ Other (please specify):

Figure 2. ESOL teacher educators' roles.

a relatively long career in teacher education. Regarding their pathway to teacher education, five out of eight participants were invited to join the teaching programme while three applied through a national job call.

Table 1. Focus group participants.

Pseudonym	Age	School teaching experience	Teacher-educating experience	Current weekly workload
Tania	53	28 years	8 years	12 hours for direct teaching and 33 for administrative tasks
Pablo	42	10 years	10 years	30 hours for direct teaching and 15 for other tasks
Pedro	52	10 years	15 years	18 hours for direct teaching, 4 hours for dissertation supervision and 23 for administrative tasks
Luisa	32	1 year	3,5 years	26 hours for direct teaching and 19 for other tasks
Luis	34	None	8 years	20 hours for direct teaching and 25 hours for administrative tasks
Karen	37	14 years	Less than a year	24 hours for direct teaching and 21 for dissertation supervision and administrative tasks
Juan	37	2 years	12 years	18 hours for direct teaching, 4 hours for dissertation supervision and 23 for administrative tasks
Teresa	36	9 years	1 and a half year	2 hours for direct teaching, 5 hours for administrative tasks and 38 for placement supervision

Established ethical research procedures were followed in both stages. All the participants were asked for their consent to take part in the study, and they were also informed of their right to withdraw at any point of the study. In the quantitative stage, this was done before completing the online survey. For the focus group, consent from the institution was sought and this research was authorised by the campus Vice-Chancellor, head of the School of Education and the Academic Coordinator. For the presentation of the findings, two ways of addressing the participants' identities have been used in order to ensure their anonymity and confidentially. Focus group participants were given pseudonyms (as seen in Table 1) and survey participants were addressed using numbers (e.g. participant 30).

Data collection methods

Two methods were used to collect data. Firstly, a web-based survey was designed to explore the perspectives and experiences ESOL teacher educators, throughout the country, have had regarding PDL . The rationale for using a web-based survey was to access as many professionals as possible in order to provide a wider context of the sample. The survey consisted of 8 open-ended items and 12 closed-ended questions which were piloted with a group of international experienced language teacher educators. The dimensions explored in the survey were three: demographic and background information (e.g. age, years of teaching experience, academic degrees), continuous professional learning initiatives and needs (e.g. PDL activities, PDL preferences), and insights into the concepts of reflective dialogue and Professional Learning Community (PLC). This article presents the analysis of the first two areas. For this data collection process, I faced some difficulties in accessing a higher number of participants as the survey was sent in an unfortunate timing with teacher educators ending the academic year. The survey was then available for more than three months to reach a wider audience.

The second tool was a focus group interview with the selected ESOL teacher educators from one university. In qualitative research, this method is used to obtain in-depth knowledge about individuals' attitudes, perceptions, and opinions about a specific

issue. This method is ideal for investigations where there is scant information about a specific topic while being affordable, efficient and fast (Morrison, Lichtenwald, and Tang 2020; Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009). The focus group lasted around 1.5 hour and the participants decided to use Spanish to hold the conversation. The questions covered topics similar to the ones examined in the survey such as their PDL involvement, professional learning needs, collaborative reflection and PLC building. The group size (i.e. 8 participants) was enough to both yield diversity and offer a comfortable environment to share their thoughts. The conversation was audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

To conduct the analysis of the quantitative section of the survey, IBM SPSS 20.0 was used to develop general patterns of the sample. For the answers to the open-ended questions and the focus group, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2019) was conducted. This orientation towards research stresses meaning as contextual, considers multiple realities and enables the researcher to actively participate in knowledge generation (Braun and Clarke 2013). The focus group transcript and the survey open-ended questions were analysed in Nvivo 12 where I got familiarised with the data, searched existing concepts from the teacher educators' PDL literature and identified other emergent codes. In this way, I read the transcripts many times highlighting the extracts and organising them around similar meanings. Then, I arranged these codes into clusters of meaning that captured patterns across the data developing themes which considered the examined literature, the research problem, and the research methodology. Then, themes were reviewed, and the supporting extracts revisited. The focus group transcript was written and analysed in Spanish where themes were also developed in Spanish. To check the accuracy and consistency of the translation, the themes and sections of the transcript from which these themes were generated were sent to two bilingual speakers.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis, more than one source of data was used strengthening the validity of the research and adding rigour to the research design (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). Also, a rich description of the context and the participants is provided to inform researchers in other contexts offering a vivid picture of the participants' lives and work. Finally, the back translation of the themes and extracts enabled the reflective and constant examination and questioning of the data and its translation.

Findings

The two themes that were developed from the qualitative data analysis are discussed in this section: teacher educators' PDL initiatives and their professional learning needs.

Professional learning and development activities

Participating in workshops and attending national conferences were the most frequent PDL activities for ESOL teacher educators. While 25% of the survey participants have actively participated in language-teaching-related workshops and courses as participant 10 exemplified *'I've taken several courses related with how we learn and how to teach'*, 28%

of the participants refer to seminars and conferences as the most common PDL initiative in the last 12 months. Participant 2 explained this engagement as part of their research interest: *'As my main area is SLA (Second-Language Acquisition) research, I have attended seminars and conferences that deal with teaching and learning EFL (English as a Foreign Language)'*. Teacher educators acknowledged the benefits of these activities claiming that they provide further insights into evidence-based teaching practices, current advances in the ESOL field and updated knowledge about teacher education. As participant 10 put it *'I think they [conferences and workshops] are very useful to me in the sense that I can learn about new studies, research techniques and classroom activities. I can also meet new people and exchange experiences with them'*.

Alongside the frequency of participation in workshops and conferences, the participants' answers also included other PDL activities such as conducting research (19%) and reading scientific journals (10%). In this aspect, Pedro, a participant from the focus group, mentioned *'what we usually do to learn is to search new research articles about what we are teaching to incorporate them in our lessons'*. Degree-led initiatives were also frequent as 13% of the survey participants had either finished a postgraduate course or were enrolled in one. Indeed, two participants from the focus group were finishing their doctoral degrees.

When asked about the activities they would like to get involved in to continue learning (see Figure 3), initiatives that encourage collaborative work were widely favoured (85%), despite their current lack of engagement in these activities (only 3% of the survey participants identified this activity as part of their PDL involvement). Other preferred activities were self-study (83%), conducting research (75%) and attending ELT conferences (75%). The motivation to engage in formal learning opportunities might respond to the performativity agenda of higher education where professionals are held accountable for their research outputs and their certificates of participation. Juan exemplified this situation when he said that *'reading a book or an article cannot be added to your resumé as it is not relevant for most institutions, they only care about academic degrees and certification'*.
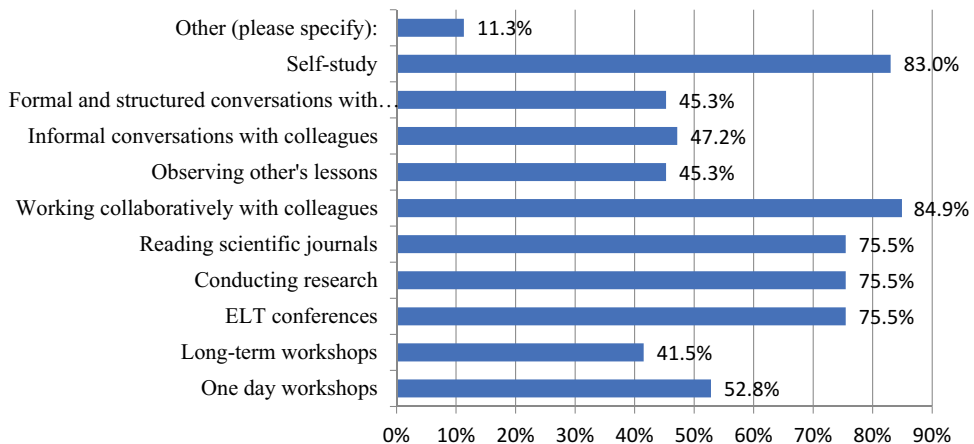

Figure 3. PDL activities preference.

Professional learning needs

What the participants from both data collection tools acknowledged as professional learning needs are presented in three clusters: research skills, knowledge about teaching diverse students and using technology, and collaborative learning and reflection.

Firstly, the participants argued that developing technical skills to conduct research is an area that needs to be addressed as it would consolidate their ability to research while responding to the research outputs that universities have declared their academics to have. 25% of those who completed the survey indicated that this was their current main professional learning need. Participant 34 indicated this need *'to learn more about research and to better my skills in writing papers'*. Participant 12 also reflected on this aspect stating that *'my main need is related to research and publishing. This is an important part of a teacher educator professional responsibility but starting is hard, especially because there is a lot of obstacles to be given research hours within the work-load'*. This comment urges higher education institutions to facilitate more time and space for research-related activities. Juan shared this apprehension as *'there is no support from universities to conduct research despite their [universities'] constant concern and pressure for this activity to be developed by academics'*. In particular, academic writing assistance, guidance on how on to publish a research paper and support to supervise undergraduate dissertations are key aspects the participants claimed to be needed to improve as professionals.

Secondly, 21% of the surveyed ESOL teacher educators argued that more emphasis should be given to improving teacher knowledge about language teaching and assessment practices for the classroom diversity. Participant 8 touched upon this need arguing that *'our learner profile is constantly changing, so I would like to know more about how to deal with the diversity we have in the classrooms'*. Karen claimed that *'this [class diversity] is a reality our student teachers will face so we need to prepare them for that'*. Luis added that this professional need takes them back to when they studied to become teachers as they *'never learned about this class diversity in our teaching programmes'*. 15% of the participants also argued that they should invest more time in learning how to adapt technological devices and applications to teach a second language. Survey participant 9 referred to this: *'I'd like to be more updated or be trained in terms of the use of the latest educational apps in the classroom'*. Likewise, participant 46 *'would like to learn more about technology tools to teach interactive lessons'*. It seems then that the role that technology currently plays in online teaching and learning as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic has encouraged language teacher educators to learn about new software and applications to better prepare teachers for the future of education. Tania emphasised this point by questioning herself about *'how are we going to teach pre-service teachers to use technological devices if we even have no idea how to use them?'*

Finally, the participants raised awareness of the lack of safe spaces they have to work collaboratively with their colleagues to reflect on their practices and not merely solve administrative difficulties. 13% of the participants described it as a current professional need. Participant 33 argued that this need responds to *'a culture that doesn't support collaboration'*. Here, university administrators play a dominant role in facilitating a space for collaboration, however, 'e*mployers still do not understand the importance of*

professional development and its impact, so they do not provide teachers with spaces/opportunities for it' (participant 8). They claimed that what they do to collaborate and reflect is not sufficient and needs to be addressed in a more structured format to support their own teaching practices and encourage student teachers to reflect. Participant 50 stated that *'I would like to learn strategies for teacher collaboration and reflection'*. Karen, from the focus group, supported this claim when she argued that *'there is not a formal instance to reflect collaboratively, what we do is only informal conversations in the corridor, but there is nothing formally established'*.

Discussion

Unlike findings from the Netherlands and Finland, what Chilean ESOL teacher educators valued the most as PDL relates mainly to formal learning activities, such as attending ELT conferences, workshops and obtaining advanced academic degrees. This supports TALIS results where workshops and courses were the most common forms of PDL (Burns and Darling-Hammond 2014). However, what the participants prefer and claim to need to continue learning goes against these transmissive activities and calls for a more transformative oriented approach to professional learning (Kennedy 2014).

A possible explanation for the discrepancy might be the institutional pressure to improve the 'quality' of their academics in order to respond to institutional standards and excellence indicators. This might also be a consequence of the managerial and performativity approach that characterises most universities that shifts all their attention to university rankings and institutional accreditation, neglecting other relevant areas of higher education such as teaching and practice (Reyes 2016). This suggests that teacher educators are compelled to engage, despite their needs, in formal professional learning activities that are prescribed, and therefore accepted, by tertiary education providers. Laiho, Jauhiainen, and Jauhiainen (2020) highlight that this managerial practice contrasts with the uniqueness and diverse culture that characterises the teaching profession, accentuating a demanded view towards professionalism (Evans 2010).

Regarding their professional learning needs, three areas were mentioned as requiring further attention. Firstly, this research found that collaborative learning is a wanted, but a non-existent initiative. This corroborates the findings of a great deal of previous work in the field (e.g. Lunenberg, Korthagen, and Zwart 2011; Dengerink, Lunenberg, and Kools 2015; Van der Klink et al. 2017; MacPhail et al. 2019). Even though, collaborative practices have been found to be preferable activities for teachers to develop (Burns and Darling-Hammond 2014), not sufficient opportunities for this to happen have been enabled. Secondly, they call for more opportunities to learn about how to teach the English language in a diverse classroom. Teacher educators recognised lack of knowledge and skills to teach pre-service teachers how to teach a foreign language in an inclusive classroom with diverse intellectual abilities. With this in mind, allocating proper induction and training to encourage teacher educators to develop a more varied profile (Czerniawski et al. 2021) becomes crucial for educational enhancement.

These areas needing further attention take us back to Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) differentiation between knowledge-for-practice, knowledge-in-practice and knowledge-of-practice, adding to the existing literature on teacher educators' PDL .

Using the authors' distinctions, this study shows the need to acknowledge the complexity between teaching and practice to support teacher educators' knowledge-in-practice. This conception of knowledge is responsive to the particularities of the discipline and the context, which is acquired through experience. In this matter, teacher educators' PDL should not only focus on the learning of content-related knowledge (in this case EFL), but also on the knowledge about 'teacher educating' (Goodwin et al. 2014, 285) which advocates the notions of teaching about teaching and learning about teaching (Loughran 2006).

The third identified area refers to the need to have more time and space to conduct research. Despite their current engagement in research-related activities and preference to learn about research, ESOL teacher educators still refer to this area as one needing further attention. On one side, this seems to place research as central to the generation of knowledge-of-practice (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999) where teacher educators question their own knowledge and practice, and knowledge and research of others, resulting in research and teaching being mutually informing spaces. On the other hand, however, this need to conduct research could also respond to the current research demands of higher education institutions where teacher education programmes are typically offered. The focus on 'research with a capital R' (Murray, Czerniawski, and Barber 2011, 268) as indispensable for promotion tends to make teacher educators concentrate much more on this matter rather than on the key issue of linking theory with practice in teacher education (Rust 2019). Regardless of the motivation to conduct research, the scholarship within language teacher education demands for a collective investment not only from teacher educators themselves, but also from ministerial organisations and higher-education institutions. Indeed, Smith and Assunção Flores (2019) argue that the increased pressure on research and publication without the required resources for the institutions and for the practitioners could be at the cost of the quality of good teaching.

The implications of this study contribute to raising awareness of the significance of exploring the learning needs of teacher educators from different disciplines as they may vary, causing an inconsistency between what the professionals need and the learning initiatives that they are offered. Murray et al. (2021, 8) recently argue the difficulty in designing 'a blueprint for all teacher educators' professional development as the needs are complex, multidimensional, multifactorial and context dependent'. For ESOL teacher educators, particularly those non-native English speakers, their professional learning needs could also be shaped by their insecurity associated to their 'non-nativeness' (Dominik and De Costa 2017). Therefore, a thorough needs analysis is required as a first step to then develop learning opportunities that consider the discipline they teach as a central nucleus. Even though generic studies about teacher educators' PDL may contribute to the design and development of learning initiatives, a deeper discipline-related analysis is essential to address the distinctiveness of each group of professionals.

Finally, some of these findings are particularly troubling and present us with a dilemma. On one side, there are specific learning needs that have not been addressed by existing PDL opportunities. This has resulted in teacher educators needing time and space to exert their agency and autonomy to direct their learning based on identified needs. On the other hand, however, they are faced with a system that highly values formal professional development tied to a performativity agenda that seeks compliance and standardisation. Unfortunately,

the idea of research performativity coexists uneasily with informal initiatives for professional enhancement (Murray, Czerniawski, and Barber 2011). If the institutions still play a dominant role in deciding what counts as PDL , it becomes quite difficult for these professionals to aim for transformative learning based on an appropriate needs analysis. Therefore, the paradigm shift that higher education institutions and ministerial bodies must go through requires a perspective on PDL that not only promotes teacher educators' knowledge-for-practice, but also the uniqueness of teacher educators' knowledge-in-practice, their empowerment, agency, and ownership of their learning. This way of approaching professional learning would enable professionals to move from 'following prescriptions to having choices, from spectators to actors and from silent to outspoken participants' (Freire 1972, 48).

Conclusion

While this research article has examined the complex nature of ESOL teacher educators' PDL activities and perceived learning needs, it has also uncovered the urgency for further research in other disciplines. I argue that these findings could provide a basis for designing contextualised PDL opportunities, bringing to light the voices of teacher educators to exert agency and take ownership of their learning while acknowledging their professional needs. Although the study is small scale addressing one particular context and discipline, and therefore certain generalised practical suggestions are difficult to support, it offers teacher education providers and ESOL teacher educators the possibility of reflecting on these needs and generating tailored learning opportunities that could respond to some of the aspects reported in this article.

The implications of this study for the international community rely upon the need to raise awareness about the role these professionals have and the uniqueness of their professional learning needs. Even though, generic research about this group of practitioners has widely contributed to examining their PDL , more research is needed on the particularities of each discipline to promote both their knowledge-in-practice and knowledge-of-practice. This suggests that further research should conduct exhaustive needs analysis about teacher educators' learning activities and needs considering the context and discipline they teach as fundamental underlying aspects. This would contribute to current practice as more tailored opportunities to continue learning could be generated and developed for and by teacher educators. This also suggests that universities need to move from the mainstream understanding that professional learning equals certification and knowledge-for-practice only to a more holistic conceptualisation that includes teacher educators' particularities, the content they teach and the conceptions of teaching about teaching and learning about teaching. I hope that this article could motivate others to examine the learning activities and needs of teacher educators from distinctive disciplines contributing to the broad literature on teacher educators' continuous professional learning.

Disclosure statement

Funding

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