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Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Urmia University

Religious Beliefs and the English Language Teaching Profession: Metaphors of Teachers' Self-understandings

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ABSTRACT

The relation between English language teaching and religion has not been given sufficient attention. Most of the existing explorations of this relationship have tended to reify Western-biased outlooks of this phenomenon, which rightly highlight serious moral dilemmas derived from a focus on Christian evangelization, neo-imperialist dynamics attached to the spread of English, and valid questions about the quality of teaching while proselytizing (e.g. Edge, 2003; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003). This body of work, however, fails to consider other possible and multiple ways in which religious values come to bear in ELT considering, for instance, non-Western, less globalized, and less diverse contexts such as rural locales in a South American country. This paper presents an alternative outlook, drawing on a narrative study of the current state of ELT in rural Colombia. The analysis uncovers religion-informed metaphors that illuminate how the spiritual values of eight teachers intersect with their professional identities. It suggests that spirituality plays a central role in helping teachers navigate the complex sociocultural conditions of teaching English in rural areas, influencing their roles beyond language instruction.

Keywords: religious beliefs; English language teaching; teachers' self-understanding; teacher identity; missionary work

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 27 July 2023 **Revised version received:** 16 Jan. 2024

Accepted: 16 June 2024 **Available online:** 10 July 2024

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10.30466/ijltr.2024.54831.2571

Introduction

Since teachers do not leave who they are and what they value at the door of their classrooms, but rather tend to interact as whole persons with their whole-person learners, it must be assumed … that teachers' spirituality then becomes part of how they conceptualize their professional identities and activities as well as of how they attempt to put those conceptions into practice (Farrell et al., 2020, p. 6).

In recognition of the fact that classroom dynamics are often a reflection of the teachers' own understandings within the larger sociocultural and political context, the study of language teacher identity has seen significant developments over the last three decades (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2017; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015; Varghese et al., 2005). This period has witnessed a proliferation of studies exploring teacher professional identities in relation to, for instance, what teachers think, know, believe, and do (Borg, 2009; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015), their learning and teaching histories as well as their current practices (Olsen, 2016; Sayer, 2012), and the role of emotions in the ways they understand what they are and do (Song, 2016; Wolff & De Costa, 2017).

One crucial dimension of teacher identity that remains underexplored, however, is the influence of teachers' spiritual lives (Han, 2018). As Farrell et al. (2020) point out, teachers and learners are whole-persons; thus, it is undeniable that their religious beliefs come to bear in how they act and understand what they do. Yet, as Morgan (2009, p 193) cautioned, religion has been a "blind spot" in TESOL, a neglected area of research (Morgan & Clarke, 2011). Despite some growth in research addressing this blind spot —for instance, in the form of edited collections (e.g., Wong & Canagarajah, 2009; Wong & Mahboob, 2018) and book-length discussions (Baurain, 2016; Johnston, 2017) and much-needed empirical research (e.g., Almayez, 2022; Muhalim-Muhalim, 2023; Tajeddin et al., 2021; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2021)— the connection between spirituality and English language teaching remains largely underexamined (Han, 2018). One possible explanation of this oversight is the "narrow conceptualizations of language, the learner and teaching and learning in the field of applied linguistics" (Han, 2018, p. 433). As Baurain (2016) critiques, this predominantly secular perspective often expects individual religious convictions to remain personal and excluded from public discourse, including language teaching.

Returning to the opening quote, "teachers do not leave who they are and what they value at the door of their classrooms" (Farrell et al., 2020, p. 6), which makes it essential to take seriously the study of teacher identity configuration in relation to their spiritual beings. This research seeks to address this gap by examining how the religious values of a group of Colombian rural English language teachers affect their professional identities and practices. It emerges from a larger narrative study aimed at exploring how this group of teachers make sense of their professional practice and sense of being, considering both the salient emphasis given to English in the national curriculum by means of ambitious language policy as well as the rural sociocultural landscape.

Language policy was taken into account as the country has been investing considerable amounts of money in ELT initiatives to make the country bilingual (in Spanish and English). However, these initiatives have been heavily criticized for being relevant almost only in ideal contexts (Guerrero, 2008; Mackenzie, 2021), which are not precisely rural schools.

The Colombian rural sector faces significant social inequalities, including poverty, poor quality and insufficient coverage of education, child labor, precarious economic opportunities and, as a consequence, a generalized disregard for its ways of life (López & Nuñez, 2007; Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo [PNUD], 2011;). In addition, remote rural areas have been historically associated with guerrilla organizations, making them the epicenters of the internal armed conflict (Ríos, 2016). This less-than-ideal context provides an intriguing perspective to

analyze the emphasis on English in the national curriculum, with significant implications for language policy, practice, and teachers' professional identity configuration. I have already discussed the major implications for language policy and practice elsewhere (Cruz-Arcila, 2018). Regarding identity, religion emerged as a prominent theme, leading to the central question of this analysis: how do religious beliefs come to bear on the ways in which a group of rural English language teachers shape their professional self-understanding **in interaction with** both the ELT policy and the challenging sociocultural rural landscape?

Religion in Colombia

Colombia has historically been a predominantly Catholic country, to the extent that before the current constitution was approved in 1990, Catholicism was the sole official religion and a mandatory part of the national school curriculum (Beltran-Cely, 2013). In recent times, Colombia no longer designates an official religion, and its religious landscape has become less Catholic, although it remains predominantly Christian (Beltran-Cely & Larotta, 2020). A study on religious diversity in Colombia by Beltran-Cely and Larotta (2020) reveals that approximately 57% of Colombians identify themselves as Catholic, and when combined with other related faiths such as Pentecostal, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants, and Mormons, nearly 80% of Colombians adhere to Christian views. It is worth noting that some individuals, while not affiliating with a particular religion, express belief in God "in their own terms" (Beltrán-Cely, 2013, p. 164). Hence, if we consider the small percentage of atheists (6.3%) and followers of non-Christian faiths (0.8%) (Beltrán-Cely & Larotta, 2021), it is possible to argue that Colombia is predominantly Christian. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that marginalized communities, both rural and urban areas with lower socioeconomic status, exhibit a stronger fervor towards religious practices as a means of combatting exclusion and marginalization (Beltrán-Cely, 2013).

Considering this religious backdrop, the intersection of English language education, the challenging rural context, and teachers' religious beliefs is a compelling point of analysis in understanding how the group of teachers under study came to perceive themselves as professionals. As elaborated further below, these factors play a significant role in shaping their professional identities.

Literature Review

Research exploring ELT and religion: *The need to go beyond Western views*

Most of the existing body of work exploring the nexus of ELT and religion has been marred by Western biases both in the almost exclusive focus on Christian evangelical faith and in the Western-bound contexts of explorations (Almayez, 2022; Louber & Almayez, 2023). This critique forms the backdrop for a broader discussion that seeks to transcend these biases, exploring four interconnected areas of criticism within the literature. These critiques are introduced to shed light on them in the context of non-Western perspectives, including the forthcoming findings of this research.

The first area of criticism centers around the contention that Christian evangelical institutions and teachers have instrumentalized English for manipulation and deception (Edge, 2003; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003). English has, according to Edge (2003), served as a convenient platform for evangelization and religious proselytization. He uses the term 'imperial troopers' to refer to Christian evangelical teachers whose real mission is the conversion of souls, not really to teach English. This discussion is complemented by the reservations voiced by Pennycook & Coutand-

Marin (2003) regarding missionary work, which, in their view, frequently aligns itself with the eradication of non-Christian religious and cultural practices.

Closely related to this is the second strand of criticism, which contends that ELT has been utilized as a vehicle for imperialism and neo-colonialism (Edge, 2003; Johnston & Varghese, 2006; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003; Pennycook & Makoni, 2005;). The central argument here is that Christian missionary teachers have often exploited the global demand for English as a "bait for the missionary hook" (Pennycook & Makoni, 2005, p 141), thereby imposing Western values on non-Christians. Simultaneously, they have promoted English as not only the language of economic prosperity but also the language of spirituality and salvation. A good example of this is Christian evangelical teachers working in Muslim countries, whose covert mission behind English lessons is to attract new believers (Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003).

The third strand of criticism pertains to the belief that Christian teachers, driven by evangelization, prioritize their proselytizing roles at the expense of 'good' teaching practices (Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003). This creates a tension of agendas, as what seems to be 'neutral' English teaching often conceals an underlying mission of preaching. The ethical dilemma of teaching versus proselytization is particularly pronounced in cases where untrained teachers, motivated primarily by religious goals, are entrusted with the responsibility of teaching.

Similarly, the fourth strand of criticism is the belief that Christian teachers have to face moral dilemmas as they need to decide whether they should prioritize their teaching or their evangelizing roles (Johnston & Buzzelli, 2008; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003; Varghese & Johnston, 2007). Although Pennycook and Coutand-Marin (2003) heavily criticize Christian evangelical institutions' predominant orientation towards converting students through ELT, Varghese and Johnston (2007) add complexity to this matter by showing that despite the fact that Christian teachers feel the need to proselytize, their obedience and commitment to God is also demonstrated by serving others and helping them meet their needs (of linguistic nature in this case).

Intriguingly, these four areas of criticism rest on the evangelical missionary work done around the world. While it is true that globalization and the spread of English have facilitated the work of Christian evangelicals, it is also important to recognize that this criticism applies especially to metropolitan and highly diverse contexts easily found in the USA, Europe or Australia, the locales of most of the scholarly work reviewed above. In these locales there are high flows of people, immense linguistic plurality and great religious diversity, and, in many cases, problematic issues of immigration (Vertovec, 2007) that facilitate proselytization. One urgent question that arises is how spirituality comes to bear in non-Western contexts or in 'less globalized' non-metropolitan locales. To explore this aspect, I review existing contributions from Asia, which will be complemented with the findings of this study from a South American country, a region that has been relatively underrepresented in this discourse.

Nonwestern explorations

The critiques highlighted in the preceding section, while intriguing, have been criticized for their Western-centric bias, which often leads to the condemnation and stigmatization of religion within ELT practices (Almayez, 2022). Indeed, as Pennycook and Coutand-Marin (2003) acknowledge, most of these critiques have been conducted with untrained teachers, many of whom harbor vested interests in proselytization. One concerning implication of this insufficiency is the risk of falling into monolithic understandings of the intricate interconnections between faith and ELT.

However, a more multifaceted perspective emerges when we delve into studies conducted in non-Western contexts. These investigations reveal that religion significantly informs teachers' practices and identities in a multitude of ways. For instance, Baurain's (2016) study with 11 Christian English language teachers working in Southeast Asia underscores that their sense of professionalism is deeply entwined with their religious principles. Grounded in their spiritual values, these teachers prioritize meaningful connections with their students, emphasizing the importance of genuine care and support. Remarkably, they openly share their religious beliefs without any intention of proselytization, emphasizing authenticity and transparency in their interactions.

Similarly, the case study conducted by Almayez (2022) delves into how religion impacts the professional identity of two Saudi Muslim male teachers in Saudi Arabia. The study suggests that Islam profoundly influences their professional identities, reflected in their ability to (1) resiliently cope with the demands of their work, (2) appreciate their students as whole individuals, and (3) uphold their students' religious beliefs. In Kuwait, Vaccino-Salvadore (2021) investigated the experiences of three female Muslim teachers and found that educators navigate their professional roles in light of local religious ideologies, albeit in distinct ways. Rawan promotes critical thinking concerning the legitimacy of religious backgrounds to support academic arguments, Jasmine not only teaches the language but also emphasizes values, and Jenan underscores the need for culturally sensitive materials and respect for local religious values. These studies resonate with Tajeddin et al.'s (2021) comprehensive interview study of identity construction among 30 Islamic Iranian teachers. Researchers considered factors such as personality attributes, special abilities, physical characteristics, ideological and behavioral features, and group membership. It was observed that Islam mediates their identity through the felt call to be fair and kind, to dress and behave in accordance with Islamic principles, and to select/adapt materials that instill Muslim values whenever possible.

Moreover, these studies challenge the notion that ELT serves as a vehicle for imposing Western values (Pennycook & Makoni, 2005) and offer a unique perspective. In predominantly Muslim countries like Indonesia, Madkur and Albantani (2017) suggest that Islamic values can be integrated into the ELT curriculum and teaching materials. In line with this idea, Sholeh et al.'s (2022) case study demonstrates that Islamic values can be 'moderated' through various activities, including curriculum development, classroom evaluation, and other teaching practices, thereby mitigating extremism and radicalization. Muhalim-Muhalim's (2023) interview study of two Muslim English teachers further underscores that religiously inspired education need not be rigid; it can serve as a means to resist dominant English language ideologies by sidestepping mainstream teaching materials in favor of designing their own, based on religious content of interest to students, or by promoting critical thinking, even towards religious tenets.

After reviewing the literature on the myriad connections between spirituality and ELT and debating Western-centric views by reviewing contributions from other contexts, it is now relevant to discuss the methods and findings of this particular study.

Methods

Participants

This analysis focuses on eight teachers selected from a larger study of ten participants. These individuals were chosen due to their significant references to their religious views when discussing their professional practice and identity. While it was not a condition for participation in the larger study, the prominence of religious views became a crucial factor for inclusion in this analysis. In

the larger study, teachers were purposefully selected based on predefined criteria, including being experienced English language educators with a minimum of one year's experience teaching in a state-funded rural school, and coming from diverse rural regions. Although their religious affiliations were not explicitly requested, their narratives frequently reflected Catholic views. The participants, who consented voluntarily, are pseudonymously referred to as Ana, Eva, Lily, Clara, Maria, Hilda, Jairo, and Arturo. Their teaching experience ranged from 6 to 24 years, with Lily and Maria being raised in rural contexts.

Data collection

These teachers were interviewed on two occasions in their L1, Spanish, with each interview lasting approximately 1 hour on average. The interviews were strategically designed to explore the ways in which teachers might have followed, assimilated, integrated, or modified their practices in response to both language policies and rural sociocultural particularities. The first interview (INT1) was centered around teachers' personal descriptions of their teaching experience in rural areas. During this phase, teachers were prompted to share insights into the particularities of the rural context, discussing factors they believed either facilitated or posed challenges to their professional practice. This interview aimed to establish a foundational understanding of their experiences. The second interview (INT2) took place after visiting each teacher in their schools in order to become familiar with the particularities of their school context and observe some of their lessons. Thus, in addition to probing the points raised in INT1, INT2 incorporated aspects drawn from observations into the conversation. This phase aimed at refining the analysis by seeking clarifications and additional details on specific themes that emerged from the first interview.

Self-understanding as an analytical framework

The analysis to be presented benefits from what Brubaker and Cooper (2000) call self-understanding. In proposing an analytical framework to add precision to the notion of identity in the social sciences, they use self-understanding and social location as one of the clusters of terms we can use. They define it as "one's sense of who one is, of one's social location, and how (given the first two), one is prepared to act" **(**Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 17). Self-understanding and social location seen in relation to each other, on the one hand, embrace the idea that understandings of self are culturally specific; and on the other hand, this cluster presupposes an effect of these located understandings on one's actions. This paper uses this specific analytical cluster as it fits well with the dimension of identity, where spirituality manifested more prominently in teachers' narrative accounts.

Procedures for data analysis

Data were analyzed thematically (Pavlenko, 2007), with categories established to explore data across individual participant cases. Themes were identified and consolidated in light of the analytical framework (self-understanding and social location) and local sociocultural and political contexts (rural milieus and local ELT policy). Teachers' narratives were also contextualized as being directed at the researcher, recognizing the potential influence on their construction. The data analysis was iterative, emergent, and interpretive, following the typical approach in qualitative research, involving multiple readings and adjustments, mediated by the researcher's reflexivity (Dörnyei, 2007). The entire process was conducted in Spanish, and translations into English were necessary for the wider dissemination of findings.

Findings

Metaphors of teachers' self-understanding

In contrast to Western critiques of evangelical teachers, the thematic analysis revealed that teachers, driven by their religious beliefs, metaphorically view themselves as missionaries, not because of the opportunities to proselytize but because of the social service they give. From this broad theme, other related religiously informed thematic metaphors emerged. Firstly, being missionaries implied two main actions beyond language teaching: caring for students and instilling belief in English. Secondly, teaching English in a rural context is a blessing but also a curse.

Teachers as missionaries

Examining teachers' self-understanding within their social context suggests that their professional image is highly associated with that of a missionary. Traditionally, missionaries engage in evangelization and education, persuading others to embrace certain principles, often of a religious nature. While the teachers in this study are not religious missionaries, they frequently draw on this archetype to define their professional identity. This understanding significantly influences their actions as they navigate their mission and tackle challenges.

Teachers express a profound sense of being led to rural locations by a higher force, considering it not merely a job but a "blessing." Their placement in these rural schools is often seen as a manifestation of "God's will" (Hilda, Ana, Camilo, Maria) or their "destiny" (Eva), echoing a sense of divine guidance. This perception profoundly impacts how they interpret their roles, shaping their attitudes and approaches to teaching in rural contexts. Hilda's words exemplify this point:

> *as a teacher and with such a big mission that one has, God has blessed me so much […] I have grown as a teacher, I have grown spiritually and I have admired a lot the people where I have worked, the further away I have been, the more people have appreciated me because they realise that one does not go there for money, we don't. It is a pleasure to get where they are despite the difficulties. (Hilda:INT1)*

Not only does Hilda acknowledge she has a mission, she also understands such a mission as being "big." That characterization of her mission probably refers to the multiple social issues teachers in rural schools report having to deal with (e.g., poverty, armed conflict, lack of resources). Despite that, it is interesting to note that the mission of developing her professional practice in the remote places she has been to is put in rather positive terms. She says God has "blessed" her, that she has "grown spiritually and as a teacher", and that having such a mission has meant being welcomed in the different communities she has worked with. This understanding of herself as a missionary actually resonates with religious notions of the same concept. This is the way in which Zacharias Tanee Fomum, a Christian ministry and professor, defines it:

> *The missionary is unique, distinct and original. He is chosen by God. He is called by God. He is blessed by God to accomplish a specific portion of God's missionary enterprise. He is handcuffed and bound to hear God's voice and obey him. He cannot just do what he wants, he is singled out for a unique purpose (Tanee-Fomum, 2015, emphasis added)*

The teachers' belief in being placed in rural locations by divine will aligns intriguingly with the traditional religious views of missionaries. Their sense of being blessed and chosen for this path reflects a profound intertwining of personal faith with their professional identities. Rather than pursuing personal desires, they perceive their roles as predetermined by a higher purpose.

Ana further illuminates this perspective by emphasizing a divine gift bestowed upon teachers. In her narrative, leaving a rural school for her daughter's healthcare becomes a moment of reflection on the unique gift teachers possess. Ana views teaching not merely as a profession but as a divine endowment, emphasizing the specialized skills required to navigate the complexities of human interactions. Her commitment to contributing a "grain of sand" reflects a profound sense of duty grounded in her religious beliefs, she says,

> *I wanted to continue to work there, I mean to take advantage of my –the gift (el don) that God gives us as teachers, because I think it is a gift, isn't it? Not anyone can be a teacher and the teacher has to handle human beings. So, I said "I would like to contribute my grain of sand (dejar mi granito de arena) in these human beings through teaching English. (Ana:INT1)*

"Not anyone can be a teacher" stresses Ana. Perhaps this statement makes a lot of sense in the circumstances where she had to develop her first five years of experience in a rural school since it was located in a quite remote region, where she experienced the terrors of the internal armed conflict (see Cruz-Arcila, 2022). Having a gift, in her view, explains the fact that teachers like her are able to deal with the challenges that are usually encountered in rural schools. Besides, Ana also says that she would like to "contribute her grain of sand" to the formation of human beings. This idea is important as she is not referring to her students simply as students but as human beings that need to be helped "as much as possible", which implies going beyond a focus on language instruction only. Here is where their mission is identified into two main intertwined actions.

Missionary action 1: Care for students as human beings and cultivate aspirations

In delineating their mission, these teachers engage in what Snow (2001) distinguishes as Christian service, aligning more with the ethos of helping others rather than conversion. Ana's metaphor of a grain of sand vividly captures this perspective, rooted in their religious convictions. Their professional goals extend beyond conventional language instruction, emphasizing the nurturing of students as individuals with unique aspirations.

Teachers have come to understand that, in connection to teaching English, they may play also an important role in making their students imagine and pursue better futures. As a result of pervasive issues of poverty, economic marginalization and cultural misrecognition of rural life, teachers have observed that students and their families tend to aim low in terms of their ambitions and possibilities for the future. It follows that such limited ambitions are likely to prevent them from realizing their full potential. This is how Jairo puts it:

> *I describe them [the students] as people who don't know the potential they have. That's sad perhaps because there is so much potential but because of the difficulties they do not realise the things they can do […] I would describe them as very, very valuable people as rough diamonds, who just need a little push, a little stimulus on the part of the authorities […] (Jairo:INT1)*

By comparing his students with "rough diamonds," Jairo sums up his view of students as talented and competent individuals, whose talents and competences are yet to be triggered. Although he particularly positions the government as the one who should provide these opportunities for students to develop what he describes as their "huge potential," data in this study actually show that teachers themselves seem to have taken on that task as part of their (missionary) responsibilities. They have come to understand themselves and act as cultivators of aspirations.

Missionary action 2: Lead students to believe in English

As noted, in their missionary role, teachers embark on a twofold mission: nurturing aspirations and instilling a belief in the power of English. In apparent alignment with discourses supported in

the national ELT policy, to broaden students' horizons, teachers emphasize the diverse opportunities available through English proficiency. This involves not only language skills but a transformative shift in students' perceptions of their futures.

One strategy involves making students aware of the myriad possibilities that English opens up, ranging from earning scholarships for higher education to accessing global travel, gaining community status, or securing a livelihood without arduous physical labor. Eva underscores the need to "sell the students the idea" that learning English and completing high school can unlock these prospects. The following is an example of how Maria seems to do exactly that:

> *In a municipality a boy told me "teacher, why should I learn English if I am going to stay here in the countryside looking after cows? I don't need it to talk to the cows" and I told him "ah but you could look after cows and study or wouldn't you like it" (as I said in the written text, I sometimes do as much as one can to motivate students), so I told him "of course, you could look after cows and you do not need to talk in English with the cows but you could study veterinary, you could study agronomy, you could study something which allows you to look after the cows and that people call you DOCTOR, and that they tell you "hey, you are very important here in the region, how knowledgeable you are! Wouldn't you like to have your own beautiful, well-established farm?" and sometimes kids reconsider. (Maria:INT1)*

This story is particularly useful to illustrate how teachers may cultivate in students (a reluctant one in this case) the idea that a promising future through education can actually be at their disposal and that English may play an important role there. The parenthetical note is also important to further illustrate how Maria positions herself as a teacher who does this cultivation on a regular basis. In other words, it is part of her professional sense of being. Her story ends by saying that sometimes, on this sort of occasion, "kids reconsider" their initial views towards English. This suggests that her cultivations start to bear fruits. These instances of cultivations of ideas in students can also be associated with encouraging them to 'invest' (Norton, 1995) in their learning as a way to widen their social, economic and cultural capitals (Bourdieu, 2018). As Norton (1995) would argue, language learning can be potentiated by students' own social needs as these might be addressed in a better way if they could communicate in a given second language. In this case, as the example above illustrates, learning English is associated with the possibility of gaining social status and a better economic standing. This is the idea teachers feel needs to be taken up by their students.

A second general way in which teachers help students make sense of English is actually the use of prayer. As observed in their classrooms, Hilda's, Lilly's, Maria's, Arturo's, and Dora's students were highly willing to start their lessons with a prayer in English, as this practice has come to be part of what Maria calls "classroom routines." In her narratives, María describes herself as "a religious person, as a Catholic, who likes praying", and has found that she shares this with most of her students and has decided to use it as an important element in her practice. Dora explains how she has used this shared interest with her students in a creative way as she actually makes up "new prayers" with a pedagogical purpose in relation to the specific topics she addresses in her class (e.g., friendship, family, jobs). The use of prayer, thus, comes up as a strategy to help students make sense of English as both teachers and students use this language to recreate some of their deep cultural values. In short, stemming from their religious values, teachers report that the strategy to incorporate prayers in their classroom routines has contributed to triggering students' motivation (Lily and María) and facilitating familiarity with English (Dora, María, Arturo, Lily).

However, teachers' self-understanding as missionaries also comes with personal and professional challenges, which is the idea to be discussed next.

Being a rural English teacher is a blessing but also a 'curse'

Although the view of teachers as missionaries is constructed in rather positive terms by, for example, referring to their experience in rural locations as a blessing, data also suggest that this same blessing comes at a cost to teachers. In this regard, Ana says that:

> *I think that's the price that one as a missionary pays, because one is like a missionary when one goes to work there [in a rural area], home destabilization. (Ana:INT1)*

Ana candidly articulates the personal toll of this missionary journey, describing it as a price one pays. In her case, the sacrifice involves home destabilization due to extended periods of separation from her family. Remarkably, Ana conceptualizes this as a 'price,' implying a transaction where the benefits of rural teaching outweigh the personal hardships. This framing underscores the teachers' resilient commitment to their mission, aligning with their religious values that elevate the positive aspects of their work.

Furthermore, at the professional level, teachers' self-understanding as missionaries is accompanied by serious concerns about their proficiency level in English. Their concern arises as they do not feel challenged to use their English in their school contexts. They do not have plenty of opportunities to use their language and thus their self-image as teachers of English is affected by a certain lack of confidence as English users. This is evident, for example, in Clara's self-understanding as a teacher of English,

> ***Researcher**: how do you think your students see you?*
>
> ***Clara**: In general I think they admire me because when I try to speak to them in English, some of them tell me "teacher, I would like to talk like you do, how nice, where did you learn? How did you learn?" […] I can feel that from some of them, they admire me in a certain way, although I don't deserve it (laughter) (Clara:INT2)*

In describing how she thinks her students see her, she explains she feels they admire her especially because she can speak English. That factor, as also brought up by Eva, plays an important role in her students developing admiration for their teachers of English. Nevertheless, Clara feels she does not deserve their admiration, as perhaps she feels that her level of English is not as good as her students think it is. In narrating her experience in an immersion program for improving her English, Maria explains she has had to confront her lack of confidence as a language user. Maria describes speaking English fluently as a "trauma" or as a "torture" she endures. Teachers' fears in this regard seem to arise from their lack of opportunities to use the language in contexts other than their classrooms. Teachers' faith also comes here to play an important role in their professional self-understanding in order to accept and deal with the fact that in remote locales their proficiency level is affected. In fact, as teachers of English, they also understand that they need to look for ways to keep their English alive, and perhaps gain more confidence as users of this language. As Ana puts it:

> *I have to be updated much more […] I also have to look after what is mine, which is English, that's why I am [taking courses] […], I already have two certifications (laughter). And my children tell me "mom, if you are already a licensed language teacher, why do you sign up [for those courses]? I say, "well I have to be updated". (Ana:INT2)*

Ana's views on the need to maintain a constant interest in developing as professionals resonate with other teachers' intentions to engage in Master's degrees. This, however, has proved complicated in a rural context (another price to pay) where the offer of postgraduate courses is either nil or not closely related to teachers' fields of interest. Here it is worth noting that Masters

in ELT, applied linguistics or related fields are rather scarce and are concentrated in the major cities of the country, which makes them too costly, especially for teachers coming from remote locations. In addition, Internet connectivity is still precarious in many rural locales, which makes the option of online courses unfeasible. These are the main reasons preventing teachers such as Arturo, Maria and Eva from undertaking their MA studies.

In essence, the dichotomy of being a rural English teacher encapsulates a delicate equilibrium between blessings and curses. It is a narrative shaped by commitment, sacrifice, and an unwavering faith that their mission, despite its challenges, holds profound meaning and purpose.

Discussion

Overall, rural teachers' self-understanding as missionaries is a powerful metaphor to highlight how their spiritual values conflate in interesting ways with the need to act professionally in socioculturally sensitive terms. Teachers' "huge mission" (using Hilda's words) is rather oriented towards what in critical pedagogy is known as creating opportunities for social transformation. For this to happen, making their learners believe in the value that learning English may have in their lives comes in as a primary concern. As Eva says, they need to sell their students the idea that education (learning English included) is a promising path and that it is worth the 'investment' (Norton, 1995) of time and effort. Put in another way, teachers understand that learning English and students continuing their education are what Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) call a 'fertile functioning', a way to bring improvement in other aspects of human life.

Teachers' self-understanding as missionaries offers an interesting counter-narrative to the western-based critical views of the connections between religion and missionary work (e.g., Edge, 2003; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003). This study strongly suggests that there are other multiple angles from which to analyze the relationship between religious beliefs and ELT practices. As shown, in a context like Colombia, the metaphor of missionary seems to comprise a whole complex assemblage of teachers' agency to tailor their professional practices in relation to shared cultural values and situated circumstances. To close this paper, I would like to go back to the four areas of critique discussed above and problematize them in relation to the findings of this study and the contributions of non-Western explorations reviewed above.

Is English a tool for manipulation and deception when connecting missionary work with ELT? As demonstrated above, that is not the case of committed rural teachers who have to develop their professional practice amidst a myriad of challenging factors. If there is some sort of covert action, it is so in the sense that teachers act beyond merely their role as language instructors to act more as cultivators of aspirations; that is, as educators who consider students' social needs and problems and try to establish connections with their professional work. These findings resonate with explorations of ELT and Islam where it has been demonstrated that caring for students as whole human beings inside and outside the classroom (Baurain, 2016; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2021) and teaching at the best of their capacity (Louber & Almayez, 2023) are spiritually mediated imperatives for teachers.

Does the missionary work facilitate other ways of neo-imperialism and neocolonialism? In contrast to imposing Western values through English, this study highlights that teachers' understanding of themselves as missionaries has contributed to making English compatible with local values. English has not been used to impose Western values; local religious values have come to be recreated through English, instead. This, at the same time, has allowed learners and teachers to add meaning to the learning of this language. This observation echoes some of the criticism done to the idea that the spread of English is per-se a neocolonial practice (Phillipson,

1992). This study highlights that communities of the periphery have not been passive recipients of hegemonic forces; on the contrary, they have found multifarious ways in which English is integrated to their sociocultural realities, which many times go against imperialist interests (Brutt-Griffler, 2002). In countries like Indonesia and Iran, it has also been demonstrated that Muslim teachers ignore, adapt and design teaching materials according to Islamic values, which are also promoted in the content of their lessons or curricula (Muhalim-Muhalim, 2023; Tajeddin et al., 2021).

Is the connection between missionary work and ELT detrimental to the quality of teaching? The previous analysis has demonstrated quite the opposite. Teachers draw on religious beliefs as a way to enhance their teaching. Understanding themselves as missionaries who are doing Christian service seems to drive teachers to do their job as well as they can, given the particularities of their contexts. Instead of complaining about the disadvantages of their social locations, they highlight the blessings over the possible 'curses'. For example, they understand they are contributing their grain of sand to improve their students' lives and they are being rewarded with spiritual growth and communities' appreciation. Such spiritual blessings help teachers make sense of the downsides of their profession, namely being away from family, not feeling fully satisfied with their level of English or not finding it easy to enroll in M.A. courses. This particular finding resonates with a multiple case study exploring how two Muslim teachers' religious values come to bear in the construction of their identities, especially as a way to make sense of the downsides of their profession such as stress, heavy workloads and instability (Almayez, 2022).

Does doing missionary work through ELT represent a moral dilemma? Not really, the analysis has shown that religious beliefs and ELT practices are complementary and potentially useful. At least that has been the case in less globalized, less diverse contexts such as Colombian rural areas, where it is easier to find and establish common spiritual grounds. A similar suggestion is found in Soleimani and Lovat's (2019) study in Iran. They found that religious beliefs are actually a good source for teachers to solve moral dilemmas in their practice regarding punctuality, relationship with students and effective teaching.

Conclusion

This study has shown how a group of ELT rural teachers in Colombia evoke the metaphor of religious missionary work to configure their identities. Overall, the use of this metaphor serves as an interesting point of reference for portraying teachers' positionality in the ELT landscape in the country. Their own religious views seem to underpin their sense of who they are and how they should act: they are blessed missionaries with the task of cultivating aspirations through English. Despite the acute issues of social inequality lived in rural contexts, teachers regard their work there as a blessing because they are developing a task God gave them, which allows them to make better use of their 'gift' of being teachers. Working in these contexts is also positive because, as Hilda highlights, teachers can "grow spiritually and as teachers" as the main retribution for their work is not precisely their salary but the satisfaction of their work being highly appreciated. The specific tasks they have been assigned (their mission) imply much more than a focus on language instruction or fulfillment of learning descriptors. It involves leading students to *believe* in English as an important element in possible better futures. This challenge, at the same time, is aligned with a sort of 'pastoral' duty they have taken on of broadening students' aspirations. Likewise, as missionaries doing Christian service (Snow, 2001), teachers are equipped with the drives to face the personal and professional downsides of being Colombian rural teachers.

The literature critiquing Christian missionary work through English has used a series of metaphors to analyze such work. For example, Christian teachers have been compared to

'imperial troopers' (Edge, 2003), their message has been referred to as 'seeds' for conversion (Varghese & Johnston, 2007), and English as a 'bait' and 'neocolonial tool' (Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003). Interestingly, the alternative connections between spirituality and the English language profession presented here around the missionary metaphor contribute to unearthing a possible great deal of understandings, contradictions, and conflicts that arise from the influence of religious values on teachers' identities. Religiosity is not something to be stripped out from ELT practices, but rather an interesting point of reference that requires much more exploration.

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