

# Insight into Novice Research: A Critical Review of ELT Master's Theses<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This study explores emerging trends of student theses in English language teaching master degree programs in Colombia. In this study, we categorized 156 abstracts into their research context, research areas, and research method, adding to the tapestry of ELT novice research worldwide. The results demonstrate that the majority of the theses reviewed were practical in scope and smaller-scaled projects, focusing on language skills and subskills, teacher-related aspects such as methodology, beliefs, etc., and curriculum. A small percentage delved into more complex or broader aspects of education inside the language classroom. They also were mainly qualitative, case studies or action research using a variety of data collection techniques that corresponded with the main research design. As a conclusion, an increased balance in research topics and methods is suggested to strengthen novice research and encourage more participation in the worldwide conversation on English language teaching and learning.

## Resumen

Esta investigación explora las tendencias emergentes en las tesis de grado de estudiantes en programas de maestría en enseñanza del inglés en Colombia. En este estudio, clasificamos 156 resúmenes según el contexto donde desarrollaron la investigación, los temas que investigaron y el método de investigación aplicado para poder contribuir al conocimiento sobre la investigación de principiantes en el campo de la enseñanza de inglés en el mundo. Los resultados demuestran que la mayoría de las tesis revisadas eran de alcance práctico y proyectos de menor escala, mayormente enfocados en las habilidades de la lengua, aspectos relacionados con el profesor como la metodología y creencias, etc. y el currículo. Un porcentaje mínimo profundizó en aspectos más complejos o más amplios de la educación en el contexto de la enseñanza de lenguas. También eran principalmente estudios cualitativos con diseños de estudio de caso o de investigación acción que usaban una variedad de técnicas de recolección de datos que correspondían con el diseño principal de la investigación. Como conclusión, se sugiere un equilibrio en los temas y métodos de investigación para fortalecer los estudios investigativos de los principiantes y fomentar una mayor participación en la conversación mundial sobre la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés.

## Introduction

Large-scale systematic reviews of scholarship are a typical method to help determine the state of art of research for the disciplines (Davies et al., 2010). This is often carried out by scholars examining variations across a field of study, most often in published academic journal articles or by analyzing keywords and bibliographic sources of particular journals or databases (Prebor, 2007; Thompson, 2009). These often focus on trends related to the field of study, specific areas within a certain field, and/or research methods. Another way to observe current trends in research includes reviewing novice research found in master's theses and doctoral dissertations which oftentimes is considered a rite of passage for those entering the world of research. This process also provides an avenue for novice researchers to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the chosen field of study (Hasrati, 2013). For this reason, according to the norms of the National Council of Accreditation of Colombia (Consejo Nacional de Acreditación, n. d.), the master's education level serves to develop researchers. Therefore, if this group of budding scholars is carrying out studies, it is essential to explore what is being done. However, because much of the research of master-level students remains unpublished, academics of the field remain unaware of this work. Furthermore, the information gleaned from this type of study may serve as feedback for master's programs to possibly encourage reflection and growth.

While the literature on thesis and dissertation review is growing throughout the disciplines and especially in education (see Balci et al., 2013; Drysdale et al., 2013), few studies have been performed in the field of English language teaching (ELT), particularly at the master's level. The present study, therefore, aims to address this gap by exploring five years (2012-2017) of student theses in master's degree programs within the field of ELT in Colombia by categorizing 156 abstracts. We have chosen a qualitative design in order to analyze and identify trends related to where, what, and how the students conducted research. The results of this study

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promote further understanding of the nature of novice research in the field of ELT, thus weaving a more comprehensive picture for academic referral.

### Literature Review

After a review of the literature on novice research in the field of ELT, we found studies from the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and the United States which show the variety of methods and approaches used. While our study focuses on theses at the master's level, in our literature review, we also included those of doctoral dissertations because in our experience, we have noticed most journal articles tend to focus on research performed at the doctoral level or mix both master's and doctoral work together (see Motha, 2009; Özmen et al., 2016).

Reviews from the Middle East included those from Egypt, Turkey, and Jordan. Abdel Latif (2018) conducted a study to identify the main trends in English language teaching research in the Egyptian context in both published journals ( $n=143$ ) and in unpublished MA and PhD projects from previous publications with regards to research areas, topics, contexts, and methods. Findings from the review of journals revealed a focus on nine areas of research: teacher education, reading, writing, speaking, listening, curriculum/program evaluation, learning practices, vocabulary, and language testing. The comparison between the published journals and the MA and PhD theses revealed similarities in the focus on quantitative studies while the context of the studies varied; the unpublished MA and PhD theses reviewed spanned the various educational levels (university, secondary, and primary). Abdel Latif (2018) concluded that these findings showed serious gaps in the state of research in the ELT field in Egypt. He called for employing broader research methods to include qualitative and mixed-method studies; performing interdisciplinary studies that go beyond curriculum and instruction and focus on more complex issues; and limiting the use of convenience sampling to broaden the contexts, focusing on more than students' own classrooms.

Research in the Turkish context reported similar studies and findings. First, Özmen et al.'s (2016) study considered 144 dissertations in ELT (2010 to 2014) and classified them into three main subject areas of language teaching: teaching English as a foreign language, foreign language teacher education, and second language acquisition. Seven of those dissertations stated that they used an interdisciplinary approach. With regard to the research method, the authors noted the majority of the studies claimed to use mixed-methods while 32 others cited using quantitative methods. Interestingly, the authors noted that the research questions of the dissertations were "heavily based on positivism" (p. 1750), indicating more quantitative methods. The general contexts of the studies included the majority within tertiary education, followed by primary through secondary, and a much smaller amount in military, adult, or private settings.

In the same line as Özmen et al. (2016), Kirmizi (2012) reviewed research trends in MA ELT programs from five universities in Turkey between the years 2005 and 2010. The most common topics found in this study included language skills, (listening, speaking, reading, writing, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar), teaching methods or approaches, materials or curriculum, and computer assisted language learning. As a conclusion, the authors argued that research within English language teaching in Turkey is limited and lacking in innovation and suggested a change in how MA research takes places within the country.

Another educational study to highlight from Turkey was conducted by Karadağ (2010). The author classified research methods and statistical techniques used in 211 unpublished doctoral dissertations in Turkey between 2003 and 2007. The author concluded that "Experimental Design (37.1 %), Survey (34.0 %), Correlational Study (12.2%) and Case Study (11.3 %) models" (p. 13) were used. Regarding the use of statistical techniques, Karadağ (2010) found descriptive statistics, *t*-tests, and ANOVAs as the most frequently used, suggesting that perhaps Turkey is lagging behind regarding methods of analysis of research data found internationally.

A study from Jordan classified 550 titles of English language theses and dissertations to identify the research interests and the distribution of topics (Bani-Khaled, 2012). The findings showed six main areas of concentration, five of which relate to ELT. These findings included pedagogical or methodological studies focusing on the impact of a certain method or technique on student language learning or motivation, language description studies encompassing grammar, syntax, discourse and pragmatics, and vocabulary, and curriculum studies that included program, course, or material effectiveness on student achievement or motivation. They also included perceptions and attitudes of students, teachers, or others in relation to an ELT aspect, as well as error analysis studies, which could have embedded grammar, reading, lexical, writing, and translation errors of students.

In Asia, several studies from Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam report on the research of master's students. Lin and Cheng (2010) reviewed 493 theses abstracts to identify national research trends in master's TESOL programs in Taiwan from 2003 to 2007 concerning the research contexts and topics. The study found that the majority of the research occurred in secondary or undergraduate-level universities. The authors found four main research topics: language skills, teaching methods or approaches, materials and/or curriculum, and computer assisted language learning. In Thailand, Chaiyasook and Jaroongkhongdach (2014) carried out a broader analysis of 194 theses in ELT from 2003 to 2011 to identify the research focus, context, design, data sources, data collection instruments, and the method of analysis of the data. They concluded that most of the theses focused on student performance with contexts closely divided among primary, secondary, and university levels. The majority of the studies used a quantitative research design, followed by mixed method, and with only seven percent reporting qualitative studies. In line with this result, the majority of the theses used questionnaires and tests and analyzed their data using descriptive and inferential statistics.

The theses review in Vietnam seemed to be more concerned with how the master's students wrote the texts than with the research areas and methods used. Thúy Loan and Pramoolsook (2016) reviewed 24 Vietnamese MA TESOL theses as well as conducted interviews with the master's students and their supervisors to identify the types of functions of citations in the texts. In general, they found that many of the thesis writers lacked understanding of the rhetorical functions of citations and believed that citations were only necessary in the literature review chapter of their thesis. In addition, they found that problems with citation, grammatical mistakes, and lack of discussion of the citations tended to render these chapters "ineffective" (p. 17). These authors called for an increase in formal instruction in academic writing.

In Europe, the only study we found in ELT thesis review was from the Czech Republic (Tůma & Pišova, 2013). The authors examined 59 PhD dissertations in foreign language didactics from Czech universities to identify their main research topics and then compared them with international studies. Findings showed that the dominant topic was management of the teaching/learning process, followed by foreign language acquisition and learning. It is worth mentioning that the area with the least amount of studies was related to language learners. Furthermore, this study concluded that, in general, the range of topics researched in the Czech theses did not significantly differ from their international counterparts.

In the United States, while many thesis reviews have been carried out in other fields of study, Motha (2009) focused on the field of second-language teaching and learning, and this study was the only one we could identify within our search parameters. This review explored approximately 500 doctoral dissertations and focused on the fifteen most prominent topics during 2006 and 2007. The author concluded:

*Topics included language policy, second/foreign language pragmatics, computer-mediated communication, non-native-speaking teachers, academic genre teaching and usage, applied learner corpus analysis, and new approaches to corrective feedback. Other topics encompassed on-line corpora and reference tools, language ideologies, conversation analysis, task complexity, affordances and opportunities in language learning, phonological acquisition, U.S. resident L2 adolescents (sometimes referred to as Generation 1.5 students), language socialization, input processing and parsing, and the reconceptualization of private speech. (p. 234)*

The results of Motha's (2009) review showed "hybridity" as an important aspect of graduate level research. The PhD researchers whose works were examined took "exploratory stances towards their research" (p. 235; i.e., using ethnography to analyze language policy) and many supported their work with various theoretical positions. This hybridity was also seen in the research methods employed by the students, seeing an increase in mixed-method studies. The author concluded that the dissertations have given insight into language teaching and learning and have furthered research methodologies used in this field. Reflecting on the results of this article, these topics seemed to have a broader view of language teaching and learning in comparison to the other countries reported in this literature review.

Despite some research having been done in other parts of the world, few reports exist on thesis review research in Latin America and none specifically in the field of English language teaching. In this region, reviews of tertiary theses have been carried out in Mexico to identify contexts and topics of theses of education (Gutiérrez Serrano & Barrón Tirado, 2009), in Chile regarding linguistics and philosophy to identify communicative purposes and to describe thesis superstructure (Zamora & Venegas, 2013), and in Latin America, as a whole, to identify the state of the art of theses on virtual learning environments (Esquivel Gámez & Edel Navarro, 2013).

Given the discussion regarding the research of master's students, this study intends to contribute to the information found in other studies around the world and to the literature in Latin America by evaluating

current trends of the theses of master's students in ELT in Colombia. More specifically, the guiding research questions for this study are:

1. What research contexts are used in the theses of master's students?
2. What areas of research do master's students choose to examine in their theses?
3. What are the methods (methodology, design, data collection tools) master's students employ in their studies?

## Methodology

### Context

To carry out this study, we first identified thirteen Colombian universities that offer the master's degree in the field of English language teaching. These included degrees specifically in ELT, but also incorporated those focused on other areas of English language teaching and learning such as didactics of English teaching, linguistics, and interlinguistics and intercultural studies. This pool of universities was then narrowed to nine by eliminating those at which students do not carry out a final research project, and, therefore, do not write a thesis as a partial fulfilment of the requirements for the master's degree. A final requirement was that the abstracts of the theses needed to be available to the public, usually via their library website since Colombia does not have a countrywide database. Consequently, because of the limited availability, two other universities were removed from the study. Thus, this study reviewed seven universities representing five different cities around Colombia: Barranquilla, Bogotá, Cali, Ibagué, and Medellín (Table 1).

The profiles of the master's programs of these seven universities report a similar purpose, which is to contribute to the construction of educational, pedagogical, and social and cultural transformation of the students' educational context (inside the classroom, institution, or region). One profile mentions a possible impact at the national level, several programs state in their objectives the importance of conserving native indigenous languages, and another program implies that students would lead educational projects that correspond to contemporary trends and state-of-the-art techniques. As such, the majority of the programs seem to favor humanistic and sociocultural research designs within master's students' educational environment (Table 1).

City	Program	Profile
Barranquilla	Master's in English Language Teaching	Prepare teachers with a solid theoretical, linguistic, methodological, and investigative foundation capable of becoming agents of change in the field and generating knowledge <i>in their contexts based upon rigorous research methods and creative adaptation</i> in the various disciplines that converge in the area.
Bogotá	Master's in Didactics of Language Teaching	Respond to the bilingual <i>educational needs of Colombia</i> , focusing on didactic knowledge for the teaching-learning of languages.
Bogotá	Master's in Education with Emphasis on Didactics of Foreign Languages	<i>Strengthen students' ability to analyze educational activities to propose alternative solutions to problems in the field of education.</i>
Bogotá	Master's in Linguistics	Promote higher level language studies for the benefit of different scientific fields at the university and particularly at the Faculty of Human Sciences; train researchers and university teachers in the areas of linguistics, from <i>an interdisciplinary perspective that addresses new developments in language sciences.</i>
Cali	Master's in Interlinguistic and Intercultural Studies	Articulate different fields of knowledge, such as general linguistics and applied linguistics, pedagogy and intercultural studies, among others, which serve as the foundation for the study of the reality of interlinguistic and intercultural contacts.  <i>Develop skills and abilities to identify problems, needs or situations that require attention in the professional field of second and foreign language teaching, bilingualism and bilingual education.</i>  <i>Promote the design and development of innovative projects in the fields of language teaching, bilingualism and bilingual education.</i>
Ibagué	Master's in Didactics of English	Contribute to the regional and national educational sector in the area of foreign languages. It aims to develop, strengthen and update the didactic, pedagogical and investigative skills that English teachers require <i>to respond to the needs and challenges of the current educational context.</i>
Medellín	Master's in Second Language Learning and Teaching Processes	<i>Participate actively in the constant changes that occur in the regional and national contexts regarding languages</i> considering pedagogical, didactic, cognitive and psychological elements.

Note. This table contains a summary of the profiles of the master's programs, which were translated from Spanish to English by the authors. Emphasis (italics) on sociocultural aspects was added.

Table 1: Summary of Colombian master's degree programs profiles



### Data collection and analysis

From the seven universities, the researchers compiled 156 abstracts of theses written between 2012 and 2017 (no online theses were available before 2012).

The abstracts were analyzed using a priori categories related to typical information found in an abstract. To establish those categories, we consulted Swales and Feak (2012) who describe abstracts as having a one or two-sentence summary of each section of the thesis (background, aim, method, results, and conclusion). We also used the American Psychological Association (2010) guidelines which call for the problem, participants, method, findings, and conclusions and implications as crucial elements of an abstract. Finally, since this study examined Colombian theses, we also considered the general requirements for authors of Colombian journals related to ELT (e.g., *Profile*, *Íkala*, and *LACLIL*) which call for abstracts to include information that “mirrors” the article (Universidad de la Sabana, 2019). Thus, the abstracts in these journals need to contain the research topic or problem, method, data collection, results, and conclusions (Universidad de Antioquia, n.d.; Universidad de la Sabana, 2019; Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2018). While, ideally, the abstracts of the projects in this study would clearly state these main components, the researchers decided not to exclude this missing information because they felt that this lack, in itself, was an indicator of the state of research at the master’s level in the language teaching-learning field in the context. Focusing on the main objectives of this study, we explored the context, research area, and research method of the theses we reviewed.

An online spreadsheet helped catalog the information from the abstracts. Reliability was established by reviewing fifteen thesis abstracts together, after which the remaining ones were split between the researchers. At the end of the codification process, the researchers reviewed the final cataloging together. Once all the documents were reviewed, the information was then consolidated, the content analyzed, and percentage breakdowns of each of the categories were generated. Thus, through this iterative process, trends in the aforementioned areas were then examined.

### Results

The findings presented in this section are related to the trends of English language teaching research carried out by students of master’s degrees in Colombia. This analysis focused on the context, research areas, and research methods used by the thesis writers.

#### Context

When looking at the background of the 156 abstracts, we focused on the educational contexts of the research studies (see Figure 1). Basing our definition on that of Abdel Latif (2018), in this study, “context” refers to “the educational stage from which the participants taking part in each study were selected or setting the study focused on or was relevant to” (p. 5).

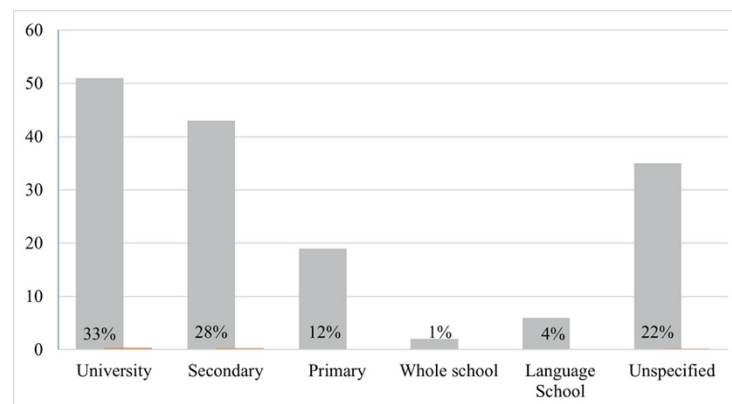


Figure 1. Context of research studies of MA theses

Eighty eight percent of the abstracts specified the context of the study (i.e., university, secondary, primary, language school), while 22% of the abstracts did not. Of the 121 studies that specified the context, almost half took place at the university level. Attention was also given to the secondary level with 36% while 16% of the studies were carried out in primary settings. Few studies were carried out in language schools or to examine entire programs of an institution. When reviewing whether these institutions were private or public, of those that stated this information directly, 70% were public rather than private institutions.

### Research Areas

As can be seen in Table 2, the theses reviewed in this study focused on four research areas: Language skills and subskills (44%), aspects related to the teacher (21%), curriculum (17%), and other (17%). Those that were labeled as “other” did not fit into any of the initial categories. The Table also presents the subareas of these theses which are discussed more in-depth further in this section.

Research area and subareas	N	%
Speaking	21	13
Writing	13	8
Listening	8	5
Vocabulary	4	3
Teacher	33	21
Methodology	11	7
Beliefs	11	7
Development	6	
Reflection	5	3
Curriculum	22	17
Program implementation	11	7
CLIL/CBI	7	4
Assessment	6	4
Needs analysis	3	2
Other		
Internationalization / Intercultural	6	4
Bilingualism	5	3
Learning English through ICTs	5	3
English (in general)	4	3
Special education	2	1
Autonomy	2	1
Learning styles	1	<1
Ns vs NNs	1	<1
Intersubjectivity	1	<1
<b>Total</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2: Research areas and sub-areas of master’s theses on ELT between 2012 and 2017

### Skills and Subskills

When observing these studies, of the 156 abstracts collected, 44% looked at the teaching or development of reading, writing, listening, speaking, or vocabulary. As demonstrated in Table 2, within this main research area, most studies focused on reading (15%) and speaking (13%) with less emphasis on writing (8%), listening (5%), and vocabulary (3%). During the analysis process, the researchers then subcategorized the main research area of skills and subskills into teacher methods, strategies, factors, and other areas which only related to the speaking skill (i.e., conversation, monologue, vocabulary, and pronunciation) as presented in Table 3.

Skills	Reading	Speaking	Writing	Listening	Vocabulary	Total (%)
Subskills						
Teacher Methods	13	3	11	3	3	33
Strategies	7	3	-	5	1	16
Factors	3	5	2	-	-	10
Conversation	-	7	-	-	-	7
Monologue	-	1	-	-	-	1
Vocabulary	-	1	-	-	-	1
Pronunciation	-	1	-	-	-	-

Table 3: Sub-categories of skills and subskills

Approximately half of the theses studied teacher methods, which encompassed methods, techniques, or approaches of teaching that lead to student improvement (on the basis of the descriptor from Stapleton & Shao, 2018). Some examples of these include using genre-based pedagogy for reading, implementing online games or blogs, or utilizing e-tools for writing. The second sub-category related to studies on strategies, included 16 theses (23%) in each of the skills and subskills. For example, some researched the effect of teaching general cognitive or metacognitive strategies for the development of reading or listening. Others focused on strategies specific to a language skill (e.g., scanning and skimming for reading; the use of communication strategies for speaking; listening for details). The third sub-category of skills and subskills explored different factors that affect the learning of a language. For instance, some theses viewed affective

factors on speaking, obstacles to oral participation, causes of difficulties in writing, and reading comprehension issues. Some examples of the sub-categories related to oral development mentioned above were teacher-student interaction, oral Facebook interaction, and the implementation of role-plays and drama activities.

### Teacher

The second most frequent research area, studies on the teacher, corresponded to 21% of the theses reviewed (see Table 2) and encompassed four areas: (a) teacher methodology (7%), (b) teacher beliefs (7%), (c) teacher development (4%), and (d) teacher reflection (3%). Interestingly, all of these studies related to how the aforementioned factors affected teaching and/or learning in the classroom. The studies regarding teacher methodology considered teacher practice, in general, but they did not connect to any specific development of language skill or subskill. Examples of these studies included the effect of teacher practice, teacher interaction patterns, and time management on student learning.

Regarding the second area for teacher studies, teacher beliefs, the projects focused on how teachers' ideas (either on a certain language skill, method, or on aspects that are more general) found in the classroom affected teacher practice. Teachers' attitudes and motivation were other topics in this area.

The third area of the teacher was the effect of teacher development on the implementation of a method, technique, or approach. Examples of this were projects that observed how teachers implemented the task-based learning approach after receiving teacher training or how teacher development sessions on technology changed their practice. The last area included teacher reflection. All five of the studies that explored reflection focused on how reflective practice could improve teaching (e.g., critical reflection; using virtual resources to reflect on practice; and how reflection influences practice).

### Curriculum

Another research area found relates to curriculum (17%). When defining curriculum for the current study, the researchers used Nunan's (1988) perspective of the broad view of curriculum that includes curricular planning, teaching/learning processes in the classroom, and assessment and evaluation. With this working definition, the researchers observed that eleven master's projects (7%) looked at the impact of the implementation of new language teaching programs or adjustments to existing curriculum/programs. Some examples included studies on implementing courses with teaching for understanding, converting a school into a bilingual school, and implementing national foreign language policies in an institution. Second, four percent of the theses explored the implementation of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Content Based Instruction (CBI) in different contexts and contents (i.e., math, citizenship, whole school, and individual courses). Some of the CLIL and CBI theses also described the impact on affective factors (i.e., motivation and attitude of students, and/or student learning). A third sub-area of curriculum dealt with assessment tools (i.e., rubrics and teacher feedback) and assessment practices (i.e., how to best assess in a certain context or area such as communicative competence) (4%). Finally, three projects (2%) performed needs analyses in order to design a future intervention or course implementation.

When coding the theses into research areas, we were not able to classify 27 studies into a broad category (refer to Table 2). These studies ranged from topics regarding language teaching and learning such as learning English (without a specific focus; 3%), learning English using technology (3%), or bilingualism (3%). Others explored broader educational aspects such as internationalization and intercultural development (4%), special education (1%), and native versus non-native treatment of errors (*less than 1%*).

### Research Method

When reviewing the type of research approach employed in the theses, we have used the key terms summarized by Twining et al. (2017), who describe the research approach as including methodology (i.e., qualitative and quantitative), design (i.e., case study, ethnography, experimental, etc.), and methods (e.g., techniques for collecting data). Though we do not prescribe to the aforementioned authors' idea that mixed method design does not exist based on theoretical stances, we found their framework useful to categorize the research approaches used in the theses. We recognize the idea that qualitative studies may use both numerical and non-numerical data (Twining et al., 2017), and, as such, we reported on what master's students stated as their methodology, design, and data collection methods, rather than our own interpretations.

Table 4 shows that approximately half of the master's students' theses (54%) do not state the type of methodology in the abstract of their study. However, of those that do state the type of study (46%), the overwhelming majority (77%) carried out a qualitative study. This was followed by eleven mixed method

projects (15%), and only five quantitative studies (7%). Again, there were many, 68 (44%) out of the 156 theses reviewed that omitted altogether information regarding the design of the study. In fact, only one study used an experimental design. The majority used case study (45%) or action research (40%) while others, to a much lesser extent, related to ethnography (9%), autoethnography (2%), and phenomenology (1%).

<b>Methodology, Design, and Data Collection</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
<b>Methodology</b>	
None stated	85
Qualitative	55
Mixed Methods	11
Quantitative	5
<b>Design</b>	
None stated	68
Case Study	40
Action Research	35
Ethnography	8
Autoethnography	2
Experimental	1
Phenomenon	1
Bibliographic Revision	1
<b>Data Collection Methods</b>	
Observation	77
Oral Interviews/ Focus Groups	69
Document Analysis	55
Written Survey/Questionnaire	52
Journals/Diaries	20
Pre-/Post-Tests	11
Tests	5
Think-Aloud Protocol	3
Narratives	1
None stated	10

*Note.* All theses used more than one data collection method.

Table 4: Methodology, design, and data collection method of thesis research

We identified strong trends regarding the type of data collection methods employed by the master's students, as demonstrated in Table 4. When reviewing these methods, all of the studies used more than a single data tool and only ten (1.6%) of the 156 abstracts failed to include the methods employed to obtain data for the study. The most prevalent methods included observations, oral interviews or focus groups, documents analysis, and written surveys or questionnaires. To a lesser extent, journals or diaries, pre and post-tests, other types of tests, and think-aloud protocols were used. These findings show a relationship between the prevalence of qualitative methodology and the types of data collection methods that qualitative studies use.

## Discussion

The main objective of this study was to review the emerging trends of budding researchers in the field of English language teaching in Colombia from seven universities in order to add to the tapestry of ELT novice research worldwide. We sought to classify research contexts (background), areas of research, and the methods (methodology, design, data collection tools) chosen by students to develop their theses. The findings indicate two major themes of Colombian master's theses: (1) a tendency towards small-scale qualitative studies and (2) a focus on the basic skills of language learning and teaching. This leads us to suggest that Colombian master's level research be expanded to include more quantitative and mixed method studies that explore not just a particular language skill but rather include the more complex language teaching and learning issues.

The contexts chosen by the master's students most likely were their own classrooms/institutions or those that they had access to. Taking into consideration the profiles for the future graduates of the Colombian university programs, there is a strong sociocultural bent, which implies that students tend to use local or regional contexts (see Table 1). In the literature of research methodology, this type of sampling is common in educational settings because the purpose of the project is often to study naturally formed groups, such as



a classroom (Creswell, 2014). However, focused contexts usually are not easy to generalize and may not allow new researchers sufficient depth toward understanding the underlying theory related to the field (Drysdale et al., 2013). Analogous to the recommendations researchers give to students in the other parts of world (Abdel Latif, 2018; Kirmizi, 2012; Lin & Chang 2010; Özmen et al., 2016; Thúy Loan & Prammolsook, 2016), master's novice researchers in Colombia could benefit from studying wider contexts and not focusing nor limiting samples to particular classrooms or social contexts. Nevertheless, research for smaller-scaled projects that look into the sociocultural context is relevant for some master's researchers.

Notably, within our literature review, many of the studies focused on language learning of particular skills and teacher methodology (e.g., Kirmizi, 2012; Tůma & Pišova, 2013). This is consistent with our findings as most theses observed student learning or the implementation of some pedagogical aspect in the classroom and the consequent student learning results. Of the 156 reviewed, only 17% delved into broader aspects of education inside the language classroom or looked at more interdisciplinary topics such as combining language learning with learning disabilities and/or internationalization. This is an area ELT teacher programs should consider, since as Jacob (2015) argues, interdisciplinary work is necessary because "being able to address the existing and emerging gaps in the literature is increasingly difficult when relying on a single theoretical perspective and research design and analytical approach" (p. 2). The research in the theses reviewed in this study seemed not to tackle complex stances toward research nor did they refute or add to larger scale "hybridity" in contrast to Motha's (2009) findings that many of the researchers studied viewed language teaching and learning in a broader way and used an innovative combination of research methods and designs. While in the field of education there is a need for a relationship between "theory building and practical application" (Saba, 2007, p. 52), students could benefit from researching more universal problems or gaps in the literature, broadening the scope of research areas, and including a higher number of participants and settings to involve more classrooms at the local level (particular institutional level or across institutions), national level, or international level.

The findings of this study show that among the research methodologies, designs, and data collection methods stated inside the 156 abstracts, there is a strong tendency toward qualitative research. Contrary to the findings from the Middle East and Asia which called for broader methods to include more qualitative or mixed-method approaches (Abdel Latiff, 2018; Chaiyasook & Jaroongkhongdach, 2014; Özmen et al., 2016), our results demonstrated a need for more quantitative and mixed method research in order to balance research methodology. On the one hand, to participate in the worldwide academic community, quantitative research is widely acknowledged as more "rigorous" than qualitative studies (Polit & Beck, 2010; Rosset al., 2010), thus providing more opportunities for publication and funding. Yet, on the other hand, qualitative studies allow for a "richer," more in-depth view of particular cases (Polit & Beck, 2010). Similar to Ross et al.'s (2010) suggestion, we also believe that to provide a viable solution to educational challenges, research should "achieve balance between rigor (internal validity) and relevance (external validity)...[and] focus on meaningful application topics that deal directly with teaching and learning challenges and practices in today's classrooms" (p. 24). For these reasons, we espouse a balance in research methods. Having more variety and out-of-the-box-thinking with research methods could strengthen Colombia's contribution to ELT research in the future.

While not a part of the research questions, the fact that many abstracts did not clearly state the context or research methodology, design, or data collection methods leads us to believe that students may not be aware of how to write abstracts. This coincides with Thúy Loan and Prammolsook's (2016) conclusions that some master's students had difficulty with the rhetorical functions in the thesis and suggest more formal instruction on the thesis genre. From the limited review of the abstracts of the theses in this study, we agree that students may need additional guidance on academic research writing. However, we do not believe that this lack in any way indicates that they did not follow a particular research method when writing their theses.

## **Conclusion**

We set out to review the contexts, areas, and methods that Colombian master's students are researching for their thesis projects. After carrying out this study, we can conclude that the majority of the theses reviewed were smaller-scaled projects aimed at solving problems in a particular context rather than those related to difficulties in the general field of language teaching and learning. They also were mainly qualitative case studies or action research using a variety of data collection techniques that corresponded clearly with their main research design.

By identifying these themes, our results have added to the global tapestry of novice research of the field. It is also hoped that the study may serve as washback to the master's programs in this context, pointing to possible adjustments in thesis research such as variety of methodological designs, interdisciplinary topics, and larger contexts. As mentioned in the introduction, in Colombia, master's theses serve to prepare students to become researchers who will fulfill the important role of exploring the problems of English language teaching and learning and looking for solutions to those problems. However, based upon our findings, when the majority of novice researchers carry out similar studies (i.e., qualitative, limited context and scope), specific problems are not being addressed and, thus, not solved. Therefore, we offer some suggestions for future novice research in this context which, we believe, could be applied to other areas around the world.

In general, we would like to highlight the idea of balance: a balance in projects that focus on broader issues and those that are narrower; a balance between larger- and smaller-scaled studies; and a balance between the use of qualitative and quantitative methods. That is to say, we do not ascribe to the practice of "throwing out the baby with the bathwater" by having novice researchers only carry out certain kinds of projects. There is merit to all types of studies. However, we are calling for more variety in the types of research being carried out. In this way, novice researchers could truly help better bridge the gap between theory and practice, contribute to the knowledge of the field and to the solution of teaching and learning challenges, and promote more visibility of research that is occurring in the Latin American region.

A recommendation would be for Colombian university scholars, libraries, and students to investigate different ways to disseminate their theses by publishing in existing databases such as *ProQuest Global* or *Scielo*. Furthermore, it could be beneficial to create a national database, as exists in other countries, where student theses could be uploaded and accessed publicly, not only by Colombian scholars but also by other researchers around the world. In this sense, these novice researchers could have real participation in the worldwide conversation on English language teaching and learning.

The major limitation of this study was the sample size because many of the master's theses of some of the universities that offer English language teaching master's degrees were not available online. For this reason, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be transferable to other contexts. Future studies on novice research are therefore suggested to include state of the art studies of master's students' theses within specific regions of the world (e.g., Latin America, Europe) as well as other comparative-type studies.

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