



9

The Journey to Becoming a Language Teacher: Motivation and Engagement with the Process of Professional Development and Lifelong Learning

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1 Introduction

Involved in a myriad of daily activities, planning lessons, attending meetings, marking students' work, it is easy to lose sight of oneself as a teacher. We live in the now, constantly adapting to change and moving on to the next step. It is hardly a surprise that we do not often stop to think about how far we have travelled since the start of our teaching careers.

We have been lucky to be offered the opportunity to undertake this journey as authors of this narrative. We were invited to delve into a crucial aspect of our personal lives that we can now identify as a motivating factor in becoming a language teacher, and in steering the direction of our professional development. We were both moved by each other's accounts:

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on the one hand, the early discovery of a love for words, and how this passion is closely interconnected with family memories; on the other hand, a more bittersweet journey, now triggering the opportunity to raise awareness of the personal difficulties that some teachers may experience simply because of the way they look—a case which will probably resonate with many colleagues.

Nevertheless, our stories of how we became language teachers converge in a vivid passion for both learning and helping others to learn, assisted by our own engagement with specialised professional development.

2 Laura's Narrative

2.1 "Miss, Where Are You Looking At?"

I was in front of a group of teenage pupils, in a small classroom in a comprehensive school somewhere in England. I had arrived there just a few weeks before, to work as a Spanish Language Assistant in three local state schools: two grammar (selective) schools and one comprehensive (non-selective) school. I had been appointed for one of the few hundred jobs available, thanks to my academic results in my final year studying for an English Philology degree in Spain, and I had been feeling rather too pleased with myself. For a long time I had dreamt of living and working abroad, and now I was finally here, in England. This was going to be my big adventure, and, as it turned out, the start of my teaching career.

The comprehensive school where I was teaching had been a bigger culture shock than the carpet in the bathroom of the house I shared with other foreign language assistants. I was very impressed by the facilities the school had, such as the Year 11 common room, but very disappointed about the lack of interest the pupils had in their learning. I knew behaviour was generally poor, and these pupils were very vocal about the fact that they saw no point in learning foreign languages. "Why do I have to study Spanish?", they would ask, "I am never going to go to Spain".

However, the negative attitude of the pupils towards learning was not the biggest stumbling block for me as a teacher. The biggest stumbling block was something I actually thought very little about: my strabismus.

I had suffered from it from birth; an operation at the age of five was very successful with one eye, but there was overcompensation with the other. I had never suffered from bullying at school in Spain; it was something that people simply made no comment about, at least in front of me. These positive experiences did not prepare me well for teaching teenagers at a secondary school. Whenever I asked a student to do something in class, they would ask me to confirm if I meant them. Often, they would turn around to look behind them, as if I were looking at something just beyond, over their shoulder. For a start, the students were probably genuinely confused: it could be that they had never had a teacher with strabismus before. However, they soon repeated this process constantly and deliberately in the class, with a smirk, challenging me explicitly with the question “where are you looking at, miss?”.

Undoubtedly, the pupils’ reactions and behaviour had a negative effect on my self-esteem and professional enjoyment of the teaching experience at this comprehensive school. However, pupils at the grammar schools where I was also contracted to work behaved quite differently and seemed to enjoy my lessons, particularly the oldest ones who were studying at GCE level. As a consequence of this overall experience, by the time the academic year ended, I had resolved in the first instance to continue my studies with a Ph.D., in order to work in higher education in the long term. I had already looked into this possibility before leaving for England, so it was relatively straight forward to start working towards a doctorate in English literature. Although this approach may sound rather pragmatic, in practice at the time I was mostly looking forward to some uninterrupted time devoted to research and scholarship in a field, literature, I am still passionate about. Thankfully, I was privileged to have a very supportive and encouraging supervisor, as well as the financial help of a research grant that enabled me to take this path.

On the other hand, encouraged by the more positive experience of teaching in the grammar schools, where students had never made any comments about my strabismus, and I had been happy teaching, I decided also not to give up on teaching altogether. Nowadays, I am an Associate Lecturer at The Open University, where I have worked for over fifteen years.

2.2 Perceptions of Difference

So far, during the rest of my teaching career, I have never encountered antagonism or negativity due to my strabismus: my experience at the comprehensive school remains an isolated, if important, critical incident. However, the negative impact that strabismus can have is well-documented. As stated by Astle et al.:

People with strabismus often report problems making eye contact when speaking with others (Nelson et al. 2008; Satterfield et al. 1993). Abnormal gaze cues associated with strabismus may explain why they have more difficulty in social situations and why others develop negative impressions of them. (2016, p. 122)

For teachers, difficulties with making eye contact with students can have a negative effect when managing a class or a specific activity. The realisation that a problem can occur indeed may prompt teachers into developing coping mechanisms and seeking advice or specialised help, if available. They may choose to be upfront with their pupils about their strabismus, thus creating a wider learning opportunity, too. For instance, a teacher suffering from a rare form of dwarfism, diastrophic dysplasia, provides an example of how this may work in real practice:

In my work, I've also learned that children are not afraid to ask upfront questions like "Why do you look different?" When my students ask why I perform simple tasks in a particular way, we often try to imitate differences in movement to make comparisons. For example, I show them how I lift myself onto a student chair and use a ruler to tap the light switch on or off. This becomes a way to explore how people may do things differently, even though we all have similar thoughts, dreams, and feelings. (Venter 2017, n.p.)

This example reveals how self-reflection can help to resolve a problem and develop agency, where the teacher takes control of a situation by making a proactive intervention: in this case, talking openly and graphically about dwarfism.

I remain full of admiration for what this teacher did. Even now, reflecting on my experience and writing this story, I feel as if I were exorcising

a demon. So, what did *I* do? I want to believe that, in a very sketchy manner, I was beginning to be what Schön (1987) and others refer to as a self-reflective practitioner.

As described by Boud and Walker (1990), self-reflective practitioners take time to think about their lessons *after* they have finished. They rehearse in their memories parts that went well and parts that went not so well. Pinpointing what made these sections successful and unsuccessful helps teachers to develop further those valuable techniques, and to readjust or abandon altogether the resources or strategies that simply did not work. In this process self-reflective practitioners proactively seek the support of relevant, up-to-date, innovative literature and training; banks of resources; line managers and networks of teachers.

So, I was aware that my classroom management skills could be improved, and I started seeking a wider range of teaching resources. For instance, I exchanged activity ideas and resources with other language assistants in the schools I was working at. I also enquired after supplementary classroom resources, and some of the teachers guided and encouraged me. For example, I remember using supplementary worksheets that were available as part of the textbook packages the schools used, but the teachers had no time for during normal lessons. Some of the resources provided by the Consejería de Educación (part of the services of the Spanish Ministry of Education in the UK) were also very helpful. One particular example comes to mind: a magazine that gathered activities created by Spanish language assistants across the country, which I received at one of the schools. Nowadays this resource still exists, albeit with a different name, *Acti/España*.

There is then some evidence that I was on the journey to becoming a self-reflective practitioner, but it is also true that there are things that I did *not* do. Even if I did not allow the experience to bring me down—my adventure year in England was, otherwise, going pretty well—, I *did not* confide in my line manager about the pupils' comments about my strabismus: it would have been just too humiliating. To a degree, I was suffering from professional isolation, as I did not trust anybody enough to be open about something that I felt was very personal. A strong culture of hierarchy in Spanish universities in my undergraduate years also made it difficult for me to take the step to approach a manager with a professional

situation that could be potentially read as a weakness, a failing, or a liability. The working culture in higher education in the UK can be described as more collaborative, diverse and inclusive, and I think this culture has made me more willing to reach out to my managers and colleagues later in my career. For instance, conversations in professional forums, workshops and conferences have helped me to adapt to institutional and industry changes, such as new policies and tuition systems. At a more personal level, contact with colleagues strengthens my personality and agency as a teacher, as well as contributing to a feeling of belonging within an academic community.

Part of being an effective teacher and self-reflective practitioner is a desire to become acquainted with your pupils' specific needs in order to adjust your teaching to them. Although I could sense a fundamental difference between some of the pupils in the comprehensive and grammar schools where I was teaching, I did not have enough knowledge at the time to pinpoint exactly how these differences came about in the first place. On the other hand, nowadays I have a better understanding of British society and I am able to ascertain the reason why many of these pupils at the comprehensive school were not interested in learning foreign languages. It was partly because they had very low expectations about their future, due to their socioeconomic background: that's why they thought that they were never going to travel to Spain. Besides, they had an internalised perception that education was not for them, and, if they acted defensively, it was because they felt excluded. I, however, was brought up in an inclusive society that, although not without its own endemic problems, arguably valued education for everyone, regardless. I have always been passionate about the benefits of lifelong learning, and I have a wide range of interests, including literature, history and foreign languages. At a more material level, education can increment your chances in life drastically; it can also enrich your inner life and train you to think critically. I am sure that teachers at the comprehensive school where I worked made every effort to motivate their pupils to take advantage of the opportunities that education afforded them to improve their socioeconomic situation, empowering them for instance by developing their reading and writing skills.

I wish I had been more willing and able to integrate myself successfully within this collective endeavour, but thankfully at a later stage in my

professional career I have been able to attempt to remedy this. Nowadays, I work for an institution with a strong ethos promoting lifelong learning and equal opportunities, and I want to encourage my students to achieve their goals in life. I find a high degree of communion with my managers, colleagues and students in the value we all place on education, while advocating that all school children, such as some of those I encountered in the early stages of my career, should be encouraged to feel confident about their individual potential, and to have high expectations for their future. As Toom et al. (2015) emphasizes, in order to stimulate agency in teacher education there needs to be the necessary social support and culture, as well as equality and acknowledgement. My personal experiences have made me sensitive to the needs of my learners, particularly those with specific learning differences and any medical conditions that potentially can have a detrimental impact on their studies. For example, as part of my continuous professional development I have specialised in Specific Learning Differences (SpLDs), in particular, dyslexia. At my institution I have supported numerous students who had disclosed SpLDs, showing them techniques to structure, develop and proofread their writing for their Spanish and Applied Linguistics modules. I have helped dyslexic students understand the syllabic structure of the Spanish language in order to enable them to bridge the gap between the written and the spoken word. In tutorials, I have learned that simple things, such as taking care to keep your worksheets and slides clear and uncluttered, can help not just students with SpLDs, but all students in general.

Both specialised training and shared experience have been instrumental in the process of refining the skills required to best support students with SpLDs. Nevertheless, the unspoken connection I feel with learners dealing with these kinds of obstacles remains a key motivating factor. Empathy, and the willingness to listen and intervene, sometimes proactively, are important elements for me as a teacher, and there is evidence that students find this helpful, because they mention it in their feedback. This is very rewarding for me. Back in that comprehensive school, I may not have felt quite like a teacher yet, probably, quite rightly. However, I would have been relieved to learn that “teachers’ professional agency is not a fixed disposition of an individual teacher, rather, it is constructed situationally in relation to the current context and past personal experiences (Emirbayer and Mische

1998; Greeno 2006; Lipponen and Kumpulainen 2011)” (Toom et al. 2015, p. 616). In other words, you are not born a teacher, you make yourself one.

3 Susanne’s Narrative

3.1 My Little Book of Words

From an early age, I have been fascinated by words and languages. I grew up surrounded by pocket dictionaries which my father used in the 60s and 70s when English was not the Lingua Franca that it is now. My father worked as an engineer in many countries, in remote places, where knowing some of the native languages was important for survival. My father enjoyed language learning and was to a large degree an autodidact—he would buy dictionaries (we had Greek, Spanish, many French and English and Italian phrasebooks and dictionaries) and teach himself, using the language knowledge of Latin, French and English which he had learned at school. Of all the countries he worked in, Italy was the one he travelled to most often and loved. In fact, my mother and father lived in Italy before I was born. I remember my mother recounting how pronunciation and mispronunciation could distort the meaning of a word in Italian—and any other language!—so much that one would not be understood. She demonstrated this with the Italian word for egg, *uovo*. As a young child, I found it great fun, trying to pronounce the two initial vowels in a way other than I had known from my mother-tongue, German. I was amazed to find that there were so many other languages that expressed the same thoughts and ideas but just in other words. I found the idea fascinating!

I knew that these little phrasebooks and dictionaries were special; for a five-year-old girl, they held some magic within. Sometimes, my father would make phone calls to Italy and often, before a conversation, would look up specific terms. Then, I would listen to him in wonderment, speaking in Italian, saying ordinary things in this beautifully elegant sounding language. I would always ask him what he had been talking about and his answers always left me feeling astounded that there was more than one way, more than one language, to talk about the world.

One day, during my kindergarten years, I got up very early one morning, before anyone else had woken up; I went to our bookshelf and chose the smallest and—to me—most appealing dictionary and painstakingly copied out one small page. It was my father's tiny Italian dictionary. I hadn't yet learned to write, so I have no idea how it must have looked. The page was supposed to be a present for my friend. Proudly, I handed it over to him in the morning, and in the afternoon, my mother was asked to see the nursery teacher. They thought it was an unusual present. Why would a child, who could not write, copy out a page in a dictionary, in a foreign language, as a present for a friend? There was curiosity as to what had motivated me to do this; I don't know how the conversation with my mother went as I had to wait outside the office, but I felt disappointed. In a way, I felt that the magic of the little present had escaped them. How could they possibly fail to see how special these words were? I was sharing the most precious treasures with my friend!

3.2 Learner and Teacher Agency

It must have seemed odd at the time, but the fascination did not pass and became a lifelong passion. Apart from my compulsion to collect words, another quest shaped my childhood life: I wanted to find out who had “invented German” and I would frequently ask adults this question on first encounter. I was fascinated by the idea of language itself and that ideas could be expressed in many different ways.

I don't ask so much about the invention of German anymore—I have learned!—but I still like words and share them with others! This resulted in my decision to join the Doctorate in Education programme at my institution. The focus of my research was on vocabulary learning and involved producing vocabulary sets on digital flashcards for beginner students of German. This enabled me to research a topic I am passionate about and to share it with a wider audience.

The fact that early childhood experiences can have a significant influence on later professional development was acknowledged by Knowles (1992) and in my case, the early fascination with words steered my entire life and career. As all German pupils in the 80s, I started learning English when I

was ten and, a year later, French. Many lists of vocabulary were written—some of them were learned, many forgotten. As a pupil and student, I experienced a lot of frustration during my language studies, always feeling that there was a lack of words in my foreign language knowledge. As a pupil and student in Germany, in my language classes, I was encouraged to read long texts in French and English and to produce my own vocabulary lists with translations. These were often incorrect because I had misunderstood the text and context. When we were given vocabulary lists by our teachers, I always managed to know the first few items on the list, but my recall diminished the further I got down in the list. And I felt further frustrated by the fact that I could understand every word my teachers were saying but could never achieve the same standard when I spoke. Unfortunately, when I learned languages in the 80s, I received no training in how to learn effectively. With more guidance on learning strategies and a warning that language learning needs determination, resilience and acceptance of failure, my learning may have been more efficient and less emotionally challenging. Later in my life, I studied other languages, out of curiosity, enabling me to see the world through different lenses and giving me an opportunity to explore different options for learning words. Just as one of the characters in Khaled Hosseini's novel *And the Mountains Echoed*, I felt that “if culture is a house, then language was the key to the front door; to all the rooms inside...” (2013, p. 362). It is often said that dictionaries represent not only the language used but also the beliefs, ideologies and values of any given speech community. So, words and what they represent in different language communities create a direct route to understanding a different culture, too. The words and languages I collect help me to understand the world that goes beyond my own language community.

In terms of learning words, I often had the image of myself as that of a Victorian butterfly collector, hunting and trying to capture particularly beautiful specimens, realising that these beautiful creations are elusive and fragile and can easily disappear again which is why I examined the role of memory, of how to commit vocabulary to memory to prevent the hard-earned foreign vocabulary from escaping.

In my school and university days, very little attention was paid to learning skills, so when I came across Sebastian Leitner's (1974) work on learning how to learn, I felt a sense of empowerment because it validated my

beliefs of teaching and learning: that knowing how to learn is vital, that learners need to be instructed in learning strategy use, that vocabulary learning should be approached systematically and that it is best to adhere to a particular learning schedule to ensure that nothing is forgotten. I stumbled upon his work at a time when I worked as a private tutor, teaching French and English and recognising that what my students needed was not only help with learning the language but also knowing how best to learn. Leitner's effective way of self-testing and making judgements on what parts of the learning material needed more attention than others was a simple system. It revolutionised the way I tackled vocabulary learning and started my interest in learning strategies in language learning.

This interest continued throughout my professional and personal life as teacher and language learner. I was asked many times by students how best to learn vocabulary because they, just as I, felt that simply writing vocabulary lists did not do the job sufficiently. When I worked as Modern Foreign Languages Curriculum Coordinator for a consortium of Adult Education centres, I was also in charge of professional development of MFL tutors and was fortunate enough to receive training as an e-guide—a champion for implementing technology in teaching and learning. It was during that time that I realised the huge potential of technology in language learning and teaching. It was during one of the training sessions that I came across upon flashcard programmes and realised what a powerful tool they could be for my students. I started collecting vocabulary from my students' textbook, translating it and uploading it to Quizlet, a flashcard programme which not only helps students to memorise vocabulary but also provides a range of different activities to practise retrieval of vocabulary. These sets can then be shared with students via a link—and here I was again: collecting words and sharing them with others!

Students welcomed this learning strategy; in data I gathered (questionnaires and focus groups) for my research on vocabulary learning, one student stated that learning vocabulary with my translated and uploaded sets was for them “the best thing ever”; another student reported that they had considered leaving the course but the availability of the flashcards had changed their mind. The response by students had confirmed my hunch as a language learner myself: students felt a need for more support for

vocabulary learning and that they felt more secure in their learning with the availability of translated vocabulary sets.

As a teacher I felt empowered to see myself as an action researcher and take agency of my own professional identity. My discussion with students and my research findings demonstrated that my beliefs were shared by others and that my own attitude to learning had influenced my teaching and professional identity. Extending my beliefs beyond that of language learner and applying it in my professional practice had struck a chord with my students. I felt that my views had validity—I had found my professional voice as a researcher. Coldron and Smith (1999) suggested: “People find a kind of agency in positioning themselves [...] in response to needs that arise from an assessment of the circumstances in which they find themselves.” (1999, p. 714) Furthermore, Edwards (2015), drawing on the work of Taylor (1989, 1991) and Eteläpelto et al. (2013) explains that agency is based on our capability of making judgements about the goals for our actions and involves teachers forging their own professional practice and identity. Once I had recognised that my experience as a language learner was shared by many others, my professional knowledge enabled me to seek a solution and thus shape my own professional identity and autonomy in the process. I have also realised that my identity as a language teacher is intertwined with my experiences and identity as a language learner.

I am fortunate in that the higher education institution I work for allows for professional development in the form of taking modules alongside other students. The experience of being a student and a teacher in parallel is of enormous value; having the opportunity of being a student empowers me in my identity as teacher. My students value my expertise as a teacher and my experience as a student. The availability of professional development does not only help to become a better practitioner but also to see oneself as a researcher. The availability of professional development opportunities as practitioner-researcher allowed me to follow the Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme and to research a field I was passionate about. For me, the choice of opting for an EdD rather than a Ph.D. was rooted in my drive to improve learning for others, for which an action-research approach was ideal.

My research, sparked by my curiosity as a child and my intuition as a language learner and teacher, has been shared with students and colleagues. My practice and beliefs are thus deeply settled in my historical self. My journey has come full-circle but I intend to travel the path again, with new knowledge and understanding.... and more sharing of words!

To refer to Cooper and Olson's terminology (1996), I most certainly see myself as a composite of multiple "I"s'; foremost I am a teacher and learner in equal measures: I teach my native language, German, in the UK, with English being my language of habitual use. I have now reached a point in time where I have lived in the UK longer than in my native country, yet I still see myself as a learner of English—a truly lifelong learning process. To me, learning has made me who I am—not only in terms of knowledge but also in terms of my identity. This is reflected in Lave's assertion that "learning is... more basically a process of coming to be—of forging identities in activities in the world" (1992, p. 3).

My experiences as a learner and teacher feed into a perpetual cycle of personal and professional development. My sense of shifting, multiple identities is echoed in Cooper and Olson (1996) who view professional identity as multifaceted and conclude that a number of factors influence teacher identity. Referring to Mishler (1999), Beijaard et al. (2004) conclude that

It is better to recognize in the definition of identity that a plurality of sub-identities exists. To give expression to this, Mishler used the metaphor of "our selves as a chorus of voices, not just as the tenor or soprano soloist [...]. Identity development occurs in an intersubjective field and can be best characterized as an ongoing process, a process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context". (2004, p. 113)

In my identity as language learner with a passion for words, I will continue to gather these lexical building blocks, full of culture and ideas, while my professional, teacher identity will keep looking for ways to make learning more effective and enjoyable.

4 Conclusion

When we started work on this chapter, we sent each other our narratives first and both of us had an initial crushing feeling that we didn't have anything profound to share, nothing to say. We felt that our voices were very much like the voices of many other language teachers in similar situations. We felt that, because our voices were similar to those of others, we did not have a voice at all. However, when we reflected on and talked about our experiences, we realised that both our narratives were not quite so different in that they described a critical incident in our lives that shaped our identity as teachers. While one incident occurred very early on in life, the other happened when already firmly set on the path of being a language teacher. Nonetheless, the two incidents determined what came next and influenced our understanding of who we are as people, as language learners and language teachers. Of course, while one perspective and understanding stems from a retrospective examination of events that shaped the person, the other choice of action and construction of voice and agency occurred much later in life than childhood. What both of these incidents show is that they served as turning points. For one, in their young life, there was an intuitive feeling that language holds something special and that those cherished words served to unlock some kind of hidden world. For the other, it was the experience in the classroom that determined her future career path.

In the foreword to Nunan and Choi's *Language and Culture: Reflective Narratives and the Emergence of Identity* (2010), Bonny Norton recognises that "the validation of past history and experience" (p. xi) can be difficult for students and teachers who are, academically, not accustomed to using their own voice to support their research. In defining voice, we utilise Nunan and Choi's definition as "the centrality of the human story to qualitative research in terms of what the story is and how the story is told" (2010, p. 1). These authors' assertion that the act of writing can become the act of enquiry itself was enlightening. They explain that the procedure of writing is complementary to the final product, i.e. our exploration of the path to our identity as teachers is equally as important as our identity itself. Our account, our giving voice to the *Werdungsprozess*, the coming

into being of who we are as people and as professionals is just as essential as examining the status quo of our identities.

Personal narratives, thus, can be encouraged as a valuable research tool that can also open a window onto our colleagues' practice and identity, a world otherwise relatively private, but immensely varied internationally, enriching our own teaching potential and contributing to a feeling of community beyond our own specialisation and educational institutions.

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