

ALTERNATIVE LEARNING PLOTS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO TEACHERS' COMPETENCE BUILDING IN THE CLASSROOM

doi.org/10.61425/wplp.2013.07.74.83

Krisztina Nagy-Váci

Language Pedagogy PhD Program, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest
krisztina.vaci@gmail.com

Abstract: The present study aims at exploring secondary school language teachers' ways of learning teaching skills, that is, the learning plots which are constructed through narrating small stories about critical incidents in the classroom. As part of a greater grounded theory study, six teachers have been interviewed to enrich existing findings on teachers' competence building. In the research process, four alternative teacher responses have been identified through constant comparison and coding procedures. These are the avoidance of competence building, experimenting with competences, delaying competence building and persevering with one's own beliefs. The analysis intends to complement our understanding of teacher development through classroom experience.

Keywords: teacher development, learning, building competence, narrative research, small story

1 Introduction

Research on teacher learning in TESOL converges on two types, the one studying teachers' careers and developmental phases with the help of life history narratives, and the other focusing on mechanisms of learning or decision-making in critical incidents through small story analysis. Studies of the first type typically identify stages based on certain features, for instance the degree of automaticity, self-regulation or familiarity with the teaching content (Alexander, 2003; Glaser 1996; Shuell, 1990). As a synthesis of classifications, models encompassing multiple variables have appeared as well (Berliner, 1988; Falus, 2011; Fuller, 1969). Studies of that first type are useful tools in identifying variables of teacher change and assessing a teacher's current status, but do not account for *how* the change actually happens.

Studies of the second type focus on a smaller time span examining the procedures in critical incidents. Prabhu (1992) for instance accounts for teachers' professional growth as an intellectual exploration, where through critical incidents during teaching, one's beliefs are subjected to tests, as a result of which the beliefs are sustained or modified. Also referred to as cognitive dissonance, the conflict between the teachers' beliefs and students' needs and the attempts at resolving it is studied as a crucial part of novices' learning career, making them "confront and modify" existing beliefs (Kagan, 1992, p. 145). Such studies can account for *how* the change happens, at least in terms of providing frameworks for learning mechanisms.

Both types of studies, however, aim at mapping learning mechanisms that are generally true to people, but fail to represent the richness of individual cases as well. Therefore the present study seeks to focus on the unconventional learning routes that secondary school language teachers have narrated. As part of a large-scale grounded theory research project investigating the identification process of teachers, the present paper provides a collection of those learning plots that could not fit in the scheme of learning suggested by previous phases of my study.

My study deals with stories of learning plots that affect a teacher to increase her teaching competence. First I will show where my inquiry is located among other psychological approaches to learning, then I will explain my understanding of the concepts of *teacher competence* and *story*. In the Methods section, a glimpse into the phases of my previous research phases, along with the features of the present study. Finally, in the Results section four learning routes will be exhibited that stretch the boundaries of the framework proposed by my earlier research, that present learning plots that diverge from a linear model, and support an understanding of learning comparable to the flight of a butterfly, rather than of a bullet (Jackson, 1968).

2 Background

As grounded theory research constructs concepts empirically from research data, presenting literature related to our topic serves to locate our study among the other research in this field. Therefore, first those theories will be presented that have a view of learning similar to this study's, then literature will be provided to clarify two concepts central to my research: *teacher competence* and *story*.

2.1 An approach to learning

Among the many psychological paradigms dealing with learning, constructivist and social learning theories are the most similar to the approach of this study. Constructivist theories propose that knowledge is actively constructed by the learner as opposed to simply assimilating it as a box of information. Therefore, as the learner is the agent of the learning process, knowledge is a fundamentally subjective representation of the objective reality. Another tenet of constructivism is that, learning is a result of interaction with the environment (Dewey, 1897; Vygotsky 1978). Similarly, social learning theories locate learning in the interpersonal domain, highlighting the social aspect of learning as opposed to a solely psychological one advocated by cognitivists (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Miller & Dollard, 1941).

Within these paradigms, the learning theory that best depicts the ideas behind my study are Lave and Wenger's Situated Learning Theory (1991), and Wenger's quite similar Social Learning Theory, better known as the theory behind Communities of Practice (1998). Lave and Wenger, in their book on Situated Learning, propose that authentic learning happens in social situations of co-participation, rather than as a result of the transmission of abstract knowledge deprived from context (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Later, Wenger, in his Social Learning Theory, describes learning as an experience of participation in the enterprise of a Community of Practice, leading to change in the individual's competencies and an understanding of his participation as meaningful, that is, possible to put into words (Wenger, 1998). The present study also maintains that learning, beside psychological factors, is a social enterprise, which has interaction between people as its possible source, and building of competencies as one of the possible outcomes.

2.2 Teacher competence

As for what exactly is acquired through teachers' learning process, the concept of *teacher competence* should be clarified. It is the body of knowledge, skills and attitudes that a teacher possesses in order to successfully fulfil a task (Falus, 2011). Teachers' knowledge is neither purely theoretical nor practical, but a unique composition of the two, also encompassing the teacher's

personal background and character features (Clandinin, 1985). Labelled personal practical knowledge, it is also “a body of convictions, conscious or unconscious” which are rooted in both personal and professional experience, and which are shown in the teachers’ narratives (Clandinin, 1985, p. 362).

As for the subdivision of such knowledge, Shulman (1987) established six categories. The first three categories are the pedagogical content knowledge, i.e., the subject-matter knowledge, the pedagogical methods and theory, and the curriculum. The remaining categories cover the characteristics of learners, teaching contexts, and educational purpose. Most studies on knowledge tend to examine the technical level of a teacher’s knowledge, whereas the latter categories are examined less often (Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991).

Regarding the source of knowledge, all the above mentioned research advocates the importance of experience. Schon (1987) emphasizes that knowledge received from formal education is important but the majority of teachers’ learning comes from their encounter with everyday problems while teaching. Beside teaching experience, other knowledge that can act as a mental screen includes: memories from a teacher’s “apprenticeship of learning” (Lortie, 1975), social position (Freeman, 2002), convictions, theories (Prabhu, 1992), literature and the media (Pajares, 1992).

2.3 Story

Before clarifying what *story* stands for in this inquiry, it may be worth pondering on narratives in general, since they constitute the backbone of my study. A narrative means both one’s self-interpretation for a given purpose, and the process of constructing the self (Holquist, 1990, as cited in Johnson & Golombek, 2011, p. 490). It represents the self since as people think, perceive, dream and remember in narrative structures (Hardy, 1968, as cited in Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Sarbin, 1986), narration is the primary tool for making ourselves understood in society (Gergen & Gergen, 1986). Also, the central function of a narrative is the construction of identity (Riessman, 2008, as cited in Menard-Warwick, 2011, p. 565) through being “a way of organizing episodes, actions and recollections of actions” (Sarbin, 1986, p. 64.), which contributes to our understanding of the self.

As for the meaning of *story*, I will rely on Labov’s (1972) idea, regarding story as a text that connects and evaluates events, actions, and experiences through time. As opposed to what has become popular in recent times, called “big story” research, which analyses autobiographies and life histories (Vásquez, 2011) in order to account for phases and processes in a person’s life, small story research focuses on structured or fragmentary recollections of an event or a critical incident (Benson, 2011) in “everyday, mundane contexts” (Watson, 2007, p. 371) which contains both characters and plots. The classroom is usually the context of these small stories, and their content includes the “goings-on” like “interactions, dynamics, talk, silences, curriculum, activities, thoughts, feelings, gestures, innuendoes, and so on” (Nelson, 2011, p. 465). In the case of the present study, the characters are the teachers and students and any other person who appears in the narration from the teacher, while the plots are about learning.

3 Methods

This study is the third part of a large-scale grounded theory research project, exploring secondary school language teachers’ teacher identity development. In order to have a clear picture of the present research, first an overview of the previous phases of my research, from now on referred to as Phase 1, will be briefly outlined. After that, the research questions are presented, followed by an explanation of the data collection and analysis. Each section contains a brief explanation of how it connects to my work in Phase 1.

3.1 An overview of Phase 1

Since the aim of my large-scale research has been to map secondary school language teachers' professional identity formation in a way that would allow for capturing both generalizable features and individual differences, I have chosen to conduct my research using the methods of grounded theory research. This research tradition comprises a structured chain of analytic methods, which I have used with the goal of generating a theory which describes phenomenon when individuals interact, and which is formulated from the content collected from interviews (Creswell, 1998). In the case of this study, the phenomenon has become bounded to the path of learning that secondary school language teachers take through their daily interaction with students, as recalled by the teachers, with a focus on their personal understanding of how they have been affected.

The analysis of the ten teacher interviews in Phase 1 revealed three communities that play an important role in teachers' identity development, and in shaping teachers' developmental phases as well. These communities are: the teacher's colleagues, the teacher's own previous teachers, and the teacher's student groups. Through the analysis of teachers' narratives, three developmental phases have been identified within the teacher's relationship to their students. These three phases were *recognizing students' expectations*, *building competence* and *recognizing positive feedback*. For the present phase of the research, in order to enrich data regarding the developmental phases, six new teachers have been interviewed, and their narratives have been analyzed through coding procedures, and constant comparison with the narratives of Phase 1.

3.2 Research questions

The umbrella research question that has guided my large-scale study is as follows:

RQ1.: How do secondary school language teachers develop their identities through social interaction with their students?

As my research has progressed, teacher learning has become my centre of attention. Upon analyzing the interview transcripts of the present study in the quest for a better understanding of teacher learning, some plots emerged that appeared non-normative; therefore the following research question has been formulated:

RQ2.: What learning plots have emerged that differ from the normative learning plots already identified in this study?

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Sampling

Six secondary school language teachers were interviewed. All of them teach in Budapest, Hungary; five of them are female. Their ages range from 26 to 39, their teaching experience ranges from 1.5 years to 15 years. To protect their identities they appear under pseudonyms in the study. They were selected by purposive sampling, seeking teachers from various secondary schools with the ability to verbalize their experience.

Care was taken so that participants were not chosen as a representation of equal demographic distribution, or other quantitative considerations that are not the focus of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These kind of controls would have contributed to variation due to

specific differences like location, and saturation would never have been reached (Morse, 2008). Still, teachers from different secondary schools contribute to enriching dimensions of properties or adding new properties, thus teachers from different secondary schools were sought out. Also, regarding the age of the participants, no limitations were imposed, as the research focus has been secondary school language teachers' professional identity development.

3.3.2 Interview schedule

For the present study, an interview protocol was used with thematic clusters as a starting point for discussion. These clusters represent a simplified version of the interview schedules used in Phase 1 (see Phase 1's latest interview schedule in Appendix A), maintaining those topics that encouraged story-telling on the teachers' part, since from Phase 1 it appeared that the critical moments that triggered learning were mostly recollected through stories. Besides the topics, I attempted to allow for the interviewees' experiential history and personality to govern the interviews, and I only focussed on spotting aspects of learning in the narratives and asking follow-up questions when an instance appeared. The interviews lasted from one hour to one and a half hours, and they were conducted in our mother tongue, Hungarian.

My initial questions were supposed to be about the teachers' career, though in the majority of cases, our discussion which preceded the interview naturally turned into the conversation that was audio recorded. Themes that naturally followed the professional career topic are failures and successes experienced during teaching. The next set of questions turned from reality to values and beliefs, asking about how the participants would describe the ideal teacher and the purposes of their teaching. These questions are relevant since the notion of how to be a good teacher and the moral purposes for being a good teacher are inherently linked with teachers' identities (Lasky, 2005). Finally, the discussions turned to the teachers' personality in and outside of the classroom.

3.4 Data analysis

The data were processed by grounded theory methods, principally by constant comparison and coding procedures (Holton, 2008). The interviews were transcribed and analyzed first by coding any phrases related to teacher identity, then coding classroom stories, then coding the sections of the stories with the phases, sources and directions that had been identified in Phase 1. After coding, stories that deviated from my previous concept were collected, and they were categorized and analyzed for the sake of identifying similarities and differences. As a result, my idea on teacher identity development has been refined and enriched, presenting multiple ways of teacher learning.

4 Results and discussion

In the following section, first the codes of Phase 1 will be described, then their refinement in light of the present findings. As a result of Phase 1, three phases emerged that played an important role in the teachers' identity development: *recognizing students' expectations*, *building competence* and *recounting positive feedback*. As these phases were further analyzed and compared across cases through axial coding, their sources and directions were identified. The term "sources" here refers to people, ideas, or circumstances who contributed to the realization of a phase. For instance, recognizing students' expectation may occur as a result of talking with colleagues, in that case the source is the colleagues. The most common sources were obviously the teachers' students, the teachers' own classroom experience as former students, the colleagues, the teachers' beliefs, the

contexts in which teaching occurred, etc. Directions relates to identity fractals of the teachers that are targeted by the phase. For example, positive feedback from the students may be targeted at the methodological self of the teacher, or acknowledging his or her competence in managing classroom work. Four identity fractals emerged, the *L2 self*, the *pedagogical self*, the *methodological self* and the *personal self*.

As a result of the present coding procedure, four alternative responses to *the recognizing students' expectations* phase emerged. These are: *avoiding competence building*, *experimenting with competence building*, *delaying competence building* and *denying competence building by persevering with one's own beliefs*. In short, *avoidance*, *experimenting*, *delaying* and *persevering*. These are detailed in the following sections.

4.1 Avoidance

Avoidance is a response where the teacher recognizes the students' needs and for some reason decides not to embark on competence building but abandons the challenging situation, as we can see in Gábor's case:

"[...] and I think in my first 2-3 years it also occurred that I left a group. I couldn't get along with them, so at the end of the year, when a new English teacher came, I signalled to the director that if it wasn't a big problem, we should try to change because I felt that somehow I wasn't enough for this group. Not that they were bad children or stupid children... It's difficult to decide. You never know whether you make such a decision [leaving a group] because you want to go towards the line of least resistance and so if there's a chance you get rid of that group. Or you say something like that because you acknowledge that simply you have no idea here [of what to do]. You can't get hold of them. As for me, it was both." (Gábor)

In Gábor's case his response to a conflict-ridden relationship with the students was, after attempting to solve the problems for a while, to avoid the situation altogether. This was, as he put it, partly a natural human reaction to problematic situations and partly a realistic deliberation of sources. Interestingly, a colleague of mine has referred to Gábor as one of the best English teachers practising in Budapest now, who also mentors teacher trainees. Thus, *avoiding competence building* in class can have its place in one's professional career.

4.2 Experimenting

The next plot, *experimenting with competence building*, can be closely linked to the previous one, as experimenting may precede avoidance. In fact, any kind of competence building entails, to differing degrees, a period of trial. It is worth observing that plot in order to point out how difficult competence building is; a fact which can easily be overlooked by learning mechanism models. The following example illustrates Emma's dilemma:

"I don't need to feel that they are afraid of me for me to feel successful. That's not important to me. But you hear it from the predecessors that you need to keep the distance, because something dire will happen. This is in your mind, but in the meantime, if it was effective to be buddies with children during the whole lesson, and then they learn the things that way too, then I'd be happy to try [being strict], but I'm not sure about that. It's a little ambivalent. I keep dancing between these two things, but in the meantime I don't really feel good in that role. But if I don't take it on, they might not learn. Then what should be done?" (Emma)

What Emma has expressed is the dilemma of which teacher personality to choose – to go for what is recommended by colleagues, keeping her distance, which does not fit her personality, or the one she feels more comfortable with but which – according to her colleagues – may hinder her reaching the goal of teaching. Thus in Emma’s case, the students’ expectations are recognized, and attempts have been made at finding a satisfying solution, but these attempts have not been successful yet.

4.3 Delaying

The next route is *delaying building competence*. In Sára’s case, the students’ expectations are recognized, it is assumed that she even knows the proper response, but she simply neglects dealing with it.

“There are things from which I haven’t learned... I sometimes offend them [the students], which is also bad. Because I know some things about them, [and] I sometimes abuse it, which is totally bad. For example, they want to be friends with me on facebook. I can see [there] that a guy goes out with a girl, and I just had to quip. I wanted it to be a joke, it was a very bad joke, bad for a joke and why am I joking with this anyway, I’m not normal... Sometimes I get too personal, and I don’t learn from my mistakes, it’s so bad.” (Sára)

Sára knows what would be a better response to such situations, but does not build her competence in doing it. In other parts of the interview she mentioned more examples of simply forgetting to pay attention to how she was responding to certain recurring situations. She intends to care more about her students, but keeps forgetting all that she could have learnt so far. Interestingly, the enviably good and light-hearted relationship she has built with her students survives such incidents. This example shows us that learning might not occur even if all the best conditions are present. However, awareness of the lacking quality still holds some hope that learning might happen later.

4.4 Persevering

In the fourth case, the teacher knows what to do and decides to do it, only it seems to be a solution that in the short term at least, does not satisfy both sides. *Persevering* means that the teacher adheres to his, or her, beliefs and ideas irrespective of the perceived student expectations. An example of this is Éva, who has decided to persist with her idea of how vocabulary should be taught regardless of her students’ feedback.

“I teach words with English definitions. Irrespectively of their level of language, they freak out. But I have sound arguments for this. What I usually do is that they write feedback in each term... Then I check them, summarize them and tell them what I think... With the words, the results were that with an advanced group I told them that this is that I’m not willing to change, and I told them reasons why, which were so good that they understood it. With a beginner group it’s difficult... They usually whine a lot, but not seriously. There is a group that hasn’t got used to it in two years, but I don’t want to change it anyway.” (Éva)

Although there is a group that seems unable to adapt to Éva’s system, despite her sound pedagogical reasons, she is reluctant to develop a response to that situation which adheres to her students’ wishes, even if it means the conservation of a continuous conflict. Thus, Éva perseveres with her own beliefs in her choice of methods, maintaining that students need to get accustomed to thinking in English.

What these four plots illuminate is that although it is tempting to conceptualize learning as a cycle of procedures leading to the acquisition of skills, one true value of such frameworks is that they can be challenged. In the case of *avoidance*, although learning in the sense of finding a proper consensual response in class does not happen, learning about one's competencies and their acceptance can take place. *Experimenting* with teacher selves is a crucial part of learning to take risks and adapt to continuous testing, a phase that seems to obtain greater emphasis than what the harmonious step-by-step conceptualization of learning suggests. *Delaying* does not fit any models, which challenges the belief that the proper givens ultimately lead to learning. Finally, *persevering with one's own beliefs* questions the notion that humans ultimately strive to terminate conflict situations – in fact, learning on both sides may take place when this motivation for resolution is delayed as well.

5 Conclusions

To conclude, four alternative routes have been identified from the interviews that were conducted with secondary school language teachers. These routes are *avoiding competence building*, *experimenting with competence building*, *delaying competence building* and *denying competence building by persevering with one's own beliefs*. What is common in these routes is that they are not the typical responses that have been identified by previous research. In the case of these four routes, action is not followed by positive reinforcement, or at least not in the short term on the part of the students. Via these routes, competence building in the sense of finding an appropriate response to students' needs happens in a less straightforward fashion, enriching our view on frameworks proposed by previous research, on learning, and also on our understanding of the nature of learning itself; pointing towards a more colourful and complex reality.

Proofread for the use of English by: Randall Stone, B.A. University of California at Santa Barbara, USA, Conversational English Instructor in Budapest, Hungary.

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APPENDIX A

An interview schedule for Phase 1

1. I'd like you to tell me a bit about how you became a teacher. What brought you to the profession?
2. How do you process your teaching experiences?
3. Did you have any turning points in your career that changed your teacher identity?
4. Do you learn from your classroom successes, failures?
5. How would you describe the ideal teacher?
6. Do you have characteristics that are typical of you during teaching?
7. Do you have characteristics that are typical of you outside the classroom?
8. Have you ever taught in a language school/another subject? Are there any differences in the way you feel/ students perceive you there?
9. Tell me about some goals that you have with teaching.
10. What do you do/What would you do, when/if...
 - a student has an opposing point of view to yours.
 - a student raises a difficult question.
 - a student whom you like very much cheats during the final test.
 - a student raises objections towards your teaching methods.
 - your student eats someone else's sandwich while he is not there.
 - you give a better mark to your dyslexic student than to the others but they complain about this.
 - a student of yours wants to be friends with you.