Practical and Theoretical Implications of Teachers' Prior Language Learning Experiences for Their Teacher Identity Development

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the practical and theoretical implications of EFL teachers' prior language learning experiences for their teacher identity development. Every language teacher possesses different values, beliefs, and underlying assumptions about teaching and learning. To a certain extent, these values, beliefs, and assumptions are shaped up by the language teacher's prior language learning experiences. Thus, teachers who regularly examine these internal values, beliefs, and assumptions are able to identify their strengths and weaknesses. The awareness of self can help teachers develop a risk-taking attitude and experiment with different pedagogical approaches which can lead to creativity and pedagogical innovation in the classroom.

Keywords: Learning, Practical Knowledge, Reflection, Teaching Approaches

PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF EFL TEACHERS' PRIOR LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Every teacher has their own unique ways of teaching and interacting with students. Some teachers believe in teacher-centered educational practices, where the teacher is viewed as the main knowledge source and presents information to students in a one-way flow while other teachers may prefer learner-centered approaches, viewing their role as facilitators. Some teachers prefer to establish their authority, while others tend to be relaxed and emphasize power-sharing. There are also teachers who adopt different aspects of both approaches. In this regard, teachers' prior learning experiences, their personal and professional interactions with colleagues, and their day-to-day teaching are all influential in their teacher identity development (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Miller, 2009; Nunan, 2017; Quan et al., 2019).

One of the factors that influence language teaching approaches is teachers' prior language learning experience (Egitim, 2017). As far as teachers' English language acquisition is concerned, two groups of teachers come to mind; native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) who learned English as their first language in early childhood, and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) who learned the language through post-childhood (Agudo, 2017; Ellis, 2009; Nicaise, 2020). NESTs presumably began their acquisition from the moment they were born or even before. This learning process is considered by most second language acquisition researchers to be of a very different nature from learning a second language as an adult (Agudo, 2017).

A comprehensive study on teacher cognition performed by Ellis (2009) highlights the links between teachers' lived experiences and the ways in which they form their beliefs about their profession. According to Ellis (2009), Teachers can be categorized into three groups based on their past language learning experience. The first group is NNESTs, who have learned the language they teach in the same way as their students. The second group is native speaker bilingual teachers, who know the language they teach but have acquired it in a different way but have learned their second language in a similar way to their students. The third group is the Native speaker monolingual teachers, who know the language they teach but have acquired it in a different way than their students.

The monolingual teacher's experience of acquiring their language is in infancy and childhood. Therefore, learning experience of the language they intend to teach is not available for those teachers. There is no other subject in which the teacher does not have the experience of learning the content in the same way as their students. The absence of this content knowledge may result in a tendency to adopt more flexible teaching approaches. Previous research studies suggest that a significant proportion of NESTs are unable to understand some basic grammatical structures (Badash et al., 2020). According to other studies focusing on NESTs' attitudes and perceptions, native English speakers are identified as informal and flexible with their teaching approaches and often use authentic English words and phrases (Agudo, 2017; Badash et al., 2020; Ellis, 2009). NESTs also tend to provide positive feedback to students and have communication as the

main goal of their teaching (Fernández-García & Martínez-Arbelaiz, 2014). Thus, it would be safe to say that NESTs adopt a more lenient approach towards teaching the language as opposed to their non-native peers.

Conversely, if teachers learned English post-childhood, they have direct experience of what their students go through in task and content while they learn the language (Agudo, 2017). The awareness of the content knowledge may result in a more controlled yet planned teaching approach in the case of NNESTs. As they already experienced the pitfalls of language learning through their adulthood, they have the ability to work their prior language learning experience to their advantage and adapt their language choices to the levels of their students.

NESTS VERSUS NNESTS IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

The efficiency of NESTs and NNESTs in terms of linguistic competence and language learning has been compared by a number of researchers in the EFL field (Agudo, 2017; Fernández-García & Martínez-Arbelaiz, 2014). Medgyes (1998) examined the differing levels of language proficiency of NESTs and NNESTs and how their proficiency impacted their pedagogical approaches. His study revealed that NNESTs being less proficient English speakers than NESTs was an asset as NNESTs were able to serve as imitable models of the successful learners of English (p. 346). In contrast, NESTs could not act as perfect language models since they had never been learners of English in the sense that NNESTs were. NNESTs adopt language-learning strategies during their own learning process. Thus, their theoretical knowledge and awareness of language education tend to be profound. During their language learning journey, NNESTs obtain knowledge of and insights into how the English language works, which gives them an advantage as a knowledge provider.

In addition, experiencing the pitfalls of language learning makes NNESTs empathetic to the needs and problems of their students. Since they have the first-hand experience of being the learners of the language, they face the same challenges as their students. Therefore, they can anticipate the learning challenges of their students and help address them more effectively. However, learning English as a second language also means being less competent than first-language speakers of the language. As a result, NNESTs often lack confidence in their language ability. According to a study performed by Machida (2016), a considerable number of NNESTs reported emotional stress due to their lack of oral competence. This self-perception can be detrimental to language teachers' confidence. As a result, NNESTs may tend to teach English mostly using their first language as a medium of instruction. This may lead to adopting teacher-centered, lecture-based teaching approaches with heavy reliance on the textbook (Dornyei, 2013). The aforementioned attributes of NNESTs can also be ascribed to teachers who speak English as their first language but have acquired another language post-childhood (Millán Maciá, 2018). Those teachers have the experience of learning a language as an adult. The ability

to perform cross-linguistic comparisons gives the speaker insights into the similarities and differences between the two languages. Eventually, this leads to enhanced self-awareness and motivation towards teaching.

REFLECTIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING PRACTICES

Reflective teaching is essential for teacher development. When teachers reflect on their own practices, they can recognize their flaws and deficiencies, and make more informed choices about their teaching methods and strategies (Egitim, 2020). As a result, teachers can adapt their lesson styles to the specific needs and expectations of their students. Reflective teaching also allows those teachers to identify their strengths and limits. They take responsible risks, and when they fail, they treat the incident as an opportunity for growth (Nunan, 2017; Powell & Kushma-Powell, 2013; Quan et al., 2019). In the language classroom environment, where teachers constantly practice their own beliefs and theories, their self-development mainly depends on their willingness to take risks (Tirri, 2017). The notion of risk-taking indicates the teacher is either adopting teaching strategies they are not acquainted with or employing behaviors that challenge traditional class structures to promote better learning experiences for students (Howard et al., 2018).

From the students' perspective, risk-taking is one of the essential qualities of an effective language learner. When language learners have the courage to take risks using the language, they can give themselves a better chance to learn from mistakes and expand their vocabulary and grammar knowledge. In this regard, the teacher's role cannot be understated. Since students view the teacher as an ideal role model, demonstrating a risk-taking attitude in front of students can potentially inspire them to try without fear. However, risk-taking may sometimes lead to an unknown path and leave the teacher in a difficult situation. Some teachers may face excessive stress and eventually turn to traditional class structures they are more familiar with. However, some scholars insist that learning only occurs when pain is involved (Howard et al., 2018; Tirri, 2017). By taking an unknown path, teachers learn to make more accurate judgments through self-reflection. As a result, they can turn chaos into creative and engaging activities for learners.

Reflective teaching practices also help teachers determine how their values, beliefs, and underlying assumptions are facilitating or impeding their personal and professional growth. Gold and Roth (2013) defined self-awareness as "a process of getting in touch with your feelings and behaviors" (p. 141). Increased self-awareness involves a more accurate understanding of how students affect teachers' emotional processes and behaviors and how teachers affect students. In order to cope with the challenges teaching and learning present, it is important for teachers to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Richards and Farrell (2005) stated that, "Only the teachers that are able to monitor and assess themselves can achieve sufficient understanding and control over their own behavior" (p. 34). Once the teacher is aware of how their practices are affecting their personal and professional growth,

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they become more open and receptive to new ideas leading to creativity and pedagogical innovation in the language classroom (Howard, et al., 2018; Smith & Lewis, 2017).

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