

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The impact of language learning experiences on language teachers' professional practices: a case study of two language biographies

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Abstract: This study explores the impact of prior language learning experiences on second/foreign language teachers' professional practices. Drawing on two English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' language learning biographies, this paper attempts to understand: a) the nature of non-native speakers' language learning experiences, b) how these experiences shape their personal practical knowledge (PPK), and c) how their PPK informs their professional practices. The findings of the study reveal that prior experiences function as a filter, shaping participants' instructional decisions. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for second language teacher education.

Keywords: Language learning in teacher education, second language teacher education, language biography, personal practical knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

In a discussion about the scope of Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE), Freeman (2009) describes the changing trends and widening scope of language teacher education as a "widening gyre" (p. 14). In the 1970s and 1980s, the scope of SLTE focused primarily on providing teacher candidates with professional input that consisted of a mix of knowledge and skills. The assumption was that teachers would simply apply these skills and knowledge in their various teaching contexts. Then, in the 1990s, the focus of SLTE moved beyond *what* teachers needed to learn to *how* they learned. Research on the professional learning processes language

teachers were engaged in, for example, research on teacher cognition (Freeman & Richards, 1996; Woods, 1996), uncovered the "complexities of teachers' mental lives" (Freeman, 2002). Teachers began to be viewed as "rational professionals who make judgements and decisions in an uncertain and complex environment" (Shavelson & Stern, 1981: p. 456).

Now, those researching the field of SLTE have realised that in order to understand how teachers learn to teach and how their professional lives evolve, inquiring into teachers' cognitive worlds, teaching practices, interpretations, beliefs, reactions, previous language learning experiences and most importantly, the contexts in which those experiences have taken place is crucial (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Freeman & Richards, 1996; Freeman, 2002; Borg, 2003; 2006). The steady and strong growth on research on language teacher identity (LTI) during the last two decades highlights how the focus on language teaching and learning has recognised the importance of the teachers and their identities (Clark, 2009; Anya, 2011; 2017; Chang, 2011; Ollerhead, 2012; Motha & Lin, 2014; Preece, 2016; Varghese *et al.*, 2016; Norton & de Costa, 2018). Further, as recent studies on language teacher identity interrogates, identity needs to be situated and studied against the backdrop of globalisation that has led to increasingly hybrid identities (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Heller, 2011; Higgins, 2015; Shin, 2012), neoliberalism and the market economy with its emphasis on individualism and the individual (Piller

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& Cho 2013; Block, 2014; Chun, 2016; Darvin, 2016) and advances in digital technologies and the affordances it gives language teachers and learners (Norton *et al.*, 2011; Norton & Williams 2012; Stranger-Johannessen & Norton, 2017).

This paper attempts to address this gap in the existing literature by exploring how language teachers' language learning experiences contribute to their professional practices. It addresses the following guiding questions:

1. What is the nature of second/foreign language teachers' language learning experiences?
2. How do these experiences shape their personal practical knowledge (PPK)? and
3. How does their PPK inform the participants' professional practices?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: TEACHER KNOWLEDGE DERIVED FROM EXPERIENCE

Unlike the situation that prevails in other professions, when teachers enter teacher education programs to receive their formal training, they have already been students themselves and have been exposed to teaching for a very long time. Lortie (1975) in his seminal work describes teacher candidates, who have spent some 13,000 hours observing their own teachers' as "apprentices of observation". Based on these observations, one can understand how teacher candidates form very strong impressions of teaching that might not necessarily change even after years of teacher education. Bailey *et al.* (1996), however, note that any prior experiences will determine one's professional practices only to the extent that one allows it. Teacher educators argue that it is important to understand the impact of these prior experiences on the formation of teachers' professional knowledge. Teacher training that does not take into account teachers' experiential knowledge, will have little impact on prospective teachers (Freeman, 1992; 2002; Golombek, 1998).

Elbaz (1983), in her influential case study of a high-school teacher, identifies the dynamic and complex kinds of knowledge teachers possess as "practical knowledge". For her, practical knowledge consists of knowledge of the self, the milieu of teaching, subject matter, curriculum development and instruction. She also asserts that teachers' instructional practices are guided by their feelings, values, needs, beliefs, experiences and theoretical knowledge.

Clandinin (1986) and Clandinin & Connelly (1986) use the term "personal practical knowledge" (PPK) to characterise teachers' experiential knowledge. For them, PPK consists of teachers' personal philosophies encompassing beliefs and values that have grown out of their experiences, along with metaphors that structure the way they think about teaching, rhythms and narrative unity. Clandinin (1992) further defines PPK as:

"knowledge that reflects the individual's prior knowledge and acknowledge the contextual nature of that teacher's knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge carved out of, and shaped by, situations; knowledge that is constructed and reconstructed as we live out our stories and retell and relive them through processes of reflection" (Clandinin, 1992: p. 125).

Golombek (2009), who also uses the term "personal practical knowledge", has expanded the understanding of how teachers learn to teach through identifying the construct of the teacher "image" as another significant component of PPK. A teacher's image, uniting his or her personal and educational lives, is created through his or her words and actions in dialogue with the words and actions of others. Typically,

"images originate in an individual's past experiences and are reconstructed to meet the demands of a particular situation, reordering her professional and personal experiences and pointing to future hopes and experiences" (Golombek, 2009: p. 156).

All these descriptions of PPK stress how teacher knowledge is experiential, dynamic, situational and storied.

Ellis (2006) uses the term "insights" to refer to what Clandinin & Connelly (1987) earlier referred to as PPK. An insight is:

"[the] understanding gained from personal experience that allows us to see how previously understood realities could be different. It illuminates something previously unseen, makes sense of something previously incomprehensible, or lends a new perspective on something taken for granted. It is the meeting place for knowledge, beliefs and experience" (Ellis, 2006: n.p.).

In her study about how English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers' PPK intervened with their decision making, Tsang (2004) uses the term PPK to refer to what Richards (1998) called "teachers' maxims". Richards (1998) defined maxims as:

“personal working principles that reflect individual philosophies of teaching and are developed from experiences of teaching and learning, from teacher education experiences, and from teachers’ own personal beliefs and value systems” (Richards, 1998: p. 60).

This paper uses PPK and Ellis’ (2006) term “insights” interchangeably to refer to the experiential knowledge teachers possess.

Although various terminologies are used to define the personal nature of teacher knowledge, a closer look at these terminologies makes it evident that their definitions focus on similar issues. They all highlight the personal nature of teacher knowledge, the impact of prior experiences and the contextual nature of teacher knowledge. Golombek (2009) identifies the proliferation of terms as a result of many similarly engaged researchers writing approximately at the same time.

RESEARCH ON TEACHERS’ LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Although there is a growing recognition of the role of prior experiences in teacher education, professional development, and research on teacher learning (Freeman, 2002), there is a paucity of research on the role of previous language learning experiences. Bailey *et al.* (1996), Golombek (1998) and Ellis (2006) are among the few that have examined it. Drawing on Lortie’s (1975) concept of teachers as “apprentices of observation”, Kathleen Bailey and her colleagues (1996) looked at how teachers’ learning shapes their teaching and learning. By using learners’ autobiographies to document their language learning histories, their study focuses on the trends, critical incidents and other salient factors influencing their participants’ development as teachers. Most of the factors the participants identified were related to their own teachers’ beliefs and behaviors, including their expectations of their students, their level of respect for their students, their ability to maintain motivation among their students, their emotional temperament, and the learning atmosphere they created for their students. Bailey *et al.*’s (1996) study reconfirms the impact of prior learning on teachers. It also asserts that the “apprenticeship of observation” or any other experience will determine one’s experiences only to the extent one allows it. While the focus of this study is mainly on formal classroom-based language learning experiences, it fails to look at informal language learning experiences which, this paper proves, can be equally important.

Similar to Bailey *et al.* (1996), Golombek’s (1998) study of two in-service teachers shows how narratives help

teachers gain an understanding of their personal practical knowledge (PPK) and how it informs their practice. The narratives of the two teachers involved reveal how their PPK was both shaped by their experiences as learners and shaped what they did as teachers. One of the participant’s narratives also highlights the affective nature of her PPK (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987). The focus of Golombek’s (1998) study and the study by Bailey and her colleagues (1996) are not exclusively on prior language learning experiences, but instead on the impact of experiential learning on teachers’ pedagogical practices.

Literature on “structured language learning experiences” or SLLE (Ellis, 2006) shows that teacher educators do view language learning experiences as a valuable means of professional development and reflection. SLLE could consist of a single lesson (Weed, 1993) or even an entire semester of studying a new language (Flowerdew, 1998; Lowe, 1987). SLLEs are introduced in teacher education programs to enable teacher candidates to experience the process of learning a language from the learners’ perspective. While SLLEs are claimed to be very beneficial as a teacher development tool, there are also many limitations to these short term language learning experiences. For instance, they are based on formal class teaching at the beginner level, the purpose is not really to learn the language, and unlike many real language learning experiences, they do not pose any threat to identity, academic success or material advancement (Ellis, 2006).

Ellis (2006) focuses primarily on the impact of prior language learning experiences on teacher cognition. She challenges the notion that monolingual teachers can attain an understanding of second language development without having learned a second language. She argues that teachers’ experiences of language learning are an important contributor to professional development. Using data derived from 31 practicing ESL teachers in Australia, Ellis’ findings reveal how experiential knowledge formed through various formal/informal, childhood/adult, elective or circumstantial bilingualism can function as a strong contributor to ESL teachers’ professional knowledge and beliefs about language teaching. However, as Ellis’ study consists of a large number of participants, it lacks in-depth insights into the participants’ language learning biographies. It does not provide details about the nature of the participants’ language learning experiences, the insights they gained about language learning from these experiences and how these insights informed their instructional decisions.

The studies discussed above show the persistent influence prior experiences and beliefs have on teachers. Research shows that the conceptions of teaching and

learning that teacher candidates bring to their training are influenced by their prior language learning experiences. The following section first provides a rationale for this study, then gives an overview of the methods used.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to further the understanding of the nature of second/foreign language teachers' language learning experiences, by focusing on the three questions presented at the Introduction.

The small sample size, which may be viewed as a limitation, in some ways is its main strength since it allows for an in-depth analysis of the participants' language learning biographies. This study employed narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry elicits life histories that generate rich and nuanced data. Each life history narrative, in this case, language learning biography, is extensive and consists of thick nuanced data. As a result, narrative inquiries employ very small samples of participants. This study employed two participants following this principal. They were chosen as their narratives shed rich and interesting insights that were helpful in answering the research questions. This study was carried out in Canada in 2012, and when informed consent was sought to seek participants (EFL teachers, who had learned English as a foreign/second language in a country where English was a foreign language), these two participants gave consent to share their language learning biographies.

Participants

The participants of this study are two English language teachers who were graduate students in a Canadian university. They had developed English language proficiency in non-English speaking English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

Oscar is a Colombian in his late twenties and is a native speaker of Spanish. He identifies himself as an advanced speaker of English and an intermediate speaker of French. He has a Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) in Modern Language Teaching from a Colombian university and has close to ten years' experience teaching English in second and foreign language contexts before coming to Canada. He has taught both adults and children. At the time of the study, he was a first year doctoral student in Second Language Education in a Canadian university.

Renée is a Chilean in her twenties and is an international student in a Canadian university where she is doing her Masters of Education (M. Ed.) in Second Language Education. At the time of data collection, she was in her first year of her program. Like Oscar, she

is a native speaker of Spanish and identifies herself as an advanced speaker of English. Additionally, she also identifies herself as a beginner of Swedish and Japanese. She has a Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) in English Language Teaching from a Chilean university. She has five years' experience in teaching adults in a private institute and one year of experience teaching primary and high school children in a Catholic school in Chile.

Data collection

Since this study emphasises teachers' language learning *experiences*, it relied on narrative inquiry as the most appropriate method of data collection. Narrative inquiry in teacher education specifically aims to understand teachers' experiences and practices in particular contexts (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008; Bell, 2002; Pavelenko, 2002). Moreover, conceptualisations of PPK highlights the storied dimension of teachers' knowledge. The construction and reconstruction of teachers' PPK is possible through teachers telling their stories through conscious reflection (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The data collection took place in two phases. In the first phase, Oscar and Renée completed a background profile questionnaire. This questionnaire focused on biographical details such as age, education, country of origin, current and previous occupations, languages spoken and proficiency. The second phase consisted of participants' language learning biographies by way of audio-taped, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interviews "generated data" (Mason, 2005) in the form of narratives about how the participants learned English both formally and informally during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood; the kinds of opportunities and resources that were available for them to learn English and the conditions under which they learned English; their positive and negative language learning experiences; what they learned about language learning and teaching through these experiences; and how these experiences and insights came to inform their professional practices. The participants' language learning biographies provided very detailed and nuanced accounts of the complexities surrounding learning a language over a long period of time.

Data analysis

The transcribed data was analysed using qualitative content analysis as described by Strauss & Corbin (1998). That is, the generative themes in the narratives were identified and clustered, and overlapping patterns in these themes were identified and interpreted to answer the three guiding research questions mentioned earlier. The common factors that shaped the participants' experiences

included: motivation level, status of the language learned, images of teachers, context, resources, and knowledge of subject matter. This process aligns closely with Polkinghorne's (1988) "analysis of narratives" approach that attempts to "uncover the commonalities that exist across the stories that make up a study's database" (p. 14).

LANGUAGE LEARNING BIOGRAPHIES

The language learning biographies of the two participants shed light on how Oscar and Renée learned English in their home countries of Colombia and Chile. The key themes that emerged in the two narratives were: two non-English speaking countries; the contexts in which they learned English; the resources that were available for them; the influence of teachers they perceived as both good and bad; and the strategies that they used to learn English.

Oscar's story: "I would talk to American tourists to practice my English"

Oscar first developed an interest in the English language at the age of five when his mother's friend from England brought him *Sesame Street* books and different pop-up books in English. Later, when he was a teenager, he became interested in English pop music. Although he wanted to learn English, in the Colombian education system, English was offered in public schools only from Grade 6. He was very excited at the prospect of studying English in school. Although he enjoyed Grade 6, he was quite disappointed in Grade 7.

"My Grade 7 teacher was not very interested in singing songs or trying playful activities in the class. She was more interested in some sort of grammar translation method of teaching English. I was really losing my motivation. I was failing. I hated the English class because of her attitude and approach to teaching".

However, despite this bad situation, Oscar was able to maintain his interest in the English language. Because he did not completely lose his motivation, he took different steps to learn English on his own. One of the first things he did was to take lessons in a private language school. The setting at his new private language school was quite challenging as, for the first time, he was exposed to a context where all the teaching took place in English. In addition, he was with students who had a lot of exposure to the language outside of the class.

"The teacher only spoke English, and it was something really frustrating at the beginning because everybody, except me, knew what was

happening. She would ask me to write something on the blackboard, and I would probably go with my chair or my desk. I was trying to read her body language. But later on, I began to understand more and more and I developed a greater interest".

The private language school posed a new kind of challenge for Oscar. Instead of getting discouraged, this challenge proved to be a motivation for him.

In addition to learning English in school, Oscar also employed various personal strategies for learning English. He explained, "A lot of my personal experiences learning English came through my interest in English." His personal experiences included listening to music and reading the lyrics in magazines, as well as watching English movies with subtitles. As part of that process, Oscar looked up new vocabulary and tried to find the meanings of words and get his pronunciation right. Receiving a second hand monolingual English dictionary from his mother as a Christmas gift also proved to be a resource for him:

"It made a huge impact on my vocabulary learning strategies. I would look for a word and continue looking for new words, and I got to a point where I told myself I had to relax. After time passed, there were fewer unknown words".

Getting MTV and the internet in the mid 1990s also had an impact on him. Because Oscar liked music, he had more motivation to access to English music and films. He also started chatting online in English. Although Oscar devoted a lot of time to learning English, most of it took place individually by himself. He didn't have many opportunities to practice with others. When he did get the opportunity, he would practice, however. For instance, when he met English speaking foreigners in downtown Cali, his hometown, he would make conversation.

Oscar's language learning biography suggests that he learned English through self sustained and consistent effort and self motivation. This resulted from the fact that he liked the language and the "super cool teachers" in his private language school. Although the social status of teachers in general was not high in Colombian society while he was growing up, the positive images of his English teachers in his language institute were one of the main reasons he decided to become an English language teacher.

Renée's story: "My language learning experience was a long process. I am still learning"

Like Oscar, Renée developed an interest in English when she was very young. Her mother, who liked English rock

and pop bands, got her to listen to English pop music and sing the songs although neither of them understood what the lyrics meant. She also had an uncle who was an English teacher who gave his material which included cassettes and lyrics, with vocabulary lists. Although she learned English in school, most of her formal language learning experiences were not very encouraging. According to her, they mainly consisted of teachers who did not encourage learning or adopted material she felt was boring and not conducive to learning. She had one teacher who mainly relied on the grammar translation method for teaching.

“I found her teaching very discouraging. I really liked the language, but it was not good for someone who has that kind of intrinsic motivation. The students who were not interested in the language were hating it. They asked why they were doing it”.

She had another teacher who avoided students.

“whenever I approached her with questions she was reluctant. She didn’t want to talk. I think she didn’t know. She was shy. She was hiding from students. That was strange”.

Moreover, English teaching in Renée’s school was conducted entirely in Spanish. Students were taught English with the use of Spanish. However, although she had very little exposure to English while in school, like Oscar, Renée took the initiative to learn English outside school. Some of the steps she took to improve her English language skills included practicing English on her own, studying the material she got from her uncle, and also having competitions with her friend. She also used various grammar books to learn English. As her language skills improved, she progressed from using a bilingual English/Spanish dictionary to a monolingual English dictionary. She got the opportunity to communicate with native English speakers when her best friend got a job working with native English speakers in Chile. She started attending their meetings and getting more exposure to communicating in English. However, her English language skills were not very strong when she graduated from high school.

Most of her language learning happened once she entered her teacher education program to become an English teacher. She received very structured formal instructions about the English language. This included grammar, phonetics and pronunciation, which she acknowledged as being very beneficial. She also got the opportunity to travel to Sweden as an exchange student. The experience in Sweden gave her the opportunity to use and improve her English language skills since English is

spoken as an international lingua franca by the majority of the population.

A common underlying theme that stems from both language learning biographies is the motivation level of the two participants and what the new language they were learning meant for them. Both Oscar and Renée liked the English language and what it represented. Moreover, they were very hardworking and persevering language learners who were not discouraged by teachers they perceived as “bad”, but instead, took measures to learn the language themselves outside of formal school contexts.

The impact of experiences on language teachers’ PPK

The two language learning biographies provide unique insights the two participants gained about teaching and learning a new language and how the experiences shaped their PPK. Each narrative discusses what Oscar’s and Renée’s experiences taught them about learning a new language.

Oscar’s story: “I know learning a language is hard work”

Oscar’s narrative shows that the driving force behind his success as a language learner was his motivation and his willingness to persist. This was fueled by his interest in what the English language represented for him and by the teachers who taught him in his private language school. He draws a comparison between learning English and French:

“I wasn’t attentive when I took French classes. When I took French, I was falling asleep. This was because of the language structure and also the traditional methodology that had a *strong* grammar focus made it so boring. I ended up dropping French. When I graduated from teachers’ college, I left my French behind. I was supposed to become a French teacher. I took four years of French, so I can speak. I haven’t invested much in French. I know if I want to be fluent in French I have to work as hard as I did with my English”.

Oscar knows from his experience that learning a foreign language involves much more than taking lessons, but also a lot of hard work outside the class. For Oscar, English was a “cool” language that opened the door to pop music, MTV, English movies and chatting online. For him a language had to be interesting and it had to be taught in an interesting manner if he was to learn it well.

Oscar’s narrative also shows the difference between having to teach one’s native language and a foreign

language to language learners. He realised that a non-native speaker teacher can bring important insights about language teaching to the language class that a native speaker might not have. He was faced with this situation when he became a Spanish language teaching assistant in a North American University.

“I had no idea how to teach the language. I never had a problem with English. When somebody asked a question I knew the answer. There are two very simple but really confusing Spanish prepositions. When a student asked a question about it I said, “That is how it is, and it sounds right.” Then I had to go and ask my boss for the language rules about Spanish prepositions. She came up with the perfect explanation. I was amazed”.

Oscar’s experience teaching his first language, Spanish, shows that although he was a native Spanish speaker, and was able to get a job because of that, he did not have the formal insights to teach it. However, the experience of learning a foreign language and getting professional training in teachers’ college gave him the linguistic as well as pedagogical skills to teach English.

Renée’s story: “There is no magic formula to learn a new language”

Renée’s language biography stresses the time it takes for one to learn a new language. Although she was a graduate student in a Canadian university at the time of our interview, she stated that she was still in the process of learning English. She acknowledged that she was learning everyday from her course readings, the media and day-to-day encounters with other English speakers.

“My language learning experience was a long process. It took me a long time to get where I am now. I always ask my students to be patient because there is no such thing as learning a language in a short time. There are packages sold in Chile that say you can be completely proficient in a year. But it doesn’t work like that. I always tell my students that there is no magic formula”.

Renée’s language learning experience, coupled with her training in linguistics, made her aware of the difficulties non-native speakers have when learning a new language. She gave an example about the difficulty Spanish speakers have when using “do” and “does” in simple present tense.

“It doesn’t exist in Spanish. My students sometimes understand it, but I don’t see them

managing it. It is introduced at the beginning of any beginner level English course, and it is assessed. The reality is, it is never acquired until much later because of our first language. They understand they have to learn it. They memorise it. But they don’t understand it. I explained to them that you can’t rely on books so much. It takes a while to learn some things”.

During teacher’s college Renée met a professor who had a huge impact on her. This professor, who later became her thesis supervisor, made her realise that it is possible to speak English well although one might not be a native speaker. He also pointed out that speaking English doesn’t have to be a process of becoming someone else.

“He had just come back from Australia after doing his MA and he was so talented. I felt he was himself speaking English. Whereas other teachers were trying to be someone else. One of them was trying to be a British guy. The other an American. Maybe it was their strategy. But he was himself speaking English, and he was speaking very good English. It was very encouraging. The identity he built, was not unreal. We realised that we can continue to be ourselves. Because when you are learning English in an EFL context, you don’t know how good you are in the language”.

Not only was this a positive learning experience for Renée, but also a positive impact on her identity formation. As an EFL student and teacher candidate, she benefited from the encouragement and the awareness that it was still possible to construct an identity that was not “unreal.”

The narratives of both participants reveal that their language learning experiences had a profound impact on their PPK in various ways. The experiential knowledge they gained through their learning was unique. Such knowledge is not possessed by native speakers of a language or monolingual speakers. The importance of hard work and having an interest in the language that is being learned, the duration it takes to learn a new language well, the impact of teachers and the identities that are affirmed, and the importance of formal instruction are insights that Oscar and Renée gained through their language learning experiences.

How PPK informed practice

Oscar’s and Renée’s experiences and the insights, discussed above informed their professional practices. Each language biography shows the different ways in which experiential knowledge transformed into practice.

Oscar: “I think the part that came from being a non-native speaker of English is the empathy”

Oscar’s narrative shows how the insights he got about language teaching transformed his own philosophies of language teaching. His own language learning experiences were a powerful contributor to his teaching. A recurrent theme in his narrative is the duration it takes to learn a language and the impact of motivation on that prolonged process. He was also very much aware of the impact of the teacher’s image on the learners. His teachers’ outlook into teaching and the methods that were employed either promoted teaching or discouraged the process. As a result, he tried to make his lessons as interesting as possible to his learners.

“I am also aware that different things might be appropriate to different kinds of people and that’s why I try to use different materials and I use computers, Power Point, different ways and different kinds of activities that might get people involved in different ways”.

Oscar knew from his experience that language learning cannot be confined to the classroom. In his view, students need to be exposed to the language as much as possible. Most of his learning took place outside the formal language class and exposure to the language elsewhere had a huge impact on his own learning. Although in his own learning process Oscar took the initiative to find as many resources as he could, in his teaching he provided students extra resources that could help them go beyond what they did in class.

“I do my best to provide my students with the tools and expose them to the language as much as I can. I try to make it a valuable experience for them. I tell them, “Take this and go beyond that”. What I have done lately is, I have started incorporating resource material in my course outline so that students can go and watch documentaries and do different things on their own. I provide a few tools and hope that they will explore more”.

Moreover, being a non-native speaker of English made him more empathetic with his students. Having experienced the same difficulties, he “knew some things were difficult and acknowledged that they were difficult.” Having gone through a process similar to that of the students he worked with, made it possible for him to put himself in his learners’ shoes. However, he also noted that this awareness did not come only through his experience, but was also influenced by his knowledge of linguistics.

Renée’s story: “I explain why we are doing what we are doing”

Positive and negative teacher images had a strong influence on Renée’s language learning experience. Her own teaching philosophies have been influenced by these experiences. Teachers who did not talk to students or did not explain why they were doing certain activities had left a lasting impression on Renée and it was one she did not want to repeat. Therefore, for Renée, talking to her students and transparency regarding her instructional decisions are crucial. As a practice, she discussed with her students her instructional decisions, why she made those decisions, and how those pedagogical decisions can impact their learning.

“I explain to my students why we are doing what we are doing. I always do that. I don’t want them to go out of the class thinking “Why did we do that?” Sometimes they don’t understand. The teachers have their goals, so I explain to them why we do certain things”.

As a motivational strategy she also discusses her own language learning experiences. She tries to encourage her students by showing that learning a language is a long process that requires a lot of hard work.

“I just tell them my story. In my country I am thought to be super proficient. Both the students and parents always have a very good impression of me. My students often tell me “there is no way I can be as good as you”. So I always tell them I started at the same level they did, with the same resources they have or maybe even less. I tell them my story and other peoples’ stories”.

For Renée, language teaching is also a process of making her students aware of the reality of learning a new language as adults. She tells her students that language learning is a long process that takes a long time and that they need to be patient.

“My language learning experience was a long process. It took me a long time. I always ask my students to be patient”.

For Renée, constantly talking to her students and explaining to them her instructional decisions are central to her teaching. Her personal experience of learning a language from the very beginning has made her more empathetic toward language learners, especially beginners who she feels need more assistance.

“I always try working with beginners. I know that other colleagues of mine don’t like to teach beginners. I have my own way of taking care of the new ones. I have my own strategies to speak to them and make them feel comfortable”.

Making the beginners feel comfortable about the language learning process and creating a conducive emotional environment are important for Renée. This process is also shaped by Renée’s knowledge of subject matter. She knows, as a result of her formal training, about the difficulties adult second language learners have. Therefore, she talks to them about it:

“I tell them, “you don’t do it because you are Latin Americans or Chileans. It happens because of our L1”. You have to wait and keep practicing. I think that instance of talking about how we learn the language helped them be more aware of their own language learning processes. They felt a little bit more empowered. That actually got them thinking”.

The two narratives show what aspects of the participants’ prior experiences informed their practices. For Oscar and Renée, negative learning experiences are reminders of what they as teachers should avoid. The narratives show they are empathetic toward their own learners and possess certain kinds of knowledge they have gained experientially that inform their classroom decisions.

DISCUSSION

These two language teachers’ language biographies give rich and nuanced insights into the factors that shaped their language learning experiences and, in turn, help us understand how those experiences shaped their language teaching. Oscar’s and Renée’s complex language learning experiences were shaped by experiential learning, classroom learning and teaching, along with the academic training they received in teachers’ college. The analysis of their narratives reveals that teachers’ experiential knowledge is a powerful contributor to teacher beliefs and practices.

Firstly, Renée’s and Oscar’s narratives show the complexities surrounding post-childhood language learning in a foreign language context. The duration it takes to learn a language and the commitment of the language learners are strong factors that shape language learning. A combination of personal as well as social and economic factors also contributed to their success. Their personal practical knowledge (PPK) is not confined to the experiences they gained in classroom learning and in

academic training, but also their life experiences had a huge impact on their PPK.

Several specific factors that shaped Oscar’s and Renée’s PPK are as follows: First, as young people, both Oscar and Renée were very motivated and hard-working language learners. Their narratives reveal that most of their learning was a result of their commitment and perseverance. Second, the status of the language they were learning and what English language represented to them was important. Oscar and Renée associated English with modernity and progress. They made connections to English through pop music, literature, MTV and the internet. They found their good English teachers to be “cool.” They were also aware of the high status an English speaker had in their respective countries. Thirdly, Oscar and Renée’s narratives show that positive and negative teacher images also shaped their PPK. Oscar’s and Renée’s teachers who encouraged and discouraged them ultimately had a positive impact on their teaching. Oscar was used to having “boring” teachers, but he tried to make his own teaching interesting and fun. Renée who had teachers who didn’t communicate well with the students, always ensured that she spoke to her own students and made her instructional decisions clear to them.

A fourth factor concerns the context or environments in which Oscar and Renée learned and taught English. Oscar’s childhood experience of being in a monolingual English language class, though challenging at first, promoted his learning. In contrast, Renée’s experience of learning English in Spanish proved to be very discouraging. Fifth among the factors were the material and human resources that Oscar and Renée had available to them that contributed to their language learning. The final factor was knowledge of subject matter that included disciplinary knowledge a teacher uses in their classes (Golombek, 1998).

Similar to what Bailey *et al.* (1996) found for the participants in their study, the author’s findings show that Oscar and Renée’ did not allow their past experiences to dominate their own teaching. Though their PPK is a strong determiner of their practice, it is also filtered to complement the context in which they were teaching. Moreover, PPK functions as a reference point the teachers keep going back to in their own teaching. At times, it is a reference point that allows them to make sense of their own teaching and the various situations they face in their classes. Drawing connections with their own language learning experiences allows the participants to understand complexities in their own teaching and learning and the tensions their own learners face.

Oscar's and Renée's narratives show that their PPK doesn't work in isolation but complements the pedagogical knowledge they have received in their professional training. On one hand, their PPK allows them to better understand the theoretical knowledge they have gained about second language teaching and learning. On the other, their PPK complements the theoretical knowledge in their own teaching. Both narratives reveal that Oscar's and Renée's teaching theories and instructional decisions are a blend of theoretical knowledge and their own PPK.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION (SLTE)

The narratives of the two teachers language learning experiences reveal how their PPK functions as a powerful contributor to teacher knowledge. It is important to note, however, that prior language learning experiences alone do not ensure good teaching, nor do they suggest that only non-native speakers should teach a foreign/second language as they have experience learning the language. Instead, the findings confirm Ellis' (2006) findings that second language learning experiences play a significant role in the formation of teachers' professional knowledge and beliefs. Prior language learning experience should be recognised as a powerful contributor to teacher knowledge and it should also be recognised as a resource that needs to be tapped into in teacher education.

Firstly, SLTE programs need to recognise their candidates as autonomous agents possessing a very personal form of knowledge. As Clandinin & Connelly (1987) state, each individual teacher, novice or experienced, has their own narrative of their past experiences, which partly shapes their teacher identities. Although teacher candidates and novice teachers might not possess the range of extensive classroom teaching experiences that more experienced teachers are likely to have, they do have some understanding of teaching and learning based on their own past educational experiences as students. Teacher knowledge is not merely confined to formal learning. Informal life experiences have an impact on teacher knowledge and on teachers' decision making. Therefore, instruction in SLTE programs should not be separated from teachers' experiential knowledge. As Harrington (1994) asserts, an approach that separates instruction from the knowledge and the experiences teachers already have "may lead to closed worlds of meaning rather than opening windows on possibilities" (p. 190). Therefore, SLTE programs need to recognise teachers' PPK as a valuable resource that shapes their professional learning and classroom practices. To do this, teacher candidates need to be viewed as active participants in the instructional process.

Secondly, teachers need to be made aware of their PPK and how it is a valuable resource in their professional development. They need to be introduced to practices which can help them reflect on their prior learning experiences and on the ways they contribute to or block their own teaching. Reflection practices can also assist teachers as they strive to make sense of their teaching situations, their students, and the tensions they and their students face. Encouraging teacher candidates to write language learning autobiographies (Bailey *et al.*, 1996) and teacher narratives, maintaining reflective diaries, engaging in ongoing dialogues about prior and present learning experiences, and conducting action research can provide a means for teachers to connect their past to their present teaching practices and theories.

Lastly, this study demonstrates the impact of prior language learning experiences on teacher knowledge. SLTE programs need to view language learning experience as a powerful resource. This does not mean that only teacher candidates who have learned the language later on in their lives should teach or that teachers who possess some sort of post-childhood language learning experience should be admitted to a given program. But instead, if teacher candidates do not have prior language learning experiences, teacher educators need to provide language learning opportunities for them. Such opportunities could be in the form of short or long term "structured language learning experiences" SLLE (Ellis, 2006). Teacher educators should also provide opportunities for those with second or foreign language learning experiences to share their language learning with their colleagues and partake in discussions around the process of learning a language as adults and how the process can impact one's attitude toward teaching a language. In addition, there should also be a platform for monolingual language teachers to raise questions, tensions, doubts or concerns. Moreover, admitting teacher candidates who possess some degree of second or prior language learning experiences into programs could be a very effective means of diversifying the teacher candidate pool and thus preparing for what is likely to be an increasingly diverse employment situation in future.

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