



Teachers' Sense of Plausibility: A Study of Narratives of Experienced Teachers

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“Plausibility” as a concept is a state of knowledge which is short of certainty (Prabhu, 2019, p. 6). It refers to knowledge that teachers themselves develop through experience. Sometimes it evolves out of the existing knowledge of teachers which is derived from formal education. The effect of teacher experience leads to some form of evolution of teacher expertise – it is in a constant state of flux, and as a result, the teacher even modifies formal and prior knowledge within the context of experience. There seems to be inert hypothesis testing on theories and practice in the minds of teachers. The present study rests on the theoretical base proposed by Prabhu (1987) on Teachers’ Sense of Plausibility (TSOP), which was later elaborated on by Kumaravadivelu (1994) and Maley (2016). The methodology of the study involved content analysis, with qualitative interpretation and reporting procedures. It involved the analyses of the narratives of 20 experienced teachers from various continents and countries, about Teachers’ Sense of Plausibility (TSOP). These full narratives were published in the book *‘Developing Expertise through Experience’* (Maley, 2019b). The findings of our analyses revealed some commonalities within the narratives with regards TSOP. These commonalities are fleshed out, analyzed, and reported in the form of five themes. We hope that the renewed interest in TSOP will benefit future teacher professional development initiatives.

Keywords: teachers’ sense of plausibility, narratives, experienced teachers, expertise, professional development

Introduction

There are countless occasions when trainers feel frustrated after lengthy sessions with teachers. Teachers seem to want to attend these sessions but seem never contented, claiming that things do not work quite the same within their teaching contexts. This is evident in Gu’s (2019, p. 72) narrative where he quotes a teacher who attended one of his training sessions: “Professor Gu’s teaching methodology is very good, but it does not work with my students”. While it may be very frustrating for the trainer, there may be after all, some positives – it probably means that there is a strong Teachers’ Sense of Plausibility (TSOP) at work, and that rigid representations of methodology offered by experts may not be considered by teachers as cast in stone. Good teachers are, thankfully, intelligent! This brings about the possibility

that plausibility is very much alive and that the experiences of teachers can lead them into coming up with their own teaching philosophies which are, according to them more viable within their unique teaching contexts.

New knowledge that comes from inert hypothesis testing is akin to a research process within the teacher, probably more potent than any conventional wide scale inquiry in the field of English language teaching. The gelling of core philosophies on what works and what does not cannot be something personal but transferable. Which means it will help other teachers who have not been through it. There is some literature on how teachers form philosophies, and this is found in Ramani (1987) and Naidu, Neeraja, Ramani, Shivakumar, and Viswanatha (1992). The literature on plausibility needs more of this. The sharing of multiple insights into TSOP can lead to a collection of these self-hypothesized notions of what works, what does not, in different contexts. This can in the end lead to transfer of knowledge into the field of Teacher Professional Development. This article categorizes some commonalities in TSOP which can in future lead us into developing informed professional development programs.

Past Literature on Teachers' Sense of Plausibility

Prabhu (1987) proposed the notion that there is a phenomenon called the TSOP. He believed that teachers manage to develop their own personal philosophies on teaching (despite their formal education) through accumulated experiences. Prabhu (1990) reinforced this idea by stating why there should not be any best method for consideration and that teachers are in the drivers' seat in teaching and experiences will eventually help them make crucial decisions on what works and what doesn't. This would lead many people to come to an important assumption: Have these teachers been up to hypothesis testing? Did they pit the things they learnt in formal education to emerging thought patterns developing within them? If this was the case, can they be considered radical researchers, their brains being the research location?

Not all teachers seem to have similar TSOP as there are among us in the teaching profession those who fear to trespass into the unknown. The question is: Can these teachers who fear breaking rules be put through professional development programs where they develop the skill of risk-taking to sensitize their TSOP? Prabhu (1990) stated that there is not after all a bad method, rather an overdependence on routines on the part of the teacher (Maley, 2019b). Kumaravadivelu (1994) elaborated on this and introduced The Post-Method condition and suggested empowering teachers so that they themselves can discover alternatives to Methods. He suggested that teachers should be empowered with knowledge, skill, and autonomy to devise for themselves alternatives to established Methods.

Based on this concept of TSOP, numerous questions arise. One can question teacher professional development programs from the basis that if teachers naturally form theories or do adaptations to learned theories from their own experiences, should not trainers in teacher professional development programs be listening to the TSOP of teachers so that their programs are much more compatible to teachers' ways of thinking? Maley (2016), stated that the 'plausibility' paradigm differs from the 'training' paradigm. He elaborated by saying that the training paradigm is algorithmic in nature, in his words, "If we give teachers X forms of training, they will emerge with Y competencies". The plausibility paradigm, according to him, is largely heuristic, and whatever training is given to the teacher, the teacher would adapt the new input to the teacher's own treasure house of knowledge which has been acquired with experience.

There is not much written on TSOP. The flood of narratives of teachers and teacher educators on what teachers' sense of plausibility meant to them came about in the recent publication, *Developing Expertise through Experience* (Maley, 2019b). Maley took the initiative to revisit Prabhu's assertions on plausibility in his 1987 publication and challenged 20 teachers and teacher educators from around the world to explore the concept based on their own experiences. It resulted in 20 very intense chapters written to start a new fire into discussions on TSOP.

Method

Participants

The participants were 20 teacher-narrators, all experienced teachers and regarded as experts in the countries they serve. They also have considerable influence in the field of English Language Teaching. The head of the project was Alan Maley and he selected the teacher-narrators. Those selected were from different continents, had each more than 30 years of experience as teachers, and were prominent in the parts of the world they were living in. They were: Robert Bellarmine, who taught in CIEFL, India and worked as English Studies Officer for the British Council; John F. Fanselow, Professor Emeritus at Teachers College, Columbia University, the United States; Thomas SC Farrell, Professor of Linguistics, Brock University, Canada; Claudia Ferradas, who teaches at the Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, Argentina; Christine Goh, who is Professor of Linguistics and Language Education, National Institute of Education, Singapore; Yueguo, Gu, who is Professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; Jennifer Joy Joshua, who is Director in the office of the Director-General for the National Department of Basic Education in South Africa; Kuchah Kuchah, who taught in his native Cameroon before teaching at the University of Leeds, UK; Phuong Le, who teaches at Phu Yen University in Central Vietnam; Peter Medgyes, Professor Emeritus of Applied Linguistics and Language Pedagogy at Eotvos Lorand University, Budapest, Hungary; Freda Mishan, who teaches at the University of Limerick, Ireland; Jayakaran Mukundan, who taught at Universiti Putra Malaysia and is now Adjunct Professor at UPSI, Malaysia; Chrysa Papalazarou, English teacher in a state primary school in Greece; Shelagh Rixon, Governor of two primary schools in the UK; Malu Sciamarelli, teacher and teacher trainer in Brazil; Fauzia Shamim, Professor at Ziauddin University, Pakistan; Jane Spiro, Reader in Education and TESOL at Oxford Brookes University, UK; Adrian Underhill, who works as an independent ELT consultant in the UK; Tessa Woodward, who taught at Hilderstone College Kent, UK and still edits the journal *The Teacher Trainer*; and Andrew Wright, freelance author, story teller, teacher trainer and teacher who is based in Hungary.

Teacher-narratives

The fact that all 20 were teacher narratives convinced us that research on them would be highly informative and would add to the meagre literature on TSOP. They were asked to contribute a narrative based on the following guidelines:

- (i) Earliest experiences of language learning and education which have affected their current views and practices (i.e., experiences encountered before they became language teaching professionals).
- (ii) Influences arising from places/institutions in which they have lived and worked.
- (iii) Key people who have left enduring marks on their lives, beliefs, and practices.
- (iv) Key ideas they have encountered which have helped form or change their beliefs and practices.
- (v) Key publications in their personal and professional development.
- (vi) Critical incidents/epiphanies in life and work which have given them new insights.
- (vii) Themes emerging from their narratives. Any implications or reflections about how a 'sense of plausibility' perspective might have an impact on changing Teacher training/Teacher development models in the direction of greater participation and teacher-ownership of the process. References may also be made to current theories of teacher cognition, efficacy, etc.; and
- (viii) Brief statements of their beliefs/values about language and about learning languages which have emerged from the experiential pathway they have described.

Content Analysis

The authors of this article worked on content analysis of the 20 narratives using a qualitative approach. This was followed by critical discussion. As this is a first study conducted on these 20 narratives, the authors have confined this study to fleshing out only the main themes. The 20 narratives which have considerable length and depth, diversity and density will not allow for other facets of inquiry. There is one research question asked in this study:

What are the main themes identified in TSOP within the 20 narratives?

Analysis, Findings, and Discussion

The five main themes identified are as follows:

1. The backgrounds of the teacher-narrators did suggest that there were elements of experiences in their early lives which would have influenced some aspects of their TSOP.

Almost all the twenty teacher-narrators seemed to have had to deal with challenges growing up, they seemed to have had exposure to the most teacher-centered situations imagined. Papalazarou (2019, p. 133) described the hush in a primary classroom (which had 40 other students) and describing her teacher as very strict, looking at them “behind her huge spectacles, inspiring a mixture of awe and fear”.

Spiro (2019) stated that she did not know what her beliefs about language learning were until she was confronted with its opposite. She “learned French through humiliation and rules” (p. 191). And she felt French was just another school subject until her first trip to France, where she immersed herself into it.

The sense of awe and fear seem to be in most of these 20 lives, a recurring theme. Many of the experiences were associated to the learning of a new language. For Rixon (2019, p. 157), French was presented as “a glisteningly slippery mountain whose summit few would reach”. And as an 11-year-old, her motivation for learning a new language took a step backwards as she felt “native speaker-ism” was “excluding non-Francophones from the shrine” (p. 157). Sciamarelli (2019) described how a change in the English teacher could be described as sudden change in weather from calm to catastrophic. The new teacher focused on written grammar and reading comprehension and there was no speaking or listening! She describes her class as ‘silent’ as no one was allowed to speak. Sciamarelli’s experiences in learning English in the last three years before university focused on test-taking strategy drills and memorization and which led her to claim that while only 17 years old, she already had strong beliefs and preferences about foreign language learning and education in general. This again adds fuel to the notion that TSOP can begin exceedingly early, while these teachers were in school. A lot of these voices show that personal experiences build early notions of what bad teaching can be. Farrell (2019) illustrated the teacher-led learning environments that he was exposed to in school where during English lessons reading aloud seemed to be the dominant activity. In his Spanish lessons he was forced into memorizing grammar rules and there was no speaking activity, and for writing he was forced into memorizing vocabulary. All this would lead him to state “I decided that I would never teach the way many of my grade-school teachers went about teaching me” (Farrell, 2019, p. 32).

Spiro stated that she formed impressions of positive and negative traits of teachers and that there was a lot to learn from both. “From my own learning, there was so much to learn from flawed teachers as the inspirational ones” (Spiro, 2019, p. 195). Her teacher Miss Macauley gave them inspiration, but she would rather not have her bitterness imposed on them.

Wright's (2019) experiences with language learning best summed up how much a language learner's fate can be decided upon by unscrupulous teachers and an uncaring system bent on destroying learners. Wright regretted wasting time in classrooms where his "intelligence and caring were never engaged" (p. 225). He is an accomplished writer who has published several hundred books but the system never found him to be intellectual as he "was thrown out of Latin class" (p. 225) and failed public examinations in both English and French! And he revisits all this to ask that fundamental question: "Did I fail or was I failed?" (p. 225).

Most of the experiences reported about past experiences of the twenty teacher-narrators illustrate the personalities of the teachers that these teacher-narrators were exposed to. Some of the teachers of the past seem to be mostly uncaring and the procedures in classrooms very teacher centered. Most of the experiences seem to be in the learning of foreign languages like English, French and Latin. Their experiences are varied and useful. Most teachers of English teach it as a Foreign Language and some of these narratives provide insight into what attracts learners towards a language and what may make them lose interest. Learners of foreign languages like Spiro (2019) are indeed lucky to know the extent to which an out of class exposure to a foreign language makes a difference – as a 15 year old her movement out of an essentially important learning experience in classrooms (which she aptly describes as the spinach or fluoride toothpaste of her life – dull but meant to be good) transforms (via the trip to France) into "people, a culture, a landscape and a literature" (p. 192).

Most important within these narratives is the strength in their convictions – they believe they will be something quite different from the teachers they have been exposed to. They know what damage authoritarian and uncaring teachers do to language learning and want to be the opposite.

A lot of what is narrated resonate with that one major TSOP narrative by Maley (2016). Maley stated that he was 12 and was sent to France on an exchange program arranged by his teacher (who he declares is a genius). No one spoke any English and the opportunity was there for total immersion into French. This experience relates very much to Spiro's (2019) experiences in France where even French songs and culture, the people and the landscape did more teaching than what took place in classrooms. Maley also described the teacher personalities that affected and influenced him in his own TSOP. It is interesting to know how tests condemn learners to failure (even those who are intellectually capable) and Alan was faced with the prospect of studying in a school for failures (Secondary Modern School) after he failed the 11+ test. This child, who was condemned as failure at 11 then, through his teachers in a new setting, became a high-flyer who was offered scholarships to both Oxford and Cambridge universities!

What the narratives tell us is that through the years, the impression of good and bad teachers from the past stick in the minds of present-day teachers. Teachers are thinkers, in fact even philosophers, they form philosophies of their own. Mukundan (2019) in his narrative felt that good teachers are a rare commodity, especially in the field of English Language Teaching. He only found two English teachers who were exemplary and believes "having just two was a miracle" (p. 125) – he felt the rest were there to make learners hate the language. If what these teacher-narrators say is gathered and analyzed, we would want to assume the following:

- (1) Most of the teachers in the 20 narratives have something to say of their past, especially on what learning a new language meant to them. We can assume that the histories (experiences and reflections on these experiences) would be an important dimension to factor into teacher professional development. Histories are stories. Some aspects of it will remain in the mind and make us probably create templates or files or schema on positive/negative teacher personality, teacher characteristics, teacher capacity, etc. A teacher who is like Miss Macauley (Spiro, 2019) may have several personality templates in the mind developed by the learner. Spiro wanted to emulate her only on the positives – the inspirational parts; while the negatives will also feature in her mind – they form another template – the 'bitterness' in the teacher which she would want to keep away from as a teacher.

- (2) Will teachers who grew up with bad histories be affected by them? Evidence shows that they remember these unpleasant teachers and whatever negative characteristics these teachers had. This would be considered essential in their basic understanding of what teaching should not be. Farrell (2019) declares that he would never teach the way many of his grade-school teachers taught him. This is an insight worth considering for teacher professional development programs. The bad history of teachers can be positive input (in the form of case studies).
- (3) An important revelation in these narratives is that there are strong associations between teacher personalities and teaching styles. All the incidences of bad experiences with teachers in the early years seem to be connected to teacher-centeredness. While teacher trainers have talked a lot about what teachers-centered lessons are as opposed to learner-centered ones, not many have been able to cite case studies. These narratives offer new opportunities in terms of input towards materials development for teacher training and teacher professional development programs.

2. The innate and unique strengths of the 20 teacher-narrators were supported by the strengths of other people and their philosophies and this further defined the patterns of their own developing TSOP.

All these 20 teacher-narrators seem to find associations that either match their own or they seem to add new experiences from others to further strengthen their beliefs. Learner centeredness for example seems to be the ultimate belief of all twenty. Fanselow (2019) observed how teachers in Nigeria started doing unconventional things like getting learners to write directions rather than to say them. In dictation classes he was fascinated by what took place when erasers had to be kept away (the teachers discover the errors learners can make!). But in *Contrasting conversations: Activities for exploring our beliefs and teaching practices*, Fanselow (1992a) suggested that while he was looking at alternatives he was much helped by the new ‘designer methods’ that were being introduced at that time. He found Ashton-Warner (1963), fascinating as her techniques differed from the mainstream – Ashton-Warner made her learners sketch experiences they had in their homes, and she, the teacher wrote lines for them that matched their experiences (the teacher cannot supply emotions of experiences of learners but can help translate emotions into words!). Some of these 20 teacher-narrators were teaching at a time (1970s and 1980s) when what was considered ‘designer methods’ were introduced into English Language Teaching. So those associated to the development of these methods like Gattegno (1971), Curran (1976), Lozanov (1978), and Asher (1969) featured a lot in the lives of these teachers. Many of these methodologies were novel and revolutionary at the time and these methods began to challenge the definition of the role of the learner and begged a redefinition of that term. While learner-centeredness was a major issue, the even bigger discovery seemed to be in the realm of silence, which led to the suppression of teacher dominance and the amplification of the strength of delayed oral production (like in methodologies like TPR - Total Physical Response). Throughout the book of 20 narratives, these teachers seemed to be advocating giving learners “space and time to unlock their creative resources” (Maley, 2019a, p. 11).

There seems to be unique philosophical positioning of some of these 20 teacher-narrators because of influences from personalities and the literature produced by them:

- (1) Michael West seems to be the person most mentioned in many of the narratives. Kuchah (2019) claims to share commonalities in some of what West talks about in his book, *Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances* (1960). He believes that teacher education still does not consider how inappropriate training can be if it is not seen within the context. In Kuchah’s context he taught English in classes ranging between 147 and 235 students. There were only 20 coursebooks available. He relied on his students to “generate both the materials and processes” (2019, p. 97) of their English lessons. Michael West is also given prominence in Bellarmine’s narrative (2019) where he states that it was because of West that graded readers made an impact on learning English as Second and Foreign Language.

- (2) Sometimes the readings of these teachers influenced the way they think, which in turn influenced the way they wrote. Fanselow (2019, p. 33) had influences from diverse fields. “My focus on literature, film, television goes along with two other influences on my thinking: botany and the Dewey Decimal System”. He was curious in groupings, categories and patterns and in *Beyond Rashomon* (1977) he states that people communicate linguistically, non-linguistically, paralinguistically and through silence. Fanselow (1977) also stated that the influences from Cervantes, Plato, Dickens, Kurosawa, and others helped direct his literature classes. He now believes (2019), that without these influences, he would not have written *Breaking Rules* (1987), *Contrasting Conversations* (1992), *Try the Opposite* (1992) and *Small Changes in Teaching, Big Results in Learning* (2018). The keywords in his titles (like *Breaking Rules*, *Try the opposite*) suggest that Fanselow (1992b) was not very ‘mainstream’, and what he read and what he wrote was the cause of it.
- (3) Gu (2019) believed in ‘non-teaching’, resonating with the beliefs of Laozi, founding father of Chinese Taoist philosophy, which is “taking no action to interfere with the learner’s own learning” (p. 77). In Gu’s words, teachers prepare the swimming pool, so that learners jump in and swim on their own. This again struck a similar chord to Underhill (2019, p. 203), when he, heavily inspired by Gattegno (1971) stated that we must not “teach learners which they can find out for themselves”.

The most cited books in the narratives were Michael West’s *Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances* (1960) and Fanselow’s *Breaking Rules* (1987). Obviously, the challenges faced by these teacher-narrators (which included teaching classes as large as 200 led them into seeking alternatives to what was prescribed in their teacher training years – revealing evidence of emerging TSOP). In more severe conditions (where teaching was supposed to lead to socio-economic liberation of the people as well, like in the case of Bellarmine (2019), the books that contributed influences include *Teaching as Subversive Activity* (Postman & Weingartner, 1969) and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970).

3. The TSOP of many of the teacher-narrators lead us to believe that things like songs and stories which are never a part of serious research may soon become important as the evidence suggests.

Songs (and rhymes) and stories seem to have a big role in the lives of many of these 20 teacher-narrators as they were growing up and eventually when they became teachers. It was as if these teachers believed these things had considerable effect on learning yet were hardly researched. Some of the notable experiences with songs and music include the following:

- (1) Mishan (2019) stated how a French *assistante* came to her primary school and taught them some children’s songs and she can still sing some until this day – this led her into liking French and she went on to read French at university and became fluent in the language. She asks, “how could play, songs and games *not* be important for L2 learning when they were so intrinsic a part of L1 learning” (p. 113).
- (2) Spiro (2019) described how her trip to France when she was 15, introduced her to French songs by Charles Aznavour and Jacques Brel, and she learned to sing them. She describes how “the feeling of French” took her over “by stealth” and when she returned to the UK after 6 weeks, “she had absorbed its music and amazed the French teacher” (2019, p. 192).
- (3) Goh (2019) related a miracle in her Singapore secondary school where a group of reluctant speakers (probably monitor over-users, afraid of committing errors in speech) became wonderfully confident in oral communication, getting their strength from participating in a school concert (where lots of practice preceded the event). Ironically, “More than Words” (p. 59) was their choice of song.

- (4) Mukundan (2019, p. 124), talked about his dyslexic self and how courage in even speaking came from singing songs chorally – because songs sung together ‘drown’ errors. To further strengthen his argument, he says that there was involuntary playback and without him knowing he was singing these songs aloud even on the school bus!
- (5) Sciamarelli (2019, p. 168) described how an enterprising English teacher who used songs made her love singing them. She then talks about the spin-offs – she would sing and relate the stories within the songs to family at home.
- (6) Underhill (2019, p. 204) declared that he “cannot separate jazz improvisation” from his “development as a teacher”. He was playing jazz which he says is “complex, creative, rule-based and improvisational – just like language”. With jazz he had the “exhilarating experience of leaping from receptive incomprehensibility to productive fluency within a few minutes” (p. 204). Music influenced his TSOP.
- (7) Joshua (2019) brought about change to the curriculum in the primary school in Chatsworth, South Africa. Her teaching plans integrated language learning with music (songs and rhymes) and stories, something never encouraged by the school. The Inspector who visited the school commended her for the music and story program.
- (8) Ferradas (2019) and her addiction to the pop band The Monkees (in particular, their lead singer, Davy Jones) made her aspire to be a singer herself. There seemed to be “an intrinsic-motivational cocktail” (p. 49) that encouraged her to learn English which was not spoken at home, nor in Argentina, generally.

There are also references to stories and the strength (although not as much as for songs) of this too:

- (1) Papalazarou (2019, p. 133) described how in a private primary school (which had a video player, unlike other places) they could watch *The Secret Garden*, and this motivated her to later read literature in English.
- (2) Sciamarelli (2019, p. 170) praised her Portuguese and Literature teacher who taught her that “stories can help us understand the world we live in, teach us about where we came from and help us see possible futures”.
- (3) Wright (2019, p. 229) described how while in Southern Austria a woman stopped him in the street and said how he (the school story teller) had motivated her son to wake up an hour early so that he could collaboratively work with schoolmates on building their story book.
- (4) Mukundan (2019) described how his Primary One teacher in Malaysia would get the class to huddle around her and she would tell stories in an engaging manner. “Sometimes, she would sit at her piano and retell the stories with musical accompaniment!” (p. 126)
- (5) Ferradas (2019, p. 50) who was teaching ESP to intensive care doctors at a hospital in Argentina, suddenly and accidentally realized the power of stories when the head of Intensive Care, who was late for class suddenly emerged shouting “Ita is dead”. Ferradas of course was stunned that this doctor was smiling as he spoke. She then realized that “Ita” was a character in a popular soap opera – and she had been sick for several episodes and that doctors watched it while on duty and updated each other on parts they had missed. They in fact even discussed how the producers manipulated the illness for dramatic effect. This encouraged Ferradas to exploit the soap opera as teaching material and it kept the class engaged for some weeks.

The evidence of the positive influence of songs and stories as found in many of the narratives does suggest there is not much research on how they help in learning and acquisition. Mukundan (2019) suggests that there could be *dinning* (Stevick, 1996) or involuntary playback (Krashen, 1983), as he, without even being aware of it was singing the songs learnt in class on the school bus. The hunch is that it probably has the same effect drills have in intensive foreign language learning. The proclamation by

Spiro (2019) does suggest songs can be a booster of sorts in language learning as her command of the French language (after indulgence in French songs) even amazed her French teacher in the UK.

4. The TSOP of most of the teacher-narrators seem to show the opposite to conventional ways of thinking

Errors were discussed by most of the teacher-narrators, but with a tone that is humanistic. They were not viewed as negative throughout the 20 narratives:

- (1) Goh (2019) discussed how she developed ‘metacognition’ strategies for her learners for listening. She encouraged them to break their listening into parts to introspect each stage of their listening task. Students were then able to slow down, reflect and discover their own learning processes and problems. This meant she allowed her students to learn about their learning, errors and all. It was probably these motivational strategies that led the boys (who were not confident in speech) to take part in the school concert – their practice of the song “More than Words” (p. 63) and final presentation at the concert miraculously made them better and more confident speakers of the language! Some of the other teacher-narrators have views on errors which are similar – a more humanistic approach:
- (2) Bellarmine (2019, p. 25) stated that learners’ language errors are “evidence of their learning effort, not sins of commission/omission” and that teachers must only correct errors selectively and incidentally.
- (3) Mishan (2019) listed as one of her beliefs that good learners are confident, that it is difficult to learn another language, so they must be prepared for those embarrassing moments where they commit errors –they must be prepared to “make a fool of ourselves sometimes”(p. 119).
- (4) Mukundan (2019, p. 124) believed errors can be ‘drowned’ through song. He described how his Primary One teacher made them all sing chorally and how he believed errors were drowned in the collective voices and correct forms of usage reinforced through repetition (songs are rarely sung just once!).
- (5) Papalazarou (2019) we can assume seemed not to care too much for errors. Her description of the creative chaos during group work (where even the learners ‘use of L1 was tolerated) underlines the overall importance she placed on meaning-making – “Meanings were the outcome of the negotiation that took place – I was convinced that from this kind of ‘chaos’ there could be collaborative creativity” (p. 140).
- (6) Rixon (2019, pp. 157-158) stated that she was victimized in foreign language learning. She indicated that “a horror of risk was instilled in us” and “mistakes resulted in an instant ‘no.’” She believed that lowering the affective filter was never in teachers’ agendas and she is, now, against the use of errors for humiliation purposes.
- (7) Underhill (2019, p. 204) believed that errors are wonderfully productive and that “Mistakes are the syllabus, a gift to the class. Mistakes are not a nuisance, but an indication of where the students are and what I need to do next.”

An interesting finding in these 20 narratives was that none of these teachers thought that errors were negative, and no one claimed that errors of learners were in their list of things that concerned them. In fact, this tone seems to be set all through the book. Woodward (2019, p. 218) echoed what Corder (1973) stated and reinforced the message that “errors that language learners make can tell us how they are working out the new language”. She said that errors are informative rather than simply wrong or to be avoided.

5. The TSOP of the 20 teacher-narrators show that their views with regards materials development and use are not mainstream.

The typical class textbook is no stranger to criticism, as there have been a long list of negative perceptions of it published already. Sheldon (1988, p. 237) called it “necessary evil”, Brumfit (1979, p. 30) refers to it as “masses of rubbish skillfully marketed”, Pulverness (1999, p. 5) believes that teachers (especially novice ones) will find it difficult to reanimate for the learner “texts which are dead on page”, and Ashton-Warner (1966) ultimately believes that the best place for the textbook is the fireplace!

The views of these 20 teacher-narrators with regards textbooks are clear, they resonate with the negative comments made by past researchers. The foreword of the book (with the 20 narratives), written by Prabhu (2019, p. 3) starts with an elaborate description of the ‘activities method’ developed by Prabhu’s predecessor at the British Council, Lionel Billows, and which emphasized teaching using activity and play – there was never a mention of textbook. In later years, Prabhu, reinforced the activity method with Task-based learning which he believes is like problem-based learning – there is satisfaction in learners when they finish a task – fulfilment from achievement! Prabhu went on to implement Task-based learning in primary schools in South India (The 5-year Bangalore Project), again stressing the importance of ‘meaning’. The assumption is that the textbooks of that time, which were filled with exercises for grammar, vocabulary and comprehension had failed the purposes of language teaching. This was clearly emphasized by Maley, (2019b, p. 10) when he says that teachers need “to be skeptical of the claims of published materials, trendy ideas and academic research”. Some of the 20 teacher-narrators made explicit comments with regards textbooks:

- (1) Goh (2019, p. 62) decided against using materials within “some well-known listening coursebooks” and instead started using videos, which had “authentic audio recordings often with ‘messy’ texts”
- (2) Kuchah (2019) recollected the time when he taught 200 in a classroom (both within the classroom and outside) and in temperatures above 40 degrees Celsius. There were only 20 textbooks provided. He depended on his students to “generate both the materials and processes” (p. 97) of the lessons, as the textbooks were of no use.
- (3) Papalazarou (2019) believed that the textbook could have been the major contributor of the ‘disruptive behavior’ of her learners, in Athens, Greece. Her classes were mixed ability, multi-level and multi-ethnic. Absenteeism among children who were especially from the Roma community was high as she felt “coursebooks were totally irrelevant to their culture and life” (p. 135).
- (4) Underhill (2019, p. 205) reported of experimentation with “emergent syllabuses alongside prescribed ones” and how he managed to get his students to work by just using a reader and an intermediate-level dictionary – from these materials their classroom activities ranged from “story, meaning, four skills, improvised drama, re-writing and all the grammar and vocabulary we needed”. The textbook was irrelevant.
- (5) Mukundan (2019) believed abandoning textbooks would be exceedingly difficult despite them being most inappropriate for learning-teaching. Textbooks in Malaysia are state-sponsored (dense with agendas of the state which include nationhood and good citizenship themes, which do not connect easily to restless young adult learners). However, not using them would lead to numerous problems when confronted by the Inspectors.
- (6) Textbooks are there eventually for a practical reason (reduces teacher preparation and they are cost effective) and most of these 20 teachers accepted their presence because of this. Rixon (2019, p. 160) reiterated that feeling when she said that she creates her own lesson materials but is essentially “a happy user of an appropriate and well-crafted textbook”.

An essential aspect of this theme on materials tell us that the TSOP of these teachers make them believe that their knowledge on the anatomy and effectiveness of the textbook has depth and validity, that which comes from experiences in differing contexts. But rather than harp on the negatives, many have chosen to deal with it, which then brings about an interesting element to their TSOP – there is logic and reasoning in play, especially when judgment is due. Almost all the 20 teacher-narrators have explicitly stated their confidence in alternatives (DIY materials) or support materials which come in the form of reading programs. Maley (2019b, p. 11), in his introduction stated that a recurring theme that runs through the 20 narratives is the view that “a massive amount of reading is one of the keys to learning, sustaining and developing another language”.

Implications

There will be assumptions made based on the themes that have emerged, and this will be valid, as Maley (2019a, p. 8) boldly claims, “the act of teaching and learning is not scientific anyway but highly individual and personal to both learners and teachers”.

The 20 narratives strengthen the belief that teacher histories are important. They tell important stories. If there aren't any initiatives to include aspects of the history of teachers – their account of their own learning in schools, their teachers and how effective these were, then it would be the right time (based on evidence from the 20 narratives) to include them in teacher professional development programs. Most of the teacher-narrators described the learning-teaching environments they were exposed to, and in many cases, there was brave judgment – indicating that these early experiences can influence initial and emerging philosophies about learning and teaching. Farrell (2019, p. 39) sums this up very nicely when he says: “I decided that I would never teach the way many of my grade-school teachers went about teaching me”.

Kennedy (1990, p. 11) states that teachers acquire seemingly indelible imprints from their own experiences as students and these imprints “din in the head” (Stevick, 1996, p. 86) and are tremendously difficult to shake. Kennedy explains why this is so by comparing time teachers spent observing teachers and participating in their work (approximately 3060 days) as opposed to the miserly 75 days spent in teacher preparation programs. He asks readers if the preceding 3060 days of reading teachers and their work should not be considered important for the emerging teacher. This of course shows how teacher professional development programs could do well to consider teacher histories and the self-evaluation by individuals of the impact of their own learning experiences across the “magical 3060 days” they endured.

Bailey, Curtis, and Nunan (2001) discussing Reflective Teaching incorporated tasks for teacher professional development where histories of teachers have a strong focus. One of those tasks requires the participant to draw a timeline as the basis for documenting their history as a language teacher. At each dot across the line they write a year (depending on their age these dots could be 5, 8 or 10 years apart). They are then to write brief statements on the timeline about the language(s) they have learned and the contexts in which they have learned them. The teacher-narrators then go onto to say that the purpose of this task (investigation) is to help the teacher understand how their own experiences as language learners have influenced them (or will influence them) as language teachers.

History teaches. In many of the narratives, the teacher-narrators now believe that they were blessed to be exposed to multiple languages. These teachers were comparing patterns of the languages they already are familiar with to the new ones they were learning. Spiro (2019) does a deep reflection of the languages that she was exposed to and believed that there were patterns that language learners can figure out and which they will benefit from in multiple language indulgences – “Most notably, when several years later we began French in school, the idea of ‘articles’ inflecting to introduce ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ nouns was familiar. In fact, it was a delight to realize that being open to one kind of system had opened my mind to many” (Spiro, 2019, p. 192).

Would these experiences (comparative intuitions/reflections on the behavior of languages) be helpful to language learning-teaching? Will this be considered in teacher professional development initiatives of the future?

Another powerful message from these narratives is the discovery of the ‘Twilight Zone’ within ELT – the mysteries surrounding the use of the creative and performing arts in language teaching. While many of these expert teachers seem to support the use of creative arts, stories, poetry and song, it’s their personal indulgence in them (from their histories) that have convinced them of their potential power within language learning. Spiro (2019) described how indulgence in French songs (while she was in France) made her a better speaker of French and Mukundan (2019, p. 126) described how he picked up courage to speak when they sang chorally and “errors were drowned” by the sheer power of numbers. It would be interesting to see if these non-conventional forms of teaching will one day emerge from the Twilight Zone and appear as part of regular classroom teaching (or at least in the form of coordinated co-curricular activity). This can happen if there is sustained energy from experts in Applied Linguistics and those from pedagogy to do research determining how the creative and performing arts contribute to learning. While there is speculation about the “din in the head” (Stevick, 1996, p. 86) and the connections to intense language learning activity, there still isn’t enough work done on how the brain processes are enhanced as a result of these activity – Why does recall work better through song as in Mukundan’s (2019, p. 127) experiment in the classroom?

The 20 narratives do suggest that good teachers are like good people in all fields of work – they may not be regular nor conventional in approach. Some seem to have married their craft to the influences of the arts and the hard sciences. Underhill (2019, p. 204) states that he “cannot separate jazz improvisation” from his development as a teacher”. It would be fascinating if the experiences of other teachers with musical backgrounds will be similar. Patterns emerge in the thoughts of teacher-narrators like Fanselow (1977, p. 33) when he says he is stimulated by the way Bellack, Kliebart, Hyman, and Smith (1966) grouped student and teacher communication the same way that botanists group plants! In another comment he states that he was influenced by Dewey (1876) and in his work *Beyond Rashoman*, he insisted on not just categories but sub-categories as well in his coding system. “I point out that we communicate linguistically, non-linguistically, paralinguistically and through silence. But then I indicate that each of these mediums can appeal to our ears, our eyes, and our feelings” (Fanselow, 1977, p. 33). Some others in this group of 20 teacher-narrators suggest that they are against coursebooks (something not really mainstream) and they have strong views on this. Goh (2019), Kuchah (2019), Papalazarou (2019), Underhill (2019), Medgyes (2019) and Mukundan (2019) seem to suggest that they have been influenced by the far left in ELT, the *dogme* movement (Thornbury, 2005). The question is, can teacher professional development include the non-regular thoughts of teachers apart from the regular? Also, can the renewed interest in TSOP sparked by Prabhu (1987) and re-ignited by Maley (2019b) bring about an increased awareness of the complexities in teacher thought and be fair in treating them equally, regular, and irregular?

Limitations

This study examined TSOP of 20 teacher-narrators who were selected because of their contributions to teaching as well as in other areas – some became researchers and writers of considerable fame. There would be constraints on generalizability as this is a small sample, and the researchers only depended on content analysis of the narratives. There would also be constraints on the utility value of the findings and its applications as most of the subjects represented probably an exceedingly small percentage of the regular teacher population. Most teachers who undergo teacher professional development programs are based in classrooms, the majority of whom teach primary and secondary levels.

Conclusion

The authors attempted a thorough analysis of content to flesh out the five dominant themes within the narratives of 20 experienced teachers. These five thematic statements were in turn checked with three experts in the field (who themselves read all 20 narratives) and who found them to be consistent with the contents of the 20 narratives.

The first of the five themes illustrated how the backgrounds of these teacher-narrators may have a strong influence on their TSOP. Many of the teacher-narrators believed that their early years in school helped form impressions of what good teachers and good teaching are. They also believed in what was considered bad teaching from their experiences and what characteristics bad teachers have. This helped the teacher-narrators develop “templates” of good and bad teachers, good teaching, and bad teaching, all of which rested in their minds and which could be a source of reference in their own lives as teachers.

The second theme concerned influences that these teacher-narrators had both from other people and their writings. There seems to be evidence suggesting that teachers become who they are by embracing the beliefs of philosophers like Laozi, the founding father of Chinese Taoist philosophy, or that of inventors like Dewey (who invented the Dewey Decimal Classification System). Many of these teacher-narrators were also influenced by the Designer Methods which emerged in the late sixties and seventies and which promoted learner-centeredness and provided justifications for what was considered strange in the past, like the phenomenon of silence and its potential in classrooms. Some of these teacher-narrators even went on to write books which supported their present beliefs, which of course had their roots in influences from the past.

The third theme proposed that songs and stories must have a stronger presence in research as they seem to feature very strongly in most of the teacher-narratives. Some of the teacher-narrators have this strong impression that motivation to learn a foreign language can come with indulgence in songs of the target language. The most interesting thing about this was that in some of the narratives there was unplanned excursions into song. The teacher-narrators liked the songs in the foreign language and these songs in turn helped them become more proficient in that language. It was also in this third theme that aspects such as “dinning” (Stevick, 1996) and “involuntary playback” (Krashen, 1983) were reintroduced and associations drawn that connect the power of songs to aspects of acquisition and learning. Stories were also important and some of the teacher-narrators believed that like songs, stories may have stronger roles in classroom teaching and in research.

The fourth theme suggested that most of the teacher-narrators do not seem to show traits that resemble conventional ways of thinking. They seem to be embracing more humanistic views with regards things such as errors. They also seem to believe that it would be counter-productive to view learner errors as totally negative. In fact, they believe that good teachers usually view errors as feedback on what learners know and what teachers need to do next.

The fifth theme suggested that the teacher-narrators’ views with regards materials-use in classrooms is not mainstream. While a lot of teachers believe in conforming to textbook use, many of these teacher-narrators have either minimally utilized textbooks or outwardly advocated abandoning them in total. This belief conforms with the large amount literature on textbooks which view them in negative light.

We believe a study of this nature, while being an initial study will be of great use to researchers wanting to further investigate TSOP. Also, Teacher Professional Development initiatives can benefit from studies of this nature. Teacher Professional Development initiatives seldom consider the experiences that teachers come with – the years of experimentation and hypothesis testing of methods, techniques, and procedures within their unique teaching contexts. Perhaps, teacher histories should from now on feature in teacher professional development.

Our hope is that this present research will be the turning point in TSOP research. While this research was content-based analysis on teacher-narratives, future researchers should look at how interviews and focus-group sessions may be an avenue to retrieve more data from teachers. Future research should also

focus not only on experienced or expert teachers but inexperienced and even beginner or novice teachers. Only then can research identify what characteristics of TSOP can be found across these various groups.

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