Teacher Trainees' Vision of Their Future English Classes

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Abstract. In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature focusing on teacher identity and teacher beliefs, which are key aspects in understanding classroom processes. While there is an increasing number of studies regarding the identity and beliefs of practising teachers, studies on trainees are rare, and studies aiming to compare and contrast different learning environments are even less frequent.

The aim of the present study is to investigate the ways in which different socio-cultural contexts influence student teachers' vision of their future professional identity and that of their future ideal lessons.

Our participants are English-language teacher trainees from Szeged (Hungary) and Miercurea Ciuc (Romania). At the time of the data collection, they had not yet started their methodology courses or their teaching practice. As the first step of a longitudinal study, they were asked to create a visual image of their ideal future lesson by drawing or making a collage. Also, they were asked to supplement their images with a written explanation.

The results indicate that pre-service teachers have very specific ideas about their ideal lessons, and their images reflect plenty of details and a great variety of different aspects.

Keywords: teacher identity, vision, teaching English, teacher trainees, visual images

1. Introduction

Numerous studies have dealt with teacher identity development and teacher beliefs, yet there are only a few that involve pre-service teachers. The present research aims to explore how teacher trainees envision their future professional identity and their future ideal lessons by comparing two different socio-cultural contexts. In order to do so, we collected data from English-language teacher trainees studying at the University of Szeged (Hungary) and at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania in Miercurea Ciuc (Romania). This study reports on the first findings of a longitudinal study, the starting point of which is the trainees' second year of study, the final stage before they start studying subjects related to the methodology of teaching English as a foreign language, and the envisioned endpoint is their last year of study, after completing all their methodology courses and teaching practices, right before they graduate. As the first step of data collection, the participants were asked to create a visual image of their ideal future lesson by drawing or making a collage, and, additionally, they were asked to supplement their images with a written explanation.

2. Literature review

Studying teachers' beliefs and identity has been found to be of utmost importance in order to understand their classroom practices. Identity is known not to be a fixed and stable entity, but, on the contrary, it is constantly evolving and is continually constructed and reconstructed by teachers' previous and current experiences and also by their future aspirations (Barkhuizen 2016, Ruohotie-Lyhty & Pitkänen-Huhta 2020). We believe that teacher education plays an important role in shaping and influencing future teachers' and teacher trainees' professional identities, since previous experiences are evoked with "the future profession in sight" (Ruohotie-Lyhty and Pitkänen-Huhta 2020: 1). This identity perspective puts the teacher trainee in the centre of the learning process, and by understanding the identities and the work they envision, we as teacher trainers can have a closer understanding of who they are and more precise insights into how to support their development better. Even though the importance of professional identity is recognized in teacher education, and there are several studies focusing on how graduate students perceive their professional identities, little research has been done on the way teacher trainees envision their future work before starting to study the methodology of foreign language teaching in theory, before going to schools to observe lessons or starting their teaching practice.

2.1. Teacher identity

Teacher identity is understood to include individual teachers' beliefs and theories of teaching and learning combined with pedagogical knowledge and classroom practices (Barkhuizen 2017) as "tools through which teachers make sense of their professional practices" (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Pitkänen-Huhta 2020: 2). Furthermore, identities are social constructs; they are negotiated, influenced by traditions, roles, and practices that individuals have encountered throughout their socialization in their social context, reflecting the "constant interplay between individuals and their context" (Ruohotie-Lyhty et al. 2021: 2). This means that while they are socio-politically embedded on the one hand, they are also very personal on the other hand, since individuals are active participants and interpreters of the social practices they are surrounded by and participate in.

Teacher identities are formed as part of a reflexive process in which they try to understand who they are and who they desire or fear to be (Barkhuizen 2017: 4). Although the process of forming a teacher identity does not usually begin during teacher education, it is nevertheless the context where former beliefs and ideas of teaching and learning can be reflected upon and transformed to provide a basis for starting as a professional. In other words, teacher training provides an excellent opportunity for trainees to make a transition from former learners to teachers. Moreover, the existing body of literature shows that teacher training/ pedagogical education is a decisive time for identity development (Golombek & Doran 2014) and that "identities formed during teacher training have a significant role in teachers' professional development" (Ruohotie-Lyhty et al. 2021: 2). Moreover, Borg et al. (2014: 3) emphasize that "teacher education is more likely to impact trainees when they have opportunities to become aware of their prior beliefs about teaching and learning, to reflect on these and to make connections between theory and practice".

2.2. Teacher motivation and the use of narratives to visualize the future

The motivation of foreign language learners has been studied extensively and from several different perspectives. Recently, it has been suggested that learner motivation be viewed in terms of a motivational self-system (Dörnyei 2005) consisting of the learners' possible selves (ideal and ought-to self) and related to their past foreign language learning experiences. It has also been suggested that the motivational self-system could be applied to foreign language teachers as well (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova 2014): to both pre-service and in-service teachers. The ability to envision their teaching in the future is thus related to their identity and motivation. However, as pointed out by Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014: 125), the purpose is "not to identify some kind of idealized fantasy image of a

language classroom [...] but, rather, to develop a personally meaningful *possible* vision that is integral to who the teacher is and that is sensitive to the context in which his/her work is located".

In teacher education, different types of narratives have been used in order to enhance teacher development (see Barkhuizen 2017, Kalaja & Ruohotie-Lyhty 2019), since narratives have been acknowledged to be a means for pre-service and in-service teachers to make sense of themselves and their profession (Johnson & Golombek 2011: 2013), more specifically in constructing their identities and reflecting upon their experiences. Narratives can be thus viewed as means of understanding the course and processes of identity development where teachers can express their "beliefs, attitudes and values" (Kalaja & Ruohotie-Lyhty 2019: 80). Narratives can be used not only to describe past experiences but also to envision the future; as Kramp (2004: 107) puts it: "stories preserve our memories, prompt our reflections, connect us with our past and present, and assist us to envision our future". Narratives, however, do not necessarily mean written or oral (verbal) stories, but there are also other modes to express ourselves, such as visual or multimodal (e.g. texts complemented with pictures, figures, sounds, or video clips).

There has been a small number of studies focused on teacher trainees or their vision about their professional future. The results of an earlier study conducted by Hammerness were published in 2003 (see also Hammerness 2006), in which he asked novice teachers to imagine their ideal classroom. Data were collected by administering a survey followed by interviews with some of the participants involved in the survey. The author asked teachers to imagine their ideal classroom by taking the interviewer on an imaginary tour and answering some questions related to what they would teach, how and why.

Ten years later, a longitudinal study conducted by Kalaja (2016) focused on teacher trainees who were studying to become foreign language teachers and were to graduate from an MA degree programme in Finland. Teacher trainees were asked to imagine their future class and then to draw a picture of this image, completing it with additional short explanations.

In another study, Borg et al. (2014) asked fourth-year teacher trainees from the University of Barcelona to draw a picture that represents a successful primary ELT class and then to write a commentary in which they explain the meaning of the picture. The task was completed by teacher trainees before their so-called specialist methodology course, after already having completed an introductory ELT methodology course in the third year. Borg et al. (2014) carried out a longitudinal study in which they conducted interviews with the participants to get further insights into the teacher trainees' drawings, and at the end of the course participants were asked again to create a picture of an effective ELT lesson.

Kalaja and Mäntylä (2018) also had teacher trainees as subjects of their research and used visual narratives to look forward in time, to envision the future. The

subjects of this study were second- and third-year university students majoring in English; they were half-way through their teacher education, so all the participants had previously completed some pedagogical studies, some of them had even completed their teaching practice. The task was for the teacher trainees to create a visual representation of an ideal English class.

Ruohotie-Lyhty and Pitkänen-Huhta (2020) took the idea of envisioning further and examined the visual narratives of 61 first-year language students at a Finnish university regarding their imagined future teacher identities (desired and undesired profession). The authors identified two perspectives of looking at teaching as a profession, namely the societal status and the nature (characteristics, activities, environment) of the profession. The same idea was extended by Ruohotie-Lyhty et al. (2021) in order to compare the responses of Finnish and Brazilian students and explore the socio-cultural differences in identity construction. The authors highlight that such research not only "encourages the exploration of emotional self-awareness reflectively in relation to contexts, beliefs and identities" (Ruohotie-Lyhty et al. 2021: 9), but as teacher trainees become aware of these phenomena, their present and future practices might be strongly affected.

3. The study

3.1. Aim

Based on the literature reviewed above, we set out to investigate the ways in which different socio-cultural contexts influence student teachers' vision of their future professional identity and that of their future ideal lessons. As stated above in the introduction, the present paper reports on the findings of the first step of what is intended as a four-year-long study with the participation of teacher trainees studying at the University of Szeged, Hungary (N = 48), and at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania in Miercurea Ciuc, Romania (N = 16). At the time of the data collection (February 2022), both student populations were at the beginning of their fourth semester of study. At this stage, the students' backgrounds and experiences can be considered similar since neither group has attended any courses on English-language teaching methodology.

3.2. Data collection

The data were collected using Kalaja and Mäntylä's (2018) idea. The participants were asked to create a picture (either by drawing by hand or by using computer software or newspaper/magazine clippings, etc.): *An English Lesson of My Dreams* – depicting a lesson that they could imagine giving after graduation. The

participants were also asked to describe in a few sentences what is taking place in the lesson and give reasons why their lesson would be as envisioned by them. The task was set as a homework assignment, and the students had two weeks to complete it. Also, they were informed that the task was not going to be graded for quality, the only requirement being to hand it in.

A superficial look at the data – there were 64 images and descriptions altogether – already reveals that most of the participants carried out the task with great care, often paying attention to the minutest of details. They indeed used a great variety of visual representation techniques, starting from pen/pencil drawings of stick figures through using colour pens/pencils to collages and computer graphics in varying degrees of elaboration. Similarly, the descriptions varied in length and detail, but they typically provided excellently insightful supplements to the images. The data were examined carefully and studied for emerging patterns. At present, we can report on four major topic areas: (1) the learning/teaching environment (traditional classroom vs. outdoor spaces), (2) the teacher's position, (3) classroom activities, and (4) abstract visualizations reflecting on the learning/teaching process.

3.3. Findings

As stated above, the data lend itself for analysis from different aspects. In the four subsections below, we are going to elaborate on how the participants imagined the ideal learning/teaching environment, where they positioned the teacher, what classroom activities they visualized, and, finally, we are going to show some abstract visualizations reflecting on the learning/teaching process.

3.3.1. The learning/teaching environment

When taking a look at the images, one of the first conspicuous features is where the instruction is taking place. *Figures 1* and *2* represent the majority of the participants' imagined classroom environments, depicting classroom settings with an impressive amount of detail. *Figure 1* represents the traditional classroom, with orderly rows, where learners are seated in pairs (however, not all learners are at their desks because they are engaged in various activities, with the teacher standing in the corner monitoring the work). In *Figure 2*, we can observe a similarly traditional classroom; this time, however, the desks are arranged in a way to suit group work activities. Moreover, we can observe some changes in the way the classroom is decorated. There is a bookshelf in the right corner and a beanbag in the left one, probably allowing some extensive type of reading[1] possibilities for the learners.

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1   Extensive reading is an approach to second or foreign language reading when learners read for pleasure/joy (see Harmer 2007: 283).
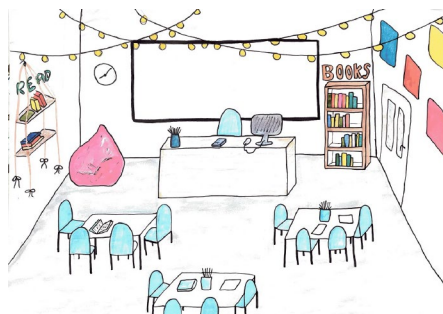
Figures 1–2. *Traditional learning/teaching environment*

Figure 3. *Non-traditional learning/teaching environment – At the Zoo*

Figure 4. *Non-traditional learning/teaching environment – A Trip to England*

Among the numerous learning/teaching environment representations, there were only a few that depicted non-traditional environments. *Figure 3* shows how language learners are taken to the zoo for a better illustration of meaning, while *Figure* 4 represents a class excursion, where the learners are taken to England. The accompanying description reveals that: "It would be great to study about the culture if we travelled to the country. The students could find the language more interesting if they had the opportunity to travel there."

3.3.2. Teacher's position

Taking a close look at the pictures submitted by the participants, we can observe various ways in which the teacher is positioned in the classroom. In *figures 5* and *6*, the teachers are standing in front of the classroom. In *Figure 5*, we can see a scene where the teacher is standing at the whiteboard, probably providing an explanation or acting as a prompter or facilitator. The students are working in groups, interestingly all of them seated with their backs towards the teacher. In *Figure* 6, the teacher seems to be providing a whole-class instruction or monitoring group work activities. In these pictures, too, students are seated in groups. In *Figure 1* above, we can see the teacher standing almost unnoticed in the corner, while there is a student holding a presentation at the blackboard, with some other students listening in the benches, and two other students are engaged in a different activity at the blackboard.

Figures 5–6. *Teacher's frontal position*

Figures 7 and *8* depict the teacher positioned among the students, in *Figure 7* standing, and thus occupying a slightly more prominent position, while in *Figure 8*, without the help of the speech bubbles, the teacher would be difficult to distinguish from the learners.

Figures 7–8. *Teacher in the circle*

The richness of this part of the data indicates that teacher trainees have various ideas at their disposal as regards the position (and hence the role) of the teacher. While many drawings place the teacher in a central, more traditional and more authoritative position, there are ample examples for the teacher positioned among the learners, as their equal.

3.3.3. Classroom activities

In the pictures created by our participants, as the ones presented in the above subsections also illustrate, we can see a great variety of work forms and activities. We can see examples for group work, presentations, discussions, various forms of interactions, and communication. Another emerging set of examples is centred around games and movement: role-play, playing games (see *Figure 9*) and video games, dancing (see *Figure 10*), and singing. Outdoor activities involve school trips (see *figures 3* and *4* above), and we can also see examples for doing project work (see *Figure 5* above), learning vocabulary, and different forms of illustrating meaning, for example, by showing pictures.
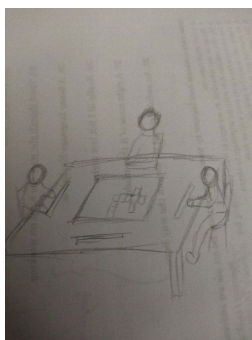

Figure 9. *Playing Scrabble*

Figure 10. *Dancing*

Figure 11. *Collage 1: Various activities*

Figure 12. *Collage 2: Various activities*

Some of the participants created collages (*Figures 11* and *12*) to be able to capture a range of different classroom activities. In *Figure 11*, the focus is on "exercises that involve listening to music and paying attention to lyrics, watching short videos, and reading interesting stories", as stated by the creator of the montage.

The montage in *Figure 12* depicts a group work activity, because "students could be more active in groups, and group works teach students how to work together". As regards learning and teaching materials, we can see exercise books, books and dictionaries, because in books "we can follow thematics", dictionaries contain the new words, and there is a "special exercise book which students can decorate with anything and write just grammar in it". *Figure 12* also contains a mind map, since according to the student "mind mapping could help memorize well a new grammar part". Wordwall games and Quizlet also appear as interactive tools, "where teachers can check students' knowledge, what they learnt during the lesson". Last but not least, there is an interactive board, which, based on the student's description, is "a big help for teachers because they can demonstrate quickly and well, and teachers can use creative things for teaching better, interestingly".

We can safely maintain that many of the participants of the study – already prior to starting studying EFL methodology – have an elaborate repertoire of different work forms, classroom activities, and creative ideas regarding capturing students' attention.

3.3.4. Abstract visualizations

In subsections 3.3.1–3.3.3, we have presented data depicting classroom environments and scenarios that are easy to recognize in the images. Some participants, however, created abstract images to convey what they consider their future profession to be like. Below we are going to present some abstract visualizations, the interpretations of which rely heavily on the descriptions provided by the participants.

In *Figure 13*, the teacher is represented with a face featuring only a prominent mouth and no other organs, while the learners are depicted as having only eyes on their faces. The symbolism of the colours is also revealing: the mouth is coloured red, while the eyes are drawn black and white. At the same time, the speech bubble coming out of the coloured mouth is black and white, while the thought bubbles are colourful. According to the participant drawing the picture (as she later explained during a personal conversation), although the material taught by the teacher can be dry, monotonous, or boring, it is up to the learners to make it colourful, that is, to make the message meaningful for themselves and benefit from it. The hearts are all connected because, again according to the participant, this is how it is the best to learn: the teacher needs to be closely connected to the learners, the learners to the teacher, and the learners to each other. The connection is not primarily intellectual (as one might suppose when thinking about an environment for education), wherefore it is not the minds that are connected. Instead, it needs to be affectionate, which is why the wiring is drawn through the hearts.
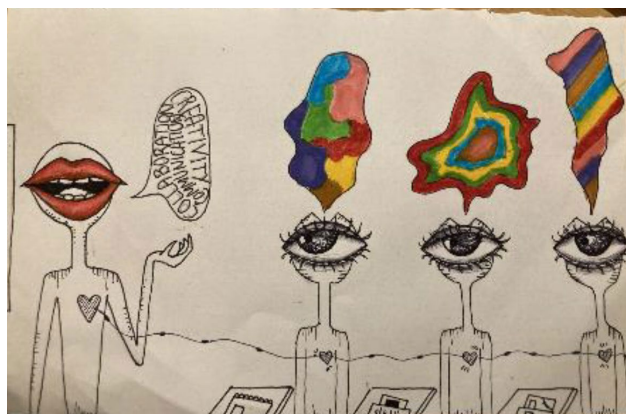
Figure 13. *Mouth and eyes*

Figure 14 is a mosaic, which, according to the participant's own description, is a metaphor for the type of classes that she would like to teach, "where every student can be unique in their own way and at the same time be part of a bigger picture. A group where we are able to combine our strengths and we motivate each other to learn new things; with this, we make our mosaic more and more colourful."

Figure 14. *Mosaic*

The participant creating the digital picture of the apple – taken from the Japanese anime *Death Note* – uses the apple as a symbol to represent their goal, namely to educate their learners about "new cultures and valuable knowledge" while teaching English. The pixels in the background symbolize some of the basic elements of language learning "such as grammar and translation".

Figure 15. *Apple*

The richest symbolism is presented in *Figure 16*, where, according to the participant's explanation, the globe represents the language learner and the hand, holding and supporting the globe, symbolizes the teacher, since it is the "teacher's task to lead and guide the learners". The headphone symbolizes the learner's willingness to listen and internalize the material that way. It has the shape of a heart, meaning that even if the learner does not like the subject or the lesson, they still have a positive attitude. The question mark and the exclamation mark represent the learners' curiosity and the constantly ongoing dialogue during the teaching/learning process. The bulb symbolizes creativity and a richness of ideas, while the symbol X or + (either, according to the description provided by the participant) represents multiplying or adding up the work done in a language lesson and advocate the idea that there is always something for the learners to take home, after each and every lesson.

Figure 16. *The globe with a headphone*

Figures 13–16 reveal very complex ideas behind the seemingly simple task given to the participants. The many details and the rich symbolism allow us to

gain an insight into the participants' thoughts prior to actually being trained on methodology. We believe that the images and the descriptions presented above show how much background the participants already have, based on their own experiences as (language) learners.

4. Conclusions

In our paper, we have made an endeavour to explore what teacher trainees think about their future English lessons. We have applied a novel data collection method, with the help of which we surveyed visual representations and short descriptions provided by second-year teacher trainees at two universities (located in Szeged and Miercurea Ciuc). Although our primary expectation was to find patterns that are different in the two sets of data because of the different socio-cultural settings, interestingly, we have found no hints at such differences. We have, however, found that teacher trainees' previous learning experiences have a great impact on their vision of the perfect classroom, since most of the visual representations contain many elements of traditional classrooms, with some changes. This might mean that the trainees' thoughts are shaped according to what they consider "realistic" teaching/learning environments, rather than an ideal, imaginary but probably not realizable classroom.

Many classes were envisioned as being quite similar to the classes the trainees themselves attended when they were at school. Although at the time of creating the images and the descriptions our participants had no prior training in English teaching methodology, we believe that thinking about and implementing the task set for the purposes of the present research has given them an incentive to a (higher) awareness of their teaching beliefs and that in itself it is already a step taken in the direction of professional development.

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