DOI: 10.1515/jolace-2015-0002

Becoming an English language teacher: *Continuities and Discontinuities*

Dorota Werbińska

Pomeranian Academy in Słupsk, Poland

werbinsk@pro.onet.pl

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to report a three-year phenomenographic study conducted on seven EFL Polish teachers with the focus on presenting how they experience different aspects of language teaching at three crucial stages: 1) the time of ELT theory studying, 2) the time of school placement, 3) the time of first-year working as professional teachers. Each stage of the study is presented from the perspective of affordances standing for the respondents' expectations (*continuities*) as well as constraints (*discontinuities*). The article concludes that discontinuities, rather than continuities, can prove invaluable in language teacher identity development.

Keywords

language teacher identity, phenomenography, continuities and discontinuities, Poland

Introduction

Becoming a teacher seems a never-ending process which is by no means final on receiving teaching credentials. It is continuously constituted, never fully completed or coherent. It usually starts very early with a person's desire to enter the teaching profession and may last well into their retirement period. The process of formal learning to teach is only a phase which brings a person closer to the process of 'becoming' a teacher, although a very important one. It can be the time when previous expectations and imaginations of candidates for the teaching profession are given rational explanations through theoretical tuition. It is also the time when their teaching abilities are tested during school placements. This period of 'learning to teach' is formative but can be transformative through providing contexts for innumerable changes with regard to pre-service teachers' preferences, self-perceptions, choices or even job-related decisions. Learning to teach is, therefore, a process of professional identity construction rather than the acquisition of knowledge or collection of new skills.

In this article I intend to take a look at the process of becoming a teacher through the concepts of 'continuities' and 'discontinuities', both acknowledged as contributors to learning. The former which stand for smooth fillers or seamless transitions from ignorance to knowledge are more popular in the common understanding of learning (English, 2013, p. xix). The latter which mean confusions, doubts, perplexities, struggles or simply anxiety before the new and unfamiliar are in line with thinking that "learning necessarily involves discontinuous moments" (ibid.). It seems that explicit targeting the selected periods of the process of becoming a teacher (the time of studies and the first working year) through the perspective of continuities and discontinuities may help in advancing our understanding of learning teaching. The current study explores the building of seven English pre-service teachers' professional identities at three crucial stages: 1) the time of university tuition, 2) the time of school placement, 3) the first year of working as professional teachers with a view to illuminating their conceptualizations of language teacher becoming experiences.

Theoretical background

The following paragraphs describe the theoretical background for this study starting with the representations of continuities and discontinuities in the teacher literature, followed by their renderings in the studies on teachers as students, school placement mentees, and first-year teachers.

I understand *continuities* as physical, mental, social, and symbolic aspects that provide 'positivity or (sometimes) neutrality in experience'. They on the whole facilitate a person's (teacher-to-be) interaction with the environment and make learning to teach a goal easy to achieve. Continuities are rooted in familiar habits, trusted routines and fixed dispositions, thereby providing stability, comfort, and somewhat adherence to the status quo. In this respect, continuity reminds various definitions of the concept of "attractors" (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008, p. 49; Sade, 2011, p. 45) or "affordances", as understood by the originator of the term (Gibson, 1979), and present scholars adapting his idea to the applied linguistics ground (i.e. Deters, 2011; Aronin & Singleton, 2013; Murray, 2013). The difference is that Gibson considers affordances of the environment in the sense of what it offers the animal for good or ill, whereas my understanding of continuity is placed on non-disturbing, to a certain extent predicted and taken-for-granted aspects provided by a teacher's environment. What is stressed in the word 'continuity' is the lack of an interruption in action leading to the goal attainment. This meaning is important in the sense that a candidate for the teaching profession is all the time following the chosen and well-trodden direction in the process of becoming a teacher, finding and making use of positive 'conductors' or acknowledging neutral aspects, with no setbacks, doubts, obstacles whatsoever withholding her on the way. If the conducive mechanisms turn out to be positive emotions, positive personality traits, or positive social institutions (Seligman, 1999), the concept of continuity can be located almost in the vicinity of positive psychology assumptions gaining in popularity in applied linguistics studies (Gabryś-Barker, 2014; MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014) right now.

By way of contrast, *discontinuities* are on the surface pejorative due to the fact that they provide 'the negativity in experience'. I borrowed the word from English (2013) who, inspired by Herbart and Dewey, assigns discontinuity the central importance in learning and teaching processes. Originating from negative physical, mental, social, or symbolic experiences, 'discontinuities' constrain a person's (teacher-to-be) predetermined interaction with the environment and make a goal more difficult to achieve. Encountered with discontinuous moments such as anxiety, doubt, ignorance, discomfort, difficulty, disorientation, disagreement, to name but a few, a person's ability to learn teaching is likely to be interrupted and therefore hindered. On the other hand, there is ample evidence that negative experiences can be valuable in making a person stronger, more understanding and reflective (Barcelos, 2001), and ultimately lead to a change. This is so because things are not totally black or white, and failure to perceive 'the greys in between' may lead to failure in the appreciation of the educative value of discontinuous moments. Discontinuities can be said a necessary condition for a teacher's growth or a basis for her change. Arriving at a limit of her knowledge, beliefs or expectations, a teacher goes through an internal struggle and opens up for a self-transformation. Therefore, despite the pejorative connotation of the word "negative" as it is in colloquial English, 'negativity in experience' here can be used to describe difference, otherness, something unfamiliar yet that may end up with a positive effect.

In the literature, references to both pre-service teachers' continuities and discontinuities can be indirectly grasped through studying beliefs, in particular how stable or prone to changing they are (i.e. Mercer, 2011; Werbińska, 2012; Crhova & Gaona, 2014). For example, popular statements related to language learning beliefs offered by Lightbown and Spada (1995, p. xv) may generate disagreements among pre-service teachers who tend to rely on common sense beliefs or what they have experienced in their language learning pasts (MacDonald et al., 2000; Peacock, 2001; Inozu, 2011; Michońska-Stadnik, 2013). Likewise, there are numerous studies on the persistence (continuity) or malleability (discontinuity) of prospective teachers' beliefs about a teacher's role (Lofstrom & Poom Valicks, 2012). Studies on the change (discontinuity with a positive effect) of future candidates for the teaching profession after attending a critical EFL teacher education course (Abednia, 2011), on teachers' perceptions of language skills (i.e. da Silva, 2005; Manchon, 2009; Woods & Cakir, 2011) language

subsystems (i.e. Andrews, 2003; Borg, 2003; Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2010), or target language use in the classroom (i.e. Kang, 2012) are examples of cases in point.

Studies on pre-service teachers during their school practicum present equally insightful findings. They emphasize positive elements pointing to continuity, i.e. building resilience in pre-service teachers (Le Cornu, 2009), making use of imagination and reflection so as to facilitate teaching practice (Walkington, 2005). Also, some of them examine negative experiences: the antagonisms between mentors and mentees (Burn, 2007; Trent et al., 2010), disassociations between the demands of placement schools and their universities (Smagorinsky et al., 2004) suggesting discontinuity, as well as apparently negative experiences culminating in positive effects: international teaching practicum (Kamarul Kabilan, 2013), significance of open and supportive school environment (Yuan & Lee, 2013), experiencing emotions (Timotsuk & Ugaste, 2010). In a like manner, studies on first year teaching produce a gamut of experiences, ranging from overall success stories (Hebert & Worthy, 2001), through focusing on particular positive factors, such as pupil success (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2006) or negative factors, such as unexpected workload (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2006) or problems with the legitimacy of access to language teaching practice (Tsui, 2007). Interestingly, in teacher education literature, there is numerically more reference to discontinuity, although encountered under 'tensions' (Alsup, 2006; Smagorinsky et al., 2004), 'challenges' (Farrell, 2003, 2012) or 'dilemmas' (Barcelos, 2001; Werbińska, 2009), than continuity of experience, especially during the most critical periods of the process of becoming a teacher, such as school placement or novice teaching. In fact, Pluskota (2014, p. 1) claims that "for every twenty articles with negative emotions ... there is only one which deals with positive emotions..."

The study

The present study aims at extending understandings of novice (pre-service and first-year) language teachers' identities and their longitudinal development from the angle of continuities and discontinuities in their language teacher becoming experiences. It will address the following key questions related to the same seven participants:

1. What continuities and discontinuities are experienced by pre-service teachers as a result of attending teacher-oriented theoretical courses at university?
2. What continuities and discontinuities are experienced by the same pre-service teachers as a result of their school placement?
3. What continuities and discontinuities are experienced by the same now first-year teachers as a result of working in real school settings?

Methodology

Recent approaches to studying different psychological constructs including identity have pointed to the benefits of using qualitative approaches (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2006). They are more successful in 'personalizing' a person under investigation and generating thick, detailed and contextualized data than quantitative 'depersonalized' understandings. A particularly promising method in this respect is a phenomenographic study that is useful in illuminating people's conceptions, understandings and perceptions of phenomena on the basis of their experiences. Phenomenography implies that phenomena can be referential and structural. The referential aspect is understood as the meaning assigned to a given phenomenon, which makes people aware that they are experiencing something as such (Gonzales, 2011, p. 70). The structural conception aspect is understood as "how people go about something in the way they do" (Marton & Tsui, 2004). A phenomenographic investigation has been credited as a valuable method in exploring qualitatively different ways of experiencing that addresses the contextual influences (Tan, 2013). Differences in ways of experiencing the investigated phenomena lead to the creation of hierarchically arranged categories of description (categories of that phenomena) which culminate in an "outcome space". The "outcome space" is a set of structured categories designed in the form of a map 'drawn' by the researcher on a range of understandings of an investigated

phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997). A thing of note is that the categories of description can never be perceived as an exhaustive list of experiences although they should be complete for the given group of participants at a particular point in time. The criteria for judging their suitability involve 1) standing in clear relation to the aspect under consideration, so that each category contributes something distinct about the investigated aspect, 2) standing in logical and often hierarchical relationship with one another, and 3) parsimony which implies that there should be as few categories for capturing the critical variation in the corpus as is reasonable. The final categories of description and the outcome space they create is a presentation of variation on a collective level in which individual 'voices' are not heard, but the categories with which people would identify are retained.

Participants

The phenomenographic study imposes guidelines with respect to participants of the study. Their number is usually restricted to several people, which clearly shows that phenomenographic research does not highlight the participants' representativeness. Instead, it can be based on their exceptionality.

The present study is part of a larger study but here the experiences are limited to three years of only seven participants who agreed to participate in the whole study (comprising three years for different participants from 2008 to 2013). Although all of them were EFL pre-service and then first-year teachers in their early 20s, they originally came from various places in the north of Poland (large and small towns, as well as rural villages), differed in sex (there were six women and one man), willingness to become a teacher (one of them very much wanted to work as a teacher, four considered language teaching as well as other options, and the remaining two were rather against being teachers in the future), students' cohorts to which they belonged (they were representatives of three different groups who studied in different years), schools in which they had their teaching practicum, and schools in which they worked after the studies (primary and lower secondary schools). All this information differentiating the participants is useful in defining 'the place' from which they voice their feelings. In line with the adopted phenomenographic methodology, the study adds to the understanding of the participants' experiences, rather than explaining it.

Data collection instrument

The data collection tool employed in the present study is an in-depth semi-structured interview conducted with each participant several times. In contrast to a traditional interview, a phenomenographic interview requires from the researcher constant interpreting of obtained responses, including the 'here and now' formulation of questions, requesting for clarifications, repetitions, confirmations. Therefore, there are only a few prepared opening questions and a number of additional ones that can but do not have to be used. In fact, the most frequent questions to be used in a phenomenographic interview are such as *What does it mean for you?*, *How did you experience this?*, *How can you understand this?*, etc. Such a way of formulating questions is purposeful because it can encourage an interviewee to verbalize their experiences and express their personal stands or their personal relation to an investigated issue.

The interviews lasted from 15 minutes to 2 hours. During the period of formal studying (stage one) all the interviews were held in my office room at university, during school placements (stage two) on the premises of schools and then at the university office, and those from stage three at neutral places (cafe, restaurant, university, or if the teacher was unable to afford much time, at his or her school in an unoccupied classroom). Being aware of the fact that talking about personal experiences is difficult for everyone, I tried my best to create a warm atmosphere, full of trust, understanding and patience. At all times, I took up the role of an active listener assuming that the narrator is best oriented in his/her own experiences, and therefore should be allowed full liberty in the presentation of his/her story.

Data analysis

The analysis of the interviews started with intensive multiple listening to the interview data and transcribing them. Since there are various methods of transcription ranging from more detailed ones

attending both linguistic and prosodic features of language to less detailed transcripts focusing on thematic issues that appear more like a written text than a spoken one (Elliot, 2005), a decision had to be taken which transcription way to choose. I decided already at the beginning of the study that the transcripts would be made as soon as possible after the recording, and the first transcripts included pauses marked by dots, fillers, hesitations. After a few transcripts conducted in such a way, I decided that simpler transcripts would do, especially that the focus of the study was less placed on how they say what they say but more on the content presented. Therefore, most prosodic features were omitted and only the main content was preserved, however without changing the basic structures or words.

An additional burden throughout the whole of the study with some of the participants was the necessity of translating their utterances into English. That was because almost half of the interviews were conducted in the participants' native language, Polish, at their request. Although my initial reaction to the choice of language was not positive, it transpired that with some of the respondents the possibility of expressing themselves in Polish was the only way of obtaining really valuable information. That was dictated by their anxiety of using English due to their, as they said, inability to express more complex ideas in English. It had to be noted, however, that in cases of doubt I came back to the issues asked on the previous occasion to make sure that the right word or phrase was used in translation, or occasionally asked for confirmation via emails. That was also the reason why it was so important to transcribe the data as soon as they were obtained. Both transcription and translation proved critical in the process of data analysis because, however lengthy and tiresome they were, they led to such 'intimate' and deep engagement with the data (cf. Hayes, 2013) that I felt no need to use qualitative data analysis software.

Since phenomenography aims at discovering people's individual conceptions, understandings or interpretations of different aspects of reality, attempting to reproduce individual kinds of thinking about a concept, it is reconstructive in nature. In order to reconstruct the participants' experiences related to what they regarded as continuous or discontinuous moments at different stages of the study, I went through the following stages:

- Reading the transcripts to identify initial patterns in the participants' responses.
- Reading the transcripts the second time while looking for similarities and differences in the senses of the participants' responses and marking the paragraphs with illustrative examples.
- Grouping similarities and differences with a view to naming the general concepts and formulating initial categories of description.
- Reading the transcripts once again against the initial categories and reexamining (modifying, deleting, adding) the categories to make sure they adequately represent the data.
- Contrastive comparing of the categories and referencing back to the data;
- Formulating outcome spaces.

The result of a phenomenographic study can be a map (but does not have to be) illustrating different ways of understanding an investigated phenomenon. Such a presentation is transparent in terms of the multiplicity and diversity of stances, or the plurality of ways of experiencing the world (Męczkowska, 2002). It is formed by procedures of the second order because the respondents not only verbalize the existence of certain facts (the first order) but also how they understand and justify them. Under the umbrella of popular descriptions of phenomena, the participants' understandings can amount to considerable reserves of knowledge, and however invisible to themselves it may be, this knowledge can constitute a good foundation for creating categories of description leading in turn to outcome spaces of research. What follows are the results of these analyses.

Results

Thirteen categories of description and one category of relation were made in total. In the following sections, all description categories created from the data are supported by the participants' quotations for illustrative purposes. The letter at the end (from A to G presented alphabetically) points to the study participant, simultaneously keeping him/her anonymous.

Stage one

The first stage of the study as described here takes place in the second year of the participants' BA studying at pre-service teacher university. They have been confronted with English language teaching methods theory, practical language classes, and most probably their previous expectations and imaginations about language studying at university from the times before the studies. From the data analysis for stage one four categories of description (one for continuities and three for discontinuities) emerge.

Continuities:

• Experiencing English language studies as imagined community of practice

To a certain extent, opting for language teaching studies can stand for an indicator of a future community of practice. The choice of English as an object of studying suggests that students are interested in languages and show language job preferences with regard to their future. The choice of a teaching profile also indicates that they do not preclude the possibility of a teacher's profession for which they will obtain formal qualifications. This is what they say in the interviews:

I wanted to get to university to study sport and then I didn't treat English seriously. Unfortunately, because of too much basketball training I had a serious injury and despite a long rehabilitation I wasn't able to come back to intensive sport training. This is why I concentrated on English because languages are very important. [A]

My first English teacher was my father who managed to implement the willingness to learn languages in me as a child. He was an ideal teacher: nice and understanding, and at the same time demanding. I owe him a lot. [B]

I have always liked learning languages, even by myself. ... I don't know what I want to do in the future but for sure I want to do something with languages. I would like to work in a company which has contacts with foreigners but I don't exclude the work as a teacher. [D]

I have chosen language studies because I have always been interested in languages. I also thought I was good at them but now I can see more and more often how much I don't know. I would like to be a teacher because in my family there are a lot of teachers. ... I was inspired by my teacher in secondary school. He had extensive linguistic knowledge, he was even a sworn translator, and I was really impressed by him. I would like to be like him, but I can also do other things in the future. [E]

As far as my adventure with English is concerned, I need to say that it wasn't until high school when I found it very interesting. I had a great teacher and eventually that led me to study English philology. I love English and German now. I have made my passion a way of life. I've been working as a private tutor and I'm certain this is what I would like to do in my future. [F]

I have always wanted to be a teacher. My dream was to instill knowledge in young people. I have also been attracted by the power that teacher holds – she, to a great degree, decides what a young person will think or will know. [G]

In many cases the students are encouraged to begin language teaching studies by the significant others although it is not only the advice offered by their former teachers or family members that makes them study English. They also feel attracted to the language itself and the idea of being a language student, probably noticing, albeit in their imaginations, the benefits that they may enjoy. They produce imagined communities in which they create attractive images of themselves (cf. Kanno & Norton, 2003), such as a confident language user or an exceptional and powerful language teacher. Although the identification with an imagined community supports a person's perseverance in the achievement of the aim and positively affects self-perception, self-assessment or readiness to act, thinking about him/herself as a member of community of practice only, in terms of a problem-free perspective can prove to be one-sided in the long run, lead to blind decisions, and consequently turn into a "miseducative experience" (English, 2013, p. 100).

Discontinuities:

- **Experiencing ELT methods as disagreement**

The theoretical input obtained during teacher preparation courses, such as language teaching methodology or second language acquisition can be quite insightful into what pre-service teachers think about ELT theory. The participants openly criticize certain principles of language teaching methods, in particular overuse of students' native language and no focus on the speaking skill (Grammar Translation Method), no room for individual opinion (Audio-lingual Method), learners' exhaustion (Silent Way) and boredom (Suggestopedia), or lack of explicit correction (Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Learning). Since there is little chance that contemporary teachers subscribe to teaching a language according to a particular language teaching method in its pure form, the responses point to these forms of teaching or teachers' behaviors that the participants disapprove. The answers supporting such opinions are as follows:

What I find least appealing in some of the methods is that teachers are using mother tongue of the learner. ... When learner is on a higher level of learning, it [language] may help to develop their knowledge of language and about it. [B]

When Latin was considered as Lingua Franca, Grammar Translation Method might have been a good way to teach that language. But I find a lot of things not appealing: vocabulary learning in isolation, out of context, speaking and listening practically not developed, little engagement of students, no communication. Terrible...[F]

- **Experiencing Practical English classes as disappointment**

In recent times, more and more students in Poland have seemed to perceive the language teaching studies in terms of learning English courses. In a like manner, the participants in this study seem to hold their own, sometimes deeply ingrained beliefs about what language learning should be like. The teaching experienced by them at university probably makes their prior knowledge and beliefs about language learning questioned, which gives vent to the following quotations illustrating this category:

Speaking English with teachers and classmates certainly help us develop our confidence in using the language. We can open up to express our opinions. But, on the other hand, teachers don't correct students' errors. Some of the students, like myself, feel dissatisfied with such language learning because nobody wants to learn with errors, for example in pronunciation. [C]

If I made a mistake I would like to hear the grammatically correct equivalent of my statement and have an opportunity to repeat it correctly or was taught if I didn't understand the structure. [F]

- **Experiencing language classes as astonishment**

In contrast to discontinuities produced by upright rejection of certain issues from the perspective of an ELT theory learner or a language user, some participants experience the feeling of surprise as a result of teaching practices used by university lecturers. Basing on their former secondary school experiences they, for example, did not expect that pronunciation or listening as a skill could be taught, that students were supposed to select the reading texts, that grammar was not part and parcel of practical language course, or there was hardly any correction or emphasis on vocabulary checking. Selected quotations illustrating moments in which the pre-service teachers' learning is interrupted by astonishment are presented next:

In previous schools I always had to cope with unknown words by myself. I had to translate them with the help of a dictionary and learn by heart. I didn't like learning new words, quite the opposite I treated it as a punishment. At university we are learning words in a proper context, which makes me develop. [B]

Listening is neglected by many school teachers. When I attended secondary school there were only few times when we practiced listening. I can imagine that this sounds strange but I wasn't taught listening then almost at all. That led to my conviction of unimportance of this skill while learning a foreign language. At university I was first surprised at the amount of listening tested, and then changed

my mind. Now, I'm strongly convinced that listening should be kept as it highly increases our general language skills. [F]

Stage two

The second stage of the study takes place during and after the teaching practicum of the same study participants. It seems that school placement provides opportunities for learning that can happen nowhere else. What can be experienced is a sample of authentic teaching with real students, classes, and school problems and, more importantly, the relations between student teachers and other groups with which they liaise. Continuities and discontinuities in this stage are conceived of as:

Continuities:

- **Experiencing school placement as pre-service teacher recognition**

The conception of being recognized as a teacher can be regarded as a sine-qua-non condition for constructing teachers' professional identities. It implies not only who they think they are but also who others think they are. Therefore, any signs of acknowledgement for being a teacher, be it by others or pre-teachers themselves, can prove crucial in their further development. In the data, the signs of recognition by learners and other teachers are recalled in the main but the participants also express how they understand, and therefore recognize, their belonging to language teaching profession. This is what the participants say in the interviews:

I very much liked the fact that during checking homework my mentor asked the pupils to come up to me, as well. ... After the practice I was invited by Teachers' Board to take part in a solemn dinner organized for teachers on Teacher's Day. It was very nice. I felt as one of them. [C]

Today I felt as a real teacher. Children said 'good morning' in the hall, came up to me and said what they had learnt at home, even asked if I would be teaching them all the time. ... there are also pupils who come to me and ask if I am from England. They must assume that since I use English in the classroom all the time, I must be from England. Such situations are very nice. I wish there were more of them. [D]

- **Experiencing school placement as personal gains**

As continuity means 'positivity in experience', school placement can be conceptualized in terms of what people gain. The participants in my study also pay attention to this fact. The gains resulting from their school placement experience are noted:

At first I didn't pay attention that it was studying English with a teaching profile. But I liked ELT subjects and then school practice the most. The practice taught me the most. I thought it was something that gave me pleasure, something for me and I would like to be a teacher. [B]

The practice was a wonderful experience for me. I understood that teacher makes future for all the kids. ... It's important how you convey your knowledge. When I was finishing my practice on the last day, and the kids were leaving the classrooms, I felt I did something important. It may not have been something great, I was only a practitioner but I think it's worth becoming a teacher for such things, for such emotions and moments. [D]

What did practice give me? I gained a lot of self-confidence. I have learnt the job of a teacher from the inside. It's not a job for me but 'my passion'. It gives me pleasure and satisfaction. I hope I won't change my mind. [F]

Discontinuities:

- **Experiencing school placement as confrontation with school ills**

However, the experience of being placed at school proves to be the time generating more discontinuities than continuities. Of particular importance is the category of school ills focused on the students' perceptions of the Polish school reality comprising criticism of school teachers' behaviors, their use of ineffective language teaching methods and obligatory language teaching policies prevalent in Poland. It seems that this category involves the largest number of the students' experiences, and

thereby the most variations in their conceptualizations. Two illustrating quotations refer to their perceptions of teachers, language teaching and ills of the system:

To be honest, I didn't like the lessons in the 3rd grade at all. From the beginning till the end they were conducted in Polish. The teacher often discussed unnecessary things with the kids. And half of the class was spent on coloring pictures in activity books. No wonder, their language level is so low. [D]

I learnt that for all the teachers at that school English was the second major subject. They graduated from three-year private higher schools to obtain English teaching formal qualifications. They tell me: "Don't worry, you'll finish BA studies and get the 'paper' [qualifications]. It's strange to me because none of them says anything about the level of their knowledge after such 'fast' studies. I'm terrified that some of them can teach three foreign languages or teach English because they ceased to be teachers of economics after several years. I don't know why but I don't believe in the professionalism of these teachers. [G]

• **Experiencing school placement as interaction with mentor**

While being placed at school, the person with whom a pre-service teacher establishes the closest contact is probably the mentor. The relationship with mentor can determine the mentee's behaviors due to the fact that his/her counterpart is regarded both as a person to teach and assess, which can imply a person to imitate. Discontinuities arise when what mentors offer and demand from a mentee brings about an encounter with a remarkable difference and a consequent break with oneself. The contents from the interviews presented below illustrate the ruptures experienced by the respondents during their school placement period:

My mentor? I didn't feel being taken care of. I was because I was, and nothing more. I expected more mentor's engagement. [E]

Unfortunately, my mentor imposed stiff frameworks for conducting the lessons and the way of introducing the content. I thought there would be more room for creativity, unfortunately I have to cover the course book. [G]

• **Experiencing school placement as unfavorable self-perception**

The perception of school placement as learning about oneself also emerges in the students' interviews. Sometimes the moment of experiencing one's deficiency can be revealing to such an extent that it can fall short of retaining a person to opt for the teaching profession. The category of self-perception does not appear in all interviews but those who refer to it understand themselves during this period of becoming a teacher as people with unreliable language competence and somatic problems:

I remember the first day with the 4th class. They asked me lots of questions connected with the history or geography of Britain and the USA. To be honest, I didn't know some of the answers. ...I felt ashamed of the fact that I myself learnt some information from my pupils. I then realized how much general knowledge not only about the language but also about the target language culture a language teacher should possess. [A]

I don't know if this is a job for me. After seven lessons I have mixed feelings. I have a sore throat again. If this continues, I will have to reject this job as a potential future for me. [D]

Stage three

The last stage of this becoming-a-language-teacher project falls upon the construction of professional identity of the same, now first year teachers. This stage in teacher becoming can be a real test on a person's professional identity. Statistics show that most teachers experience attrition after the first year and drop out of teaching, possibly unready to shoulder so many new expectations from students, parents, colleagues, supervisors, the community (Pillen et al. 2013). The categories of description for continuities and discontinuities at this stage of the study are as follows:

Continuities:

- **Experiencing first-year language teaching as in-service teacher recognition**

Likewise in the school placement period, the category of recognition emerges in the first year of working as teacher. In the interviewees' accounts, just like in stage two, there are themes referring to self-recognition and those related to the recognition by others. Being recognized as a teacher is a positive experience that is somewhat expected by those entering the profession. Therefore, in-service teacher recognition is again a category created within continuities, and the following quotations illustrate the participants' experiences about it:

Some parents come to ask how their kids are doing. They accept my arguments, they are nice. [D]

Other English teachers in my school didn't major in English. When I heard one of them speak English-[sigh] lots of kids have better pronunciation. She has been selected to be my mentor (*N.B: first-year teachers in Poland employed on work contract - not replacement teachers employed on a temporary basis - are assigned a mentor to help them prepare for professional promotion grade, achieving the status of contract teacher after one year of working*), but I don't observe her classes. There's no point. She is stressed, and I'm not learning anything. Other English teachers are afraid of me.[F]

Nothing to complain about. No problems with discipline. I feel respected. ... I have regular contacts with them. If I notice a pupil works less than before, I call the parents, and advise how to help and work with the pupil. [G]

- **Experiencing first-year language teaching as language teaching decision taking**

Apart from becoming a professional and acknowledged-by-others teacher, the first year of work is also a period in which one's own decisions concerning the way language teaching can be taken. What this implies is the fact that in-service teachers can to a certain extent decide by themselves what is to be taught in their classrooms and what can be left out, what is worth repeating, and what can be totally ignored. My study participants express this variation of the discussed category in the following way:

I do believe in projects. Yesterday I gave 3 topics: choose a role-play, choose who you want to be, act as if you would like to, take 15 minutes preparation time and present it to the rest of the class. ... I take care of their vocabulary knowledge in contexts, not in isolation. I also draw their attention to grammar. I often use memory games. [A]

I use a lot of listening. It disciplines them. They get quiet to hear well. As for vocabulary I tell them to copy into notebooks and translate. Once I brought a phonetic alphabet to show them how to read. When they are good, we play their favorite games.[D]

The question of course books? I had to decide whether to change, or keep the same ones. The course book hasn't been changed but I modified it, rejected the activity book and left the grammar book with lots of exercises. [F]

Discontinuities:

- **Experiencing first-year language teaching as difficult interactions with others**

One of the categories of discontinuity during the first year of language teaching emerges as interactions with others. This time, however, it is not confined to learners or one colleague (mentor) but a whole spectrum of other people: supervisors, colleagues, parents, learners. The relations with colleagues are perceived as negative due to the conflict of values between the novice teachers and 'the other' person. This is what the participants have to say about this:

I have good contact with only one English teacher. When he was organizing a party he invited all the staff, including me. I didn't go but it was nice to be invited. Another English teacher is funny and likes joking but that's all. Still another likes when I consult him about some linguistic uncertainty. [A]

I have mixed feelings about my colleagues. They are my former teachers. Only one person didn't teach me. It's very hard to introduce something. Everyone treats suspiciously any new idea. The best thing for them is to come, sit down, open the book and assign exercise one, two, three four and that's it.

Good if nothing happens and nothing is done. Perhaps if they were younger, there is only one young teacher but I don't have much contact with her. [B]

I mix with everybody. But in reality I'm a bit of an outsider. There are cliques like everywhere. I don't want to have anything to do with it. [F]

When during a teacher's meeting, I expressed my opinion about a possibility of retaining a pupil in the same class for another year, one senior teacher said aloud: 'I won't be listening to an apprentice'. But I only tried to suggest something to prevent aggression at school. [G]

The relations with learners often involve the most common problem of new teachers – discipline. A handful of quotations below seem to illustrate the problem:

One class is very difficult. They always object to my ideas, they compare me with the previous teacher, they say aloud: 'Oh, no. English again!'. Once I lost my voice because of them. [A]

Teacher as a friend—that was my intention: mutual understanding, playing, respect. It doesn't work. They have no respect. Teacher as a 'torturer' is probably the best. After finishing school we remember with fright those who shouted, demanded and made us learn. But is there any golden mean? [E]

If they misbehave I give 1s (1 is the fail grade in Polish schools). Nothing else seems to work. Remarks don't work, translations of texts don't work—like it or not I have to do something to make them quiet. It used to be better. Now, it's the only way. [F]

In the described category, the new 'other' is a parent the relations with whom can produce a lot of disquietude, as well. A few excerpts from the interview transcripts may show the participants' experiences related to their problems with students' parents:

Once a parent came to me after I lowered the grade for a test and said that I shouldn't be a teacher and only I have problems with her son. It was so bad for me. I couldn't say anything. It's a private school so parents interfere a lot. [A]

A parent came to me with complaints. I was told I require too much, I am young and too ambitious. [E]

• **Experiencing first-year language teaching as overwork**

The other category of description pointing to discontinuity emerging as a result of first year teaching experiences is the perception of teacher's work. This variation relates to what they think they do on a daily basis, the image of the work itself, or their conception of school reality. The themes emerging in this category provide gloomy images of a novice teacher's work:

I start at 7.50., children come to school earlier. The worst thing is my hall duty. I have to be 10 minutes earlier. If I have a break duty, I don't have time to write the topic because the kids from 1-3 grades come, they are so intrigued that I don't even open the register book. The moment I enter the classroom, it starts. No time for quiet entering, sitting down, writing a topic, telling them what the lesson will be about – no time. And it's only 45 minutes once a week. [B]

I still feel terrified by paper work. Filling in so many documents, creating syllabuses for pupils with special needs, documents for headmaster... The worst aspect of school teaching. [C]

I am always very tired. Too many things overlap. I used to check homework assignments or tests every day but now I feel overworked after a whole day's work. I do it at the weekend. [F]

Relating category:

• **Role of a teacher**

The relating category that seems to affect all the categories of description are the participants' beliefs on the role of a teacher. Reading the interviewees' responses carefully, it can be noticed that the role of teacher is present in all of them.

In the first stage, the participants look at the role of a teacher from the perspective of learner. Imagining themselves as successful members of communities for whom communicating in English is the norm, they primarily value the role of teacher as a language expert. Such a conception exists in their imaginations, and even though some of them still do not know what job to perform in the future, their

imagined communities of practice vividly feature themselves as very competent linguistically. Their belief in the necessity of learning language elements like listening or pronunciation is immediately accepted, despite the fact that they were not taught those skills or language subsystems deliberately at their previous schools. They are convinced now that their improvement of especially oral skills is a gateway to achieving greater legitimacy as language users. From the repertoire of English language teaching methods they seem to select only those techniques that directly influence their acquisition of good communicative competence in the fastest possible time. Therefore, they ask for teacher error correction, which proves that the role of teacher as an assessor seems also rational to them.

It must be acknowledged that the conceptions of language teacher as an expert and an assessor are very much determined by learners' backgrounds. Although English is no longer considered an elite language to study in the contemporary Poland as it was in the socialist times, reputable schools or well-educated English language teachers in smaller towns or villages from which most of the participants come are very few and far between. Those who attended better schools with more ambitious teachers in the past come for fewer surprises at university, their opinions are more divergent, and on the whole seem more inclined to believe that they themselves are primarily responsible for the way and their ultimate level of language competence (i.e. teacher D). By contrast, those who were used to being provided information in a transmission-like manner understand language teaching studies as another school in which teachers' role should be focused on providing and testing information (i.e. teacher C), although now about communication. Therefore, beside the roles of a language expert and a language assessor, the conception of teacher as a knowledge provider is still vivid.

In the second stage of the project after experiencing school placement the role of language teacher seems to be shifted from learner to teacher perspective. Now, the participants look forward to their 'teachership' recognition on the part of school learners and mentors. They seem to identify mentally with everyday work of a practicing language teacher, which usually brings them a great deal of satisfaction. The variations in the conception of school placement are very much affected by role of a teacher assumed by their mentors. Authoritarian mentors demanding complete subordination of mentees generate more resistance and criticism surfacing in the interviews. This is the case because the imposition of teaching in exactly the way the mentor tells produces a great deal of self-questioning in more autonomous mentees. The reflection brings about confusion, sometimes distance to the issue at hand or doubt in what they think they knew or learnt at university, but on the whole entails the critique of the school system that validates such a state of affairs. This also testifies to the participants' altered awareness that now allows for more complex understanding of a teacher's role – a critical thinker and deliberator of school ills. It can be noted that school criticism is not difficult for the participants to produce, especially for those who still do not know what professional path to follow.

At the same time, teacher 'contactability' comes to the fore since communicative skills implying friendliness, helpfulness, tolerance and understanding of another person guarantee good interpersonal relations with others, especially with the mentor. It must be stressed, however, that good interpersonal skills are required from everyone, and mentors deprived of them are openly criticized. The role of teacher as a language expert is still present, especially in private schools where the level of pupils' English is high and a good command of language is expected on the part of a language teacher. It can be inferred that language teacher now should possess an impeccable knowledge of language and good communication skills on a par.

The role of teacher with regard to the first year of teaching is similar to the period of school placement although all three roles (a language expert, an assessor, and a communicator) are experienced more intensely. The professional work is now performed in earnest, so the willingness to be recognized as a legitimate member of teacher community is far more important than it was at the previous stage. Good language skills bring them recognition in others, the role of a good communicator is now expanded through the inclusion of supervisors and learners' parents, and day-to-day school practice seems to offer more issues to reflect upon. The first-year teachers represent another shift in the understanding of their roles. On the one hand, they would like to have a say in what and how they teach,

but on the other hand they become more and more aware that most things related to their job do not depend on them. The atmosphere of school in which they work, both in terms of learning outcomes and mutual respect, can affect what kind of teachers they become, how they are treated by other members of the teaching staff, what they give up and what they assume. In smaller far-away schools there is more inequality among teachers, more prescriptiveness, and less parent interference. In schools in bigger places, learners and especially their parents are more aware of language issues, and therefore more critical. The role of teacher as a critical thinker can be spotted, although most of them represent it at a declarative, rather than agentive level.

Conceptions of the language studies, school placement and first-year teaching are presented in a hierarchy in Table 1. The hierarchical structure was naturally dictated by the chronology of this longitudinal study, starting with the time after the participants' receiving some theoretical input (stage one), through their school placement (stage two), and finally the first year of their working as English school teachers (stage three). The categories of descriptions denoting their experiences of continuities and discontinuities at subsequent stages of exploration were influenced by the perception of teacher role as the relating category. It seems worth adding that in the creation of the map I assumed the methodological reduction postulate of *epoche*, according to which the researcher's beliefs are kept in suspense.

	CONTINUITIES	Categories of relation	DISCONTINUITIES
	Categories of description	Beliefs on teacher role	Categories of description
University courses	Imagined community	Communication preparer	Disagreement
		Language assessor	Disappointment
		Language expert	Astonishment
School placement	Recognition	Critical thinker	School ills
	Self-perceived gains	Good communicator	Difficult interaction with mentor
		Language expert	Unfavourable self-perception
First-year teaching	Recognition	Good communicator	Interaction with others
	Language teaching decisions	Critical thinker	Overwork

Table 1: Hierarchical relationship among categories of description

Discussion

This study has attempted to investigate three crucial stages of the process of becoming an English language teacher – formal courses at university (stage one), school placement (stage two) and first-year of teaching (stage three) of the same seven individuals through the conceptions of continuities and discontinuities with the application of phenomenography as a methodological approach. It is found that the three investigated stages are uniquely experienced by individual teachers who have different biographies and social backgrounds and who, in stages two and three, establish new relationships with their surroundings and create slightly new teacher identities, thus altering themselves. At the methodological level, the study has provided empirical support for the phenomenographic perspective for two reasons. Firstly, the participants' understandings of the successive stages of teacher development drawn on their attitudes, feelings and emotions over a prolonged time were documented, showing the complexity of their experiences. Secondly, the conceptions created on the basis of their understandings can be presented as related to their perceived role of a teacher. But what role can

continuities and discontinuities surfacing in the project assume, apart from providing the backdrop for the formation of categories of description? What can we learn from them?

As noted before, the decision of becoming a language teacher can be considered in terms of continuities. Governed by language and sometimes teaching interests, candidates join English language philology in the hope of securing their access to the formerly imagined community of successful English users and sometimes English teachers. The time of school placement and the resulting signs of acceptance of themselves as teachers by those around is an important, yet foreseeable aspect of recognition, indispensable for developing a person's professional identity. This acknowledgement – recognition by others and him/herself – can be treated as acquisition of symbolic teacher legitimacy qualifying a person to professional teacher membership group which, in turn, contributes to perceiving personal gains, including the right to take own decisions with regard to what language teaching in the classroom is like. The fact that these decisions can be at times inappropriate or too heavily influenced by individual prior beliefs does not seem to matter to teachers. In this light, continuities presented here in terms of categories of description can be said to represent the “realm of the expected” (English, 2013, p. 25), emphasize what is taken for granted and predicted, and therefore familiar. The pre-determined conceptions in the process of becoming a teacher provide ‘warmth’, stability and comfort, even the only social reality. This one-sidedness based on the premise that only what is known can be trusted and what is new or different can be ignored, in a way, signifies teacher's self-interestedness. Yet this habitual self-understanding, anchoring the person in positive features of existing knowledge and experience can prove misleading in terms of teacher identity formation due to its ‘simplicity’. To create a complex and multifaceted professional identity, interruptions occurring on the way should not be taken as signs of failures but rather quests for learning which make teacher open up for a change, expand the horizons, and grow cognitively.

Perceived as obstructions causing people to ‘pause’ and think, discontinuities invite to reflection. If we consider the discontinuous categories of description that emerge, it is clear that most interruptions shown by the participants as disquietude or disturbance can arouse inquiry. In fact, they can be turned into relative, or even poststructuralist questions, such as: *Is boredom always negative in the classroom?*, *Should we teach RP pronunciation in the times of English as Lingua Franca?*, *Should students or university teachers be held primarily responsible for students' learning outcomes?*, *Is there only one way of successful language learning?* (the students' conceptions of the language studies in stage one), or even framed into problems such as *Where do the school ills come from and what can be done to ease them up?*, *What could be done to turn the problematic relations with different school stakeholders into effective cooperation?*, *Why is the relationship with mentor ineffective?*, *Has the mentor been prepared to her role?*, *How can the drive to teacher accountability be turned into teacher identity development* (the students' conceptions during the period of school placement and first-year teaching in stages two and three), to name but a few. Addressing negativity of experience and subjected to reflection, such queries make room for the change of perspective, discovery of what may be true and what not, and provide a sound basis for a teacher's self-transformation. Then, discontinuities do not have to be understood as black areas only, but shades of greys are allowed into them. Consequently, an ‘alien other’ (Trent, 2014, p. 60) in the school context is not positioned as antagonistic, and the ‘us and them’ divide is no longer valid. Discontinuities in experience may encourage to explore poststructuralist questions, such as “who is speaking, from what position, in what contest and with what effect” (Trent, 2014, p. 61). Then, it may turn out that in a given position, a criticizing pre-service teacher might behave in some aspects similarly to the one that is criticized. This ability to see the otherness within ourselves is referred to as ‘hybridization’ (Bhabha, 1996), or occupying a ‘third place’, (Kramsch, 2009) – the adoption of a position which stands beyond strict binary divisions, between and beyond what is right and wrong.

Naturally, the sole existence of discontinuities is insufficient in developing teacher identity. What is needed, as noted before, are pre-service teachers and their autonomous and responsible educators who are aware that falling out of step to analyze negativity, distancing on the comfortable and the secure to problematize what the experience has brought can open up the beginning of a deeper perspective on

language teaching. Language teaching students can first be encouraged to uncover such moments by their university educators (during stage one and stage two), and then continue (during stage three) the exploration of possibilities offered by their experience of discontinuities on their own. Questions such as *What is missing in my understanding of school?*, *How does this experience relate to the beliefs that I used to hold?* or *How does it affect the choices I have made or those that I have to make?* (English, 2013, p. 124) can serve as examples. By asking questions like this they can start thinking differently than they used to think and question predetermined concepts of correctness to which they were accustomed. In this way, they can become stronger, more resistant to future difficulties and frustrations, and “open up an in-between realm for new and purposeful learning” (English, 2013, p. 104). Resisting the kind of only taken-for granted practices represented by continuities, they can shape their own teacher selves through critical reflection, ongoing dialogue with others and herself, and standing back from who they are so as to find out who they might become (Clarke, 2003, p. 169). In a word, addressing the negativity of experience in their teacher becoming trajectories, can be educative and self-transformative for both pre-service and first-year teachers. Therefore, acknowledged as limits to one’s ability or understanding, discontinuities are vital for learning teaching provided they are noticed and reflected upon.

Conclusion

In focusing on the experiences of just seven Polish teachers, this study naturally limits itself in terms of generalizability. However, the themes that emerge through the whole study, anecdotal evidence from other pre-service and first-year language teachers as well as a growing body of research that specifically address the formation of teacher identity suggest that the experiences of the participants in the study may be frequent. I hope these analyses have shown that continuities understood as positivity in experience may prove insufficient in transforming a person into a ‘multifaceted’ teacher due to their ease, simplicity and predictability. Discontinuities revealing negativity of experience, on the other hand, have consequences in altering people’s horizons. They can be positive (we learn from them) and negative (we learn the hard way) at the same time (English, 2013, p. 118). They do not necessarily make teachers agree with what teachers find ‘counter-happening’. Instead, their role is to acknowledge ‘the other’, be these disillusionments, conflicts, or simply encounters with new concepts. Perhaps, future studies that explore the issues raised here in other contexts and with other participants might contribute to a more thorough understanding of how language students become language teachers. While working on this project, I deepened my understanding of teachers’ experiences during the periods that were the objects of investigations here. This finding thus raises the question of how teacher identity is formed as the teachers constantly experience continuities and discontinuities.

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Contact

Dorota Werbińska, Ph.D

Sołdka 5/10, 76-200 Słupsk, Poland

werbinsk@pro.onet.pl