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# Personal Growth in Teacher Development: A Case Study

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*Using qualitative data, the present study demonstrates how one ESL teacher's teaching practice was complemented by her personal growth. The teacher based her teaching on Aesthetic Realism, a philosophy she had been studying for 35 years, striving to teach what she called "big things"--some of the principles of Aesthetic Realism such as "to like the world more," "seeing the world as well-structured," and "to respect one another"--in addition to L2 knowledge. Thus, not only the teacher's knowledge, but also the personhood she nurtured throughout her adult life played a part in how she taught. The study points out a need to investigate*

*the interplay between professional and personal growth, and the way in which it contributes to teacher development*

本稿は質的データを基に、あるESL教師の現場での実践が、人間的な成長とあいまってどのように発展したかを示すものである。この研究に参加した教師はAesthetic Realismとよばれる哲学を35年間学んでいたが、この哲学に基づいて現場実践を行い、L2知識に加えて、「世の中をもっと好きになる」「世の中を意味のある構成を呈した所としてとらえる」「お互いを尊敬しあう」といったAesthetic Realismの基本理念（教師はこれを「大きなこと」とよんだ）を教えようと努力した。このように教師の知識のみならず、成人してからの人生を通して培ってきた人間性が、教師の教え方において大事な役割を演じていた。本研究は専門職としての成長と個人的成長の相互作用と、その相互作用がどのように教師としての成長に寄与するかを調査する必要性を説くものである。

## Introduction

Second language acquisition research, which informs modern language teaching, focuses on how to enhance learning outcomes. As a result, we now understand the mechanisms of language learning much better than we did 30 years ago. However, the image of the teacher arising from such research is that of someone who simply sets up classroom tasks and teaches according to the recommendations that researchers have made. Teachers as a variable are marginalized so that linguistic outcomes are enhanced, regardless of who is teaching (Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Voller, 1997). Teachers' sense of agency, indispensable for teacher development, is largely absent from the research.

Recent research on teacher knowledge in TESOL (e.g. Borg, 1998; Golombek, 1998; Johnson, 1999; Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Johnston & Goettsch, 2000; Woods, 1996), which investigates teachers' ways of knowing, rather than attempting to identify the knowledge that teachers should acquire, is encouraging in that it pays more attention to teachers' personhood, valuing teachers' agency in instructional planning and decision making. Based on such teacher knowledge research, the present case study reports on the influence of one ESL teacher's developing personhood on how she taught. The paper argues for a need to investigate the interplay between personal and professional growth.

## Method

The data is derived from a larger qualitative study conducted in the U.S. in which two teachers' beliefs were examined with regard to classroom interaction for over the course of two semesters. The present case study is a secondary analysis of the above-mentioned data, and focuses on one of the teachers, here referred to as Jean (a pseudonym). Jean has been teaching ESL for 40 years. The classes observed were a lower elementary writing class, and a high-elementary reading and speaking class in a two-year college. The students' ages ranged from 20 to 60, and the duration of their stay in the U.S. varied from two months to 35 years at the time of data collection.

The sources of data included 43 non-participant observations, 29 after-class interviews, plus two letters from myself in which I tentatively outlined my interpretation of Jean's teaching practices and her beliefs about classroom interaction, and two follow-up interviews about the letters.

## Results

Jean was an idealist who firmly believed that the best thing a teacher could do for her students was to recede into the background and let the students control their own learning, thus promoting learner autonomy. She also believed that lessons should be student-centered, and allow the students to be emotionally engaged. Her idealism was rooted in the practical experience and wisdom she had gained as a veteran teacher, and she strove to achieve a happy medium between the ideal and the practical.

## Aesthetic realism

Of all the factors raised by Jean regarding her beliefs about classroom interaction, Aesthetic Realism, a philosophy that she had been studying for 35 years, was probably the most influential for her, and the most frequently mentioned. Aesthetic Realism is a philosophy that presents ways to explain the world, and to live a harmonious life with one's inner self and with the outside world (e.g. Siegel, 1981). Other factors Jean touched upon appeared to be connected to some of the principles of Aesthetic Realism, and to form a web around these principles. Some of these principles included *to like the world more*, *to see the world as well-structured*, and *to see the world in terms of opposites*. Jean seemed to conceptualize *the world* as everything, both concrete and abstract, that surrounded her. Aesthetic Realism seemed to be omni-present in her life, giving coherence to whatever she did, be it classroom interaction, teaching and learning, or the appreciation of art and literature, just to mention a few examples that were surfaced in the interviews. It gave a deep philosophical meaning to her existence. In that sense, Aesthetic Realism appeared very much

like a religion for her, and there was often a moral touch to her discussions of Aesthetic Realism. In Excerpt 1, Jean describes the crucial role that Aesthetic Realism has played in her life.

### Excerpt 1

What I study in Aesthetic Realism is how every one of us has two desires all the time, a desire to respect the world and a desire to have contempt for it. And my question in life has always been *I know better. I think my own way. I'll do it my way.* You know, carrying individualism to an extreme. That's been my way in life, and it's changing. It's still in process. It'll keep on changing through my life. I'll never "arrive" (Interview #17).

Jean stated in the excerpt that she had learned, through the teachings of Aesthetic Realism, that she should accept the world as part of her, and respect and like it, instead of denying it. She felt that she had grown through this spiritual struggle. Convinced that to respect the world and to live in harmony with it is essential to leading a fulfilled life, Jean's teaching had overarching purposes. She referred to these overarching purposes as *big things* (Interview #17).

### Teaching big things

One of the *big things* was *to like the world*, the most important and all-encompassing principle of Aesthetic Realism for Jean. It represented the gist of Aesthetic Realism as realized in her classroom. She mentioned it in her course description, and throughout the semester, she encouraged her students to like the world in a number of ways, such as having the students report things that they liked in their diaries. In the excerpt below, Jean

stated that her job as a teacher involved more than teaching the language. It was *to encourage people to like the world more*.

### Excerpt 2

I have one person in the class who writes... that he is really depressed, really depressed and bored. And I feel it is my job, if a student communicates to me that he's got something going on, I don't care it's not my *teaching job*. *Because my job is larger than English. My job is to encourage people to like the world more.* I do it mainly through English. I want them to find the English language communicable, manageable, learnable, etc. (Interview #1; italics added).

Jean constantly paid attention to not only the intellectual, but also the moral and spiritual dimensions of adult education, believing *big things* would be vital to living a fulfilled life, which, in the case of many of her students, speaking the English language and being assimilated into mainstream American life would be a part of.

According to Jean, liking the world is enhanced if the world is seen as well-structured, and one way to see it as well-structured is to see it in terms of opposites. Jean often spoke of her teaching practice in terms of *the world as a well-structured entity* and *seeing the world in terms of opposites*. For example, Jean taught grammar, such as the position of subject, verb, object, and complement, with the purpose of having English look "more learnable to them [the students], not so complicated, not so arbitrary, not so capricious" (Interview #1). This was because English would seem more friendly if it was perceived as well-structured, and students would feel that it was their language

(Interview #12). Discussing learner autonomy, which she believed was central to second language learning, Jean stated that, in order to become autonomous, people needed to feel:

### **Excerpt 3**

I like myself through this. I respect myself through this. I see the outside world more friendly to me. And that's why I want to take it in more. I don't have a problem taking the outside world in, because I see it as the other half of myself (Interview #12).

Furthermore, for Jean, seeing the world in terms of opposites was a way to explain various phenomena in the world. When we have two opposites in us that are in a dynamic relationship, we are not “locked into” one thing. We are ready to change flexibly, as we determine which is best for the situation we face. In the interviews, Jean discussed how the world is structured in terms of opposites, with examples from English grammar and phonology. She talked about tense and lax vowels, past and non-past, singular and plural, and “rests and motions” represented in nouns and verbs (e.g. Interview #8). For Jean, singular and plural, for instance, are not just grammar abstraction. Singular and plural reflect how the world is structured, because the world can be understood as one and many, such as one nation comprising many people, and one person with many different aspects (Interview #8). For Jean, every lesson should be carefully planned to teach the idea that English grammar represents what the world is. When that goal is achieved, the students will see that the outside world makes more sense and looks more friendly.

These instances demonstrate that Jean's conceptualization of teaching was deeply rooted in how she lived. For instance,

learner autonomy is a popular topic in discussions of second language teaching and learning (e.g. Littlewood, 1996; Voller, 1997). Jean often discussed autonomy in the interviews, mentioning that she aspired to be a facilitator of learning or a resource person for the learners, instead of controlling them (e.g. Interview #11). Terms such as facilitator and resource person are often associated with the learner autonomy literature (Voller, 1997), and it seems that Jean was quite aware of learner autonomy research, and its ramifications for teaching. Her awareness of the centrality of autonomy in language learning also seemed to be derived from her first-hand experience as a learner of Spanish, French, and Japanese (Interview #17). Thus, Jean incorporated her understanding of learner autonomy research with insights from her foreign language learning experience and precepts such as *to respect and like oneself* and *to like the world* from Aesthetic Realism, and developed a highly personalized conceptual framework for thinking about teaching and learning. The way she conceptualized overarching curricular concepts, and also seemingly mundane teaching points, such as singular and plural, was intrinsically connected to how she made sense of, and came to terms with, the world as she deepened her understanding of Aesthetic Realism, and put it into practice in everyday life.

### **Criticism**

Although she believed in teaching *big things*, Jean acknowledged with regret that she did not always center her teaching on them. Therefore, instances of self-criticism abounded in the interviews. Excerpt 4 is an example in which Jean criticized herself for not focusing on *big things*.



**Excerpt 4**

I'm not really going in for the big things.... I'm doing all these peripheral things when really, if I have a clear purpose to help people see something about the structure of the world, they'll start to teach themselves.... You know what I should be doing is to have them love the English language, see that it's something for them. It's *their* language. It's not *my* language that I give to them from the beneficence of my heart.... What am I doing? I mean I do some fun things. And people tend to learn more if they are having fun. But become self-teaching in the language? You have to feel, "Boy, I like myself through this. I respect myself through this. I see the outside world more friendly to me. And that's why I want to take in more..." I'm not sticking to the main thing (Interview #17; emphasis as in the original).

In the excerpt above, Jean criticized herself for spending too much time on unrelated subjects, as she digressed from, or improvised on the lesson plan, instead of focusing on *the main thing* and teaching students to be autonomous. As Excerpt 4 shows, in her critical reflection on her own practice, ideals from Aesthetic Realism, such as *to like the world more*, and *to respect and like oneself*, featured prominently, providing concrete reference points and direction in her efforts to improve her practice. Thus, teaching, and her own criticism of that teaching were deeply intertwined with the moral life she was striving to live with the help of Aesthetic Realism.

Criticism for Jean meant something very positive, which she learned from Aesthetic Realism, and she made constructive use of criticism to improve her daily practice. Often, discussions of constructive use of criticism to improve her teaching occurred in tandem with references to her personal growth, as in the following excerpt.

**Excerpt 5**

So I thought they [the students] did fine. The criticism is mainly or exclusively of me... That's what teaching is all about. Teaching is boring if you can't change and improve... If you study Aesthetic Realism, criticism is the same as love. If another person criticized you, that means they care about you. When you criticize yourself, we are all endlessly imperfect and we can always be better. And that's what life is all about. Not to say, "Oh, I've got to shape up." So if my criticism sounds like, "Oh, I did another bad thing," it should not. It should be, "I saw this, this, and this. I am proud to see it. I intend to do better with that. That will be fun. Because I can improve it next time." It should really be pleasure (Interview #15).

In Excerpt 5, Jean talked about a skit she had had the class perform, and criticized herself for not planning the time well. As she briefly discussed the role of criticism in Aesthetic Realism, she momentarily referred to her personal life and stated that we all strove to be better today than yesterday in life. Such a momentary transition from the professional to the personal often occurred in Jean's self-criticism. For Jean, teaching, which was part of, and superseded by, life in general, was more than a profession. It was a place in which she practiced the teachings of Aesthetic Realism in order to live a moral life.

## Conclusion

As can be seen in Jean's case, the teaching endeavor involves not only a professional's theoretical, pedagogical, and curricular knowledge, but also his or her personhood. Aesthetic Realism, on which Jean had based her personal life for the previous 35 years, was intrinsically intertwined with her teaching practice, and the teachings of Aesthetic Realism contributed, to a great extent, to how she conceptualized her own teaching.

Teachers foster their own personhood as they perform their many duties in the social context in which they are placed (Hansen, 2001). That is to say, teachers develop as persons as they meet the professional responsibilities which teaching entails--such as interactions with students, conferences with parents, conversations with colleagues, professional conferences, and workshops. According to this view, teachers nurture their personhood throughout their career, and beyond. As they continue to teach, they strive to be better persons.

I would like to suggest that research on teacher development expand its scope, and include more philosophical investigation of teachers' personhood. Teaching, like any other profession, is a means to earn a living, but it is also a means by which to lead a moral life (e.g. Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002; Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993), as Jean's case demonstrated. For many teachers, including Jean, teaching is more than a profession. It is a way to grow intellectually, emotionally, morally, and spiritually. This aspect of teaching has not been squarely addressed, and this has left a gap in the research agenda for L2 teaching. Such an inquiry will provide a more complete picture of teacher development, based on the interplay between professional and personal growth. It will also provide a way to explore teacher development from a lifetime perspective.

Finally, the narrowness of the scope of the paper should be addressed. As acknowledged at the outset, this is a case study of one ESL teacher's developing personhood and its influence on how she taught. Because the sample size is so small, the findings of the study may not be generalizable to all ESL teachers. Idiosyncrasies that this teacher may have brought to the study also need to be mentioned. Elements of the current study, such as the overarching philosophy that seemed to govern this teacher's inner world, and influence her teaching practice, could be particular to her. If other teachers are examined, they may bring something entirely different. While the findings of this study should be viewed with caution, it does, nevertheless, demonstrate that how this teacher lived was intrinsically intertwined with how she taught, and it suggests that the influence of teachers' developing personhood on their teaching practice should be further investigated, and its implications for teaching practice addressed.

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