Surviving the classroom – inside and out!

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Many people spend a lot of time, effort, and money in learning techniques and following literature in an effort to become a "good teacher". But how long can one continue teaching? This paper focuses on factors that affect the length of a teacher's career. The paper gives brief accounts of the author's own experiences and how these have affected his own career. After illustrating these events, the author discusses research which may help to understand factors affecting a teacher's own career span. This will illustrate how development of professional skill may require a more thorough understanding of a teacher's self and how teachers work in the academic community.

「よい教師」となるために、教師たちは膨大な時間、努力、技術を磨くためのお金や学術文献を読む時間などを費やします。でも教師生活はどのくらい長く続けられるものなのでしょうか。この論文では、教師生活の寿命を左右する要因に焦点を当ててみました。著者は自身の経験が、教師としてのキャリアにどのような影響を与えたかについて触れ、また自らの経験を学術研究と照らし合わせます。教育専門技術の修練が、一個人としての教師と、学界での仕事との付き合いが深くかかわり合っていることを例証してゆきます。

During a recent exchange with a colleague, I heard about an unpublished survey that showed that the average EFL teacher taught language for just six years. With that as a limit, my time was up several years ago! Indeed, many of the colleagues I started teaching with are no longer teaching. Even though I have kept teaching, I often have to ask, "Can I continue to teach EFL?" This personal reflection is the subject of this paper.

Looking at the economic climate, I may soon have to piece together part-time jobs to make a living. Job security is limited, so I may have to move around between several school systems (each with different norms and expectations). Among my teaching peers, this is quite normal. I may be asked to affirm my commitment to teaching – my contract – every year, despite any other pressures I may be feeling at the time.

Age limits on some tenured jobs make careers a race against the clock. Universities are competing for a diminished number of students. Lecturers, both Japanese and non-Japanese, are affected as schools react to those numbers. The everyday practical problems a teacher has to deal with on a normal Monday morning are being joined by more and more social, moral, and economic issues.

A book by Nieto, aptly titled "*What Keeps Teachers Going?",* (Nieto 2003) suggests looking at why one started teaching as a possible first step in answering why one teaches now. The decision to keep teaching is personal, and so I have focused on my personal experience in the first half. The question of whether or not to continue teaching takes many forms. The factors involved in the decision to stop or continue teaching are so unwieldy and multi-faceted that I find myself unable to break the question down into small chunks of answerable questions so common – and rightly so – in much teacher research. Contrary to the usual academic tradition, I have put research into the field at the latter half of the article, looking at writers who have influenced my thinking on the question. It is my hope that this research will focus thoughts of readers and give them a jumping off point for their own reflections.

Myself as a teacher

Winograd (2004) employs a largely feminist and social constructivist approach to analyzing his experience as a teacher. Nieto (2003) extensively explores what started a person on the career path of teaching as a big part of the question of why people continue to teach. Huberman (1989) considers identifying as a teacher to be a part of a developmental process of becoming a teacher. Identity and origin are integral parts of the teaching process.

I would be considered a Caucasian white, middle-class male. I am from the UK, male, married, and have no children. My undergraduate degree is in social studies. During my time at university, I coached some sports, but always swore I would never become "a teacher", even if I had to teach from time to time. I identified as a "coach" rather than as a teacher.

After graduating, I worked as an advice worker (something like a para-legal and counselor rolled into one) and soon started training staff – teaching – in aspects of law and advice work at the volunteer agency I worked at. I switched to teaching English to get extra training experience. In the language classroom, I got to know students in a more rounded and long-term way, such that I could see their growth as individuals. I could talk to them and go for a coffee with them. In essence, the job was not so different from advice work, but more concerned with long-term development of my students. In essence, teaching was the chance to get to know people in depth and to help people become more self-dependent [that] started me teaching. At the same time, language teaching was intended as a temporary situation to get credit on a course.

What started out as a "teaching job" has turned into a rewarding career. I worked in conversation schools, first in Italy and then in Japan, for five years before committing to an MA in teaching. I did my MA in the US rather than the UK, in order to gain a wider perspective of my cultural and experiential understanding of what I profess to teach. After my MA, I got a job in China in a mixed management

and teaching position. Finally, I got a job at a Japanese university, mostly to get back to meeting more students. When I started teaching, a university position seemed like the ultimate goal, and yet having achieved it, I still find myself wondering if I can continue to teach.

Two lessons learned

Over ten years ago, shortly after I started teaching EFL, my teaching was assessed for the first time. My assessor observed at the back of the classroom. I presented the grammar target to the multi-level class (usage of the present continuous) and said you needed a present participle. One of the high level students said in a loud, clear voice:

> "That's not a participle. It's a gerund."

Another student, from a different country joined in. "It is a gerund. That is what my teacher called it at home."

I was on shaky ground. I couldn't recall exactly how gerunds were used, and was uncomfortably aware that my assessor was in the room. I could see two low-level students who had no idea what was going on, so I knew I had to end this soon. Horror struck, however, as the conversation took a "Yes, it is!"/"No, it isn't" kind of a shape.

After a small and intense eternity of going back and forth, I remembered myself enough to say, "Look, it's the -ing part, we can agree on that. I'll talk to you about it later". I was out and the lesson was moving again. My instructor later told me my experience was not unusual, and that she had seen many different reactions to such situations.

Staying in front of that class was my first real "survival" experience. Strong reactions still strike, both inside the classroom and in other parts of my role as a teacher. Although I had felt like I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me, the situation had resolved itself, a personal lesson I use even today.

Some years later, during a SCUBA diving course, I got a good knowledge of how the body reacts under such stressors which seems to me to be highly applicable in the classroom. What was happening in that classroom all those years ago was a good example of "perceptual narrowing". Other options for getting out of what was an unproductive conversation failed to appear because stress had "narrowed" my thinking. I was also too conscious of all the other features of managing a classroom, as well as the teacher assessing me. The result was a high "task-loading" (the number and complexity of tasks one has to do). The result can be debilitating.

Later, I discovered stress from outside the classroom can still affect performance in it. One such case occurred just before moving to the US for my Masters program. Owing to [downright] bad luck, the house that my partner and I had arranged in the US for our MA program fell through a couple of days before we left. We managed to arrange temporary accommodation just before leaving, but we started school without a permanent place to stay. We had each invested time, hope, and money into the program. On arriving, we found we were unable to concentrate on our learning, because we had to spend study time looking for a place to live. We did not actually find a place to live permanently until about four weeks into the program, by which time we were both well behind on our reading and assignments.

At the time, a sympathetic teacher explained that each of us has only a certain amount of energy to expend on what we do every day. Energy is finite, and if we spend it worrying about where we are going to live, we have less energy to use on studying, teaching, or whatever. This is a more universal way of looking at the idea of task loading I mentioned previously, although here the task does not necessarily relate to an immediate objective.

I believe this idea has extra relevance for those of us without permanent employment situations. Outside events like finding a new job, thinking about pensions or health insurance, or even positive events such as starting a relationship, can make teaching harder. We have to manage our use of our energy carefully in order to survive in our careers long-term.

Where I am now

All teachers face challenges. For me, returning to Japan after my MA was harder than I thought. Even after many years of dealing with things Japanese, I still find myself in something approaching culture shock in some situations. My university teaching experience was all in China, so although I had experience, I found the position hard at first. I was also nearly double the age of some of my students – a big difference from when I started teaching. Finally, although my Japanese is adequate, I am still a visitor to Japan with little understanding of my students' lives or the nature of universities here. How do teachers deal with issues such as these?

Identifying such issues and trying to find solutions or options for them is a vital part of keeping oneself "in the game". In my situation, I decided to try some participant observation-style action research. I joined the university Aikido club. In the club, I hear from students about finding work, taking driving tests, and the other things that shape their life. This helps me greatly in relating to my own students. I also got a second job at another university to help my learning about a new group of students and a new school culture. Identifying and working on single problems or skills, however, seems to be only half the picture.

Although I am now adapting to my new environment, and am economically comfortable for the present, not every day is rosy. Only by approaching my identity and role as a teacher, with its myriad complexities can an individual teacher begin to develop an understanding of long-term survival, as well as the experience to make survival more choice than luck. The following search of the literature is an attempt to begin to understand the larger forces at work in the processes of surviving in the classroom.

Huberman - The classic study

The classic study of how teachers fare over their careers looks at about 160 Swiss teachers. Michael Huberman (1989) reviewed literature on career development (not solely teachers' careers) to come up with a list of factors to predict how teachers would turn out. Aside from a motive of "reckless curiosity" (Huberman 1989, p. 39), his reasons for conducting the study relate to administrators. He describes how some administrators "know" certain types of teacher based on "loose talk … over brandy" (Huberman, 1989, p.39). Administrators use this knowledge to make decisions.

His search of the literature lead Huberman to build a theoretical framework, which he then tested. The composite cycle of teaching careers he developed begins with the plus and minus of being a new teacher – learning to cope with the new demands (*survival*) and finding the joys of the classroom (*discovery*). This is then followed by a period of *stabilization*, in which one does the "double act" of committing to one's profession and ruling out other career options. One identifies as a "teacher", rather than "someone who teaches", and begins to feel mastery of one's profession.

After *stabilizing* begins a period of *experimentation* or *activism*. This may involve a feeling that one can now "tinker" with materials or one's repertoire, or one may become "active" in the school or broader area and make some changes. After this period, Huberman discusses a period *taking stock* or *self-doubt*: basically, a mid-career crisis. This is not universal to the literature he looked at, but his own study showed about 40% of teachers in his sample said they had considered leaving the profession. Eventually, however, teachers in the 45 - 55 age group come to a period of *serenity*, *conservatism*, and/or *disengagement*.

His findings showed a sequence of patterns that could end well or not end well. He is very clear that in his research, mid-career crises are not some kind of benign and universal sign of healthy growth and development. The recovery rates were not optimistic, especially (of personal concern to me!) among men. Reading this may make one think that leaving the classroom is not a bad idea at this stage. Of those who recovered, however, he noticed one sub-group did well. If change was not forcibly introduced every five or six years, there was a *lethargy* and a *slow erosion of the spirit* (p.47). The group that recovered their "harmony" often objected to changes at first, but did well in the long-term. Continuing to find ways to make the best of changes, then, seems to be a useful long-term strategy.

The statistical predictor for satisfaction or disenchantment was very clear. They did not appear early, however. Huberman says these indicators usually appeared 12-15 years into a teacher's career. Teachers who stayed away from wide-ranging reforms, who simply "tinkered", as he often put it, with classroom level experiments (groupings, grading schemes, etc), were far more likely to be satisfied than those involved in school or district-wide programs of change. My impression of these results is that trying to change too much of the world can change us from romantics into dried-up cynics.

Johnston – The Expatriate Teacher

Exploring a single image of teachers, Johnston (1999) focuses on [the] teachers as a post-modern form of the paladin, a kind of wandering knight from the middle ages, in an attempt to promote discussion of issues within ESL/EFL teaching (Johnston 1999). His work refocuses on three of the participants from an earlier study he conducted.

The comparison between EFL teachers and Paladins is done in a post-modern framework and is both positive and negative. Paladins sought to improve their character and their lot on behalf of a sponsor, for the benefit of their own immortal soul. As such, despite having noble intent, they maintained and promoted a power structure that was colonial. Medieval sponsors are now replaced

with conversation schools and groups such as the British Council or United States Information Service. The "nobility" of paladins came from birth, whereas the "nobility" of teachers are predominantly supports the "virtues of middle class wealth through a free market economy" (p. 266). Participating in the EFL world means perpetuating a set of values, even if they are not values one agrees with. Such a situation makes teachers uncomfortable, and can make careers shorter.

In the post-modern context of our modern Paladins, the goal (if there is one) can begin with the goal of "travel", but that lacks a consistent narrative, especially in terms of continuity and causality. Although there is no particular method of entry into the field, Johnston mentions that all the teachers in his study had had previous careers. In terms of why people became teachers or what makes them stay teaching, Johnston found the reasons far from clear. He also found the participants did not really have a long term goal in teaching and were thinking they would go "home" at some stage, probably into another career.

Marginality was a big part of Johnston's discussion, with teachers being marginalized (especially in terms of having little control in educational policy) and marginalizing themselves, for example by socializing in an expatriate group. In addition to this marginal role, the subject they teach was also marginal under Johnston's analysis. English language exists in the margins of subjects such as linguistics, literature, and a host of other disciplines. Related to the marginality is an idea that change is often introduced simply for the sake of change, that plurality and diversity are regarded as good *a priori*.

Johnston' work reflected the general state of EFL superbly for me. His work emphasizes the lack of long-term structures and much of the load on teachers. In addition, he investigates where that load comes from in such a way as to promote discussion and change.

Winograd

Winograd had been a teacher educator, and used his sabbatical to return to the classroom after 13 years absence. His discussion of emotion in teaching is particularly pertinent to the question of surviving teaching.

The suppression of emotions that counter a perceived image of how a teacher should behave and feel leads to a number of negative feelings. These may include self-accusation, embarrassment, shame and guilt. He suggests that the self-accusation part of teaching, "diverts teachers' attention from structural conditions within their working conditions" (Winograd, 2005. p.200). This silences and isolates teachers, and removes political power from them.

Winograd points to teaching as a "gendered" profession, and how the image of the calm teacher, never angry, always nurturing, may be reinforcing a particular dominant power group. He is also quick to point out the disconnect between the submissive figure of the teacher in the administration and larger political system with the skills and authority necessary to manage a large number of students. As a white European male, I found a lot worth considering here.

Perhaps of chief importance for continuing as a teacher were the concepts of *feeling rules* and *emotional labor*, which Winograd uses, referring to an earlier model he credits

to Hochschild. The feeling rules relate to those feelings we are "supposed to" have (and not have) as teachers. When we do not have these feelings, we do what is called "emotional labor": we create the emotions. We may do *deep acting* (similar to method acting) where we recall things that may stimulate the emotions. This is usually a functional response and can help us through the day. Sometimes, however, we may not be able to find the right stimulus and just put on a mask: this is *surface acting*. This can lead to a severe alienation between our working selves and our more natural selves that may prove dysfunctional.

Winograd often comments, "Teaching is hard work". According to the "feeling rules", Winograd had an image of the teacher as a (nearly) all-knowing maintainer of order, with warm personal relationships in a collaborative atmosphere. The reality was that there was often disorder, he had some adversarial relationships with students, and he often felt confused and hopeless (Winograd 2005, p.237).

I felt one of the strong points of the MA program I attended was this focus on the "feeling" aspects of teaching. I am hopeful this may actually increase my chances of remaining an EFL teacher.

Cowie

Of all the research I looked at in trying to answer my question, the only study reflecting my current position was that of Neil Cowie. He investigated language teachers from a range of backgrounds, all currently teaching in universities in Japan. The average experience of the participants was 12 years, and so they had to some extent succeeded in surviving my kind of classroom. For these teachers, the main source of satisfaction or dissatisfaction revolved around three nodes: their students, their colleagues and institutions, and the wider EFL profession.

In terms of students, the teachers used talk to bond with their students "beyond the mechanics of instructions or explanations" (Cowie 2006 p. 10). Teachers often shared parts of their private lives, beliefs, or values in order to create *emotional warmth*. Teachers seem to view their students as whole individuals, as opposed to people completing tasks. This is also reflected in the teachers' need to see not simple curricular progress, but progress in terms of personal development, such as becoming active or independent learners, or displaying responsibility or initiative. Lack of progress in this area was a clear source of dissatisfaction.

A friendly atmosphere at work was an important aspect of satisfaction or the lack of it. This did not mean that deep and lasting friendships have to develop, but that teachers feel they should be able to rely on peers for support. Day to day messages from the institution or colleagues that erode emotional warmth caused dissatisfaction. Cowie concludes that in their institutions teachers feel "a good atmosphere should exist, and is somewhat taken for granted, but poor conditions are bitterly resented and can lead to feelings of great frustration" (Cowie 2006 p. 13).

Finally, there is a factor that brings all of us together – the wider EFL profession. Successful long-term teachers are curious about their field and believe that professional growth, particularly in collaboration with others, is important. This could involve meetings, e-mail, and so on, but again, peers

were valued for this collaboration. Cowie points out how our profession lacks a clear development structure. One of the results is that it is difficult to feel any sense of progress, and that teachers can feel marginalized. While there is great freedom in the classroom, changing things outside the classroom is an area where teachers are almost powerless. After a while, jobs can become predictable. Promotions can be hard to get, so the biggest benefit of the wider community was to help teachers stay motivated with investigations. There was a feeling that those who did not find such ways to progress would leave the profession.

Summary

The decision to continue to teach is personal, and dependent on a great variety of factors. One could almost say that the way teachers keep and reaffirm their commitment is as large as the number of teachers. In that sense, original reflections on the narrative of one's teaching career, such as those I gave at the beginning of this piece, are important. Broader discussion on the subject is available in the EFL community, although this discussion of change is not always easy to find. Keeping good EFL teachers teaching is something I consider critical if we are to develop as a community, and making EFL a desirable career can only benefit our students. Both personal reflections on careers and broader studies such as those listed here are a vital part of that process.

Despite an expectation that teaching should be fun, "much of our work life may be unambiguously dismal" (Winograd 2004. p.213). We all have a conflicting list of what can and should happen in our professional lives. The conflict between different images of teaching, as well as the images conflicting with our actual experience, can be a highly negative experience, ultimately causing professionals to leave the field. Because of this, it is important for us to name the feelings we have, and reflect on how these feelings and experiences will change as our careers progress.

Most literature seems to show good relationships at work, with students and with colleagues, are not a luxury but a necessity for longevity in EFL. Being aware of the load that events and emotions can cause us, and the management of that load (especially over a period of years), should be a central part of our personal development. As motivated EFL professionals, making this happen should be a priority. Being part of a caring community of teachers seems to be the key to a long career as a teacher. While many of the social and political factors in career longevity are beyond our control, I believe surviving long-term will only happen if we recognize the load we are all under and begin to work together with all the partners that make our education work.

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