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# “English is a way of travelling, Finnish the station from which you set out ...”: Reflections on the identities of L2 teachers in the context of Finland

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## Section A: **My biography: from a learner of English as a foreign language (EFL) to a specialist in L2 learning and teaching**

When I was young, I never dreamed of becoming a teacher of English. After some twists and turns in my life and career, and having graduated with another two degrees in Applied Linguistics and completed Teaching Practicum at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, I returned to Finland and was eventually appointed Professor of English in the Department of Languages of the University of Jyväskylä. However, I have little experience of teaching English (i.e., grammar and vocabulary, or language skills); I have much more experience of teaching **about** English as an academic discipline, including courses on Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. In fact, I now do research on issues related to the learning and teaching of English, and have been giving courses on related topics over the past two decades – targeted at future teachers of English.

Teachers of English are **highly qualified** and **appreciated** as professionals in Finland (unlike in some other countries). They are in great demand, as English is viewed as a necessity these days, and it is almost taken for granted that all Finns have learnt to speak the language. English has become an integral aspect of their lives, including spare-time activities, school, work, and travel. English is the most popular language studied in schools: well over 90 % of school children start studying it as the first foreign language from Grade 3 or from the age of nine onwards. Unfortunately, this is taking place at the expense of studying other foreign languages. The status of English has been changing in the country so that it is becoming a Lingua Franca (ELF). One can get by with it not only outside the borders of Finland, but also within its borders, with the ever increasing numbers of foreigners who find themselves in the country for a host of reasons, such as travel, work, study, and politics.

## Section B: **Development of the identities of future teachers of English in Finland**

Teacher education is mainly the responsibility of three parties at the University of Jyväskylä: the Department of Languages, the Department of Teacher Education, and the Teacher Training School (Grades 1–12). The first caters basically for **language studies**, the second for **pedagogical studies**, and the third for hands-on practice in teaching (or **Practicum**). In this process, content knowledge will turn into pedagogical knowledge and finally into principles and practices applied in classrooms. The pedagogical studies are part of a joint five-year MA degree program with 300 ECTS credits.

When applying to study English with us, applicants have to choose between two lines of specialization. And if accepted, they will then graduate from the program either as **specialists in language learning and teaching** (referred to as teacher trainees) or as language specialists. Their studies with us comprise of courses in communication in English and in the following content areas: 1) Linguistics, 2) Discourse studies, 3) Language, culture and society, 4) Language learning and teaching, and 5) Research. The teacher trainees study as a rule another two subjects as their minor subjects. Pedagogical studies is one of them, and these studies start as early as

Year 1 (in contrast to other universities in the country) and after their completion, the teacher trainees will qualify as **subject teachers** of English within the Finnish educational system.

A longitudinal project *From Novice to Expert*, based in the Department of Languages at the University of Jyväskylä, has followed a group of students of English (N = some 120 students) in their studies from Year 1 to Year 5, by which time they had already graduated or were about to graduate from the MA degree program. The project focused on the development of their beliefs, agency and identities over time, as reported, e.g., in Chapters 6 and 7 in Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro, and Ruohotie-Lyhty (2015). While studying on the MA degree program, the identities of the students of English seem to evolve in three respects: as advanced learners of the language, as future specialists of language learning and teaching, and finally as novice teachers of English (for details, see Section C).

Firstly, their identities will evolve from being **learners of EFL** to **users of English as an L2**, the language taking over some functions of their L1, that is, Finnish, including expressing emotions and thinking, or of **ELF**, and eventually to **multilinguals** who can resort to a variety of linguistic resources, depending on the situation, though the students still hedge about this: *I am lucky to be almost bilingual*, says a male student with Finnish as his L1, English as L2, but having also studied at least Swedish! Furthermore, they tend to study initially English for its own sake, out of love for the language, having been good at the subject in school, or become interested in aspects of the English-speaking world (e.g., music, literature, movies). It is only later that they realize the instrumental value of knowing English, providing them even with a different view of the world – compared with their L1. Thirdly, the identities of the students evolve over time from language majors or minors to **professionals** or specialists in language learning and teaching. Consider the following quote (translated from Finnish) from a teacher trainee in Year 5 of her studies:

(English is) a tool. It is a tool quite literally, as I will graduate as a teacher of English, and English is what I will be teaching, teaching about, and using as the medium of instruction. It is also a tool for communication. I often realize that I am thinking in English, and in everyday conversations I often end up using an English word when the Finnish equivalent does not come to my mind, or is not quite so much “to the point” in that situation./SU-R-e2

As mentioned, the pedagogical studies start from Year 1, and Year 3, 4 or 5 is crucial in providing the teacher trainees with hands-on practice in teaching English at the Teacher Training School or across various levels of education. At this point, most of the students **envision** their teaching of English in terms of a specific discourse, *Future foreign language teaching*. This discourse is based on their previous experiences of using English in out-of-school contexts (travel, hobbies or spare-time activities, the media and the Internet) and studying on the MA degree program. The discourse is quite different from another discourse, *Past foreign language teaching*, based on their previous experiences of learning English in school contexts. Both discourses were identified in the multimodal data collected for the longitudinal project and its follow-up study.

Accordingly, when entering the profession of teaching, the students would emphasize the **social** nature of learning English in contrast to their past experiences as learners of the language. Their teaching would focus on real language use or (oral) **communication** and aspects of **culture(s)**. The students would make use of authentic texts rather than standard textbooks, and they would apply modern IT in their classes. They would act as **guides** in class, and their students would be expected to act as active participants, willing to look for learning opportunities and interact in pairs, small groups, etc. By Year 4 or 5 the teacher trainees will draw on some, if not all, of the principles and practices of the second discourse (but a few will still be hesitant of the applicability of these in their classes in the future). Consider a metaphorical visualization by a teacher trainee in Year 5 (Figure 1). It highlights some of the principles and practices in a future English class:

**FIGURE 1 HERE**

Figure 1. An English class to be given shortly after graduation – as envisioned by a teacher trainee: 1) Inductive grammar teaching ('päättely'), 2) Speaking the language ('suullistaminen'), 3) A relaxed atmosphere ('rento ilmapiiri'), 4) Authenticity ('autenttisuus'), 5) The joy of learning ('oppimisen ilo')./SK

### Section C: Development of the identities of novice teachers of English in Finland

The graduates start as a rule with temporary jobs and teach pupils in a variety of grades and schools. The development of the identities of the newly qualified teachers (N=11) has been followed in a longitudinal project *Young foreign language teachers in the beginning of their careers*, based in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Jyväskylä (see, e.g., Nyman, 2009 and Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2011) with further data collected from some of the participants after three or four more years in the profession.

The teachers of English (and other foreign languages) struggle with their identities during the first few years in the profession. While trying to figure out how they themselves would go about teaching and putting their newly adopted ideals into practice, they hesitate between two career paths: do they wish to view themselves as **language teachers** or as **language educators**, or opt for a compromise of one sort or another (Table 1)?

Table 1. Identity struggles of novice teachers of English (and other foreign languages), based on Nyman (2009), Ruohotie-Lyhty (2011), and Chapters 8 and 9 in Kalaja et al. (2015).

Aspect	Language teacher?	Language educator?
Teacher?	Little sense of agency; the school environment viewed as constraint; distant from pupils	Great sense of agency, ability to reflect; the school environment viewed as enabler; close to pupils
Teaching: content?	Narrow focus: relaying subject matter, i.e., language as system, incl. grammar and vocabulary	Wide focus: ensuring overall growth of pupils, incl. multiculturalism
Pupils?	Objects (of teaching and assessment by a teacher); learners of English	Subjects (e.g., as seizers of learning opportunities and assessors of progress of their own and that of others), taking responsibility for their learning
Principles and practices in class?	Curriculum, textbooks	Authenticity, interaction
School community?	Little, if any, cooperation with colleagues and participation in school activities	Active cooperation with colleagues and participation in school activities

The choice of a career path has consequences for what they will view as important in their jobs: their relationship – and involvement – with pupils and colleagues, their main aims in teaching, and the principles and practices applied in their classes.

In addition, the teachers of English have been found to experience two types of tension (outlined in Chapters 8 and 9 in Kalaja et al., 2015) in the early years of their careers, with both having an impact on their identities. The first type of tension is related to the school environment: does it allow the novice teachers to apply the principles and practices envisioned by them upon graduation in their classes – or not? To put it another way, do they view themselves as **independent** actors, feeling free, or even encouraged, to be innovative in their ways of teaching

English (e.g., by taking in-service workshops or courses); or as **dependent**, feeling pressured to fall back to more traditional ways of teaching (e.g., in response to reactions by their colleagues or pupils in class, norms in the school community, or in view of a high-stakes examination)? This is related to how agentive, or capable of acting, the teachers view themselves to be in their school environment and in putting their ideals into practice, or alternatively being socialized into the well established canon of the past. The second type of tension is evident in the narrative accounts of their first nine or ten years in the profession and with more established careers by that time. The stories were found to be of two types: stories of **identity change** and those of **identity continuity**. The teachers will construct themselves either as professionals who are sensitive and willing to adapt to the needs of their pupils (after a critical incident of one type or another with them) – or as professionals who resist changes in the principles or practices applied in their classes.

#### Section D: **Future developments in research on the identities of L2 teachers in Finland**

In the two projects reviewed, student and teacher identities have been (mostly) viewed as **discursive phenomena** (e.g., Potter, & Wetherell, 1987). In other words, students and teachers come to construct their identities on specific occasions of talking (i.e., in interviews) or writing (e.g., in essays and sentence completion tasks), or in multimodal data (including drawings), and their identities can be characterized as a struggle or being **dynamic** across time and space. Furthermore, the development of student and teacher identities has been viewed in relation to their sense of agency and beliefs (for a review, see Chapter 2 in Kalaja et al., 2015), as these are expected to influence how the teachers will go about teaching English. Future research is needed on student and teacher identities also in relation to the **emotions** involved in the learning and teaching of English. This is a conclusion from both the projects.

In their research design the two projects have been **longitudinal**. The participants have been observed over exceptionally long periods of time. In contrast to some previous studies, the developments observed so far in the teacher identities are not necessarily thought to be something that only novice teachers go through: they may become critical even at later stages in their careers. At any rate, further research is needed to trace **later developments** in their identities over careers that may last another 30 years. Furthermore, recent developments in Finland and its educational system (revision of curricula; innovations in IT; students with multilingual and -cultural backgrounds; introduction of the principles of Inclusion) call for further **contextualized** research on the identities of L2 teachers in the country.

#### Section E: **Suggestions for further research on L2 teacher identities**

In more general terms, some assumptions underlying current research on L2 (student or) teacher identities could be reconsidered or challenged, when doing research in the years to come. More specifically, as a rule

- teachers have been assumed to go through a fixed set of stages in the course of their careers, and so novice teachers have been compared with experienced teachers; instead of following a group or illustrative cases over extensive periods of time
- developments in teacher identities have been viewed as if caused only by major changes such as organizational reforms or curricular revisions, and not as something taking place in response to daily routines in a school environment, or possibly interacting with, e.g., the teachers' sense of agency, regulation of emotions, or beliefs
- student or teacher identities have been observed over relatively short periods of time, e.g. a course, a semester or year (with a pre- and post- design) and therefore (not surprisingly) with little evidence of developments in their identities; instead of much longer periods of time.

## Section F: References

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Figure 1.