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## Images of past teachers: Present when you teach

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### ABSTRACT

Although research suggests that pre-service and novice teachers' instructional practice is influenced by their history as language learners, the question remains as to whether these experiences continue to be made manifest in the practice of experienced teachers. The interest in this study was to examine how an experienced teacher was influenced by her own history as a language learner and the extent to which she was aware of the obvious or subtle ways that the past influenced her current teaching practices. This linkage was investigated through relating stories told by the teacher about her past experiences to observations in her English classroom. Findings suggested that the teacher's own positive experiences studying French influenced the warm and structured learning environment of her classroom, while her negative experiences with explicit grammar instruction may have contributed to her own minimal focus on grammar in the classroom. However, findings illustrated the complex relationship between present practice and past experiences, suggesting that the value of exploring past experiences lies not in determining the exact nature of those experiences or exactly how they align to present practice, but in examining the stories that constitute one's identity.

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## 1. Introduction

It is well established that teachers' classroom practices are shaped by a variety of contextual variables, including: (a) institutional factors such as class size, class composition, the curriculum, or workload (Richards & Pennington, 1998; Schulz, 2001), (b) political factors such as educational or assessment policies (Gorsuch, 2000; Nishino, 2012), and (c) social factors such as students' target language proficiency or teachers' pedagogical skills in the discipline (Richards & Pennington, 1998). Teachers' practice is further shaped by their knowledge and beliefs, constructs that are difficult to separate and can be further broken down into many sub-categories (see Borg, 2015). Borg (2003) uses the term *teacher cognition* to describe “the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe, and think” (p. 81). This cognitive dimension of teaching exerts great force on teachers' practice and is not only unobservable, but dynamic. Just as cognition influences teachers' practice, their practice influences cognition. Borg (2015) developed a model of concepts that shape teachers' cognition and outlines the relationships among them, including: (a) classroom practice, which includes practice teaching; (b) professional coursework; and, (c) schooling, defined as one's personal educational history.

The aim of the present study was to further theorize and investigate Borg's (2015) concept of *schooling*, defined as “personal history and specific experiences of classrooms which define preconceptions of education (i.e. teachers, teaching)”

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(p. 333). The influence of teachers' own history as language learners on their teaching practice has long been recognized, referred to by Lortie (1975) as the “apprenticeship of observation”. All teachers have personal experiences as learners, themselves historically and socially situated, that influence both their beliefs (Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Richards & Pennington, 1998) and their instructional practice (Freeman, 1992; Golombek, 1998; Johnson, 1994, 2009; Sanchez, 2010). Consider the example of Jenny, an MA candidate and teaching assistant (TA) assigned to teach a course for international TAs (Golombek, 1998). An instructional objective of the course that she taught was fluency, but Jenny struggled to achieve this objective because she was reluctant to provide corrective feedback due to her previous negative experiences as a language learner with being corrected publicly. In her journal, she described the terror that she had felt as a student of Russian because her teacher constantly corrected her errors and noted this as the cause of her “fear of hypercorrecting students” in her own classroom (p. 454). Jenny's personal experiences as a learner of Russian manifested themselves in her own experiences teaching.

The interest in this study was to examine how an experienced teacher was influenced by her own history as a language learner and her sense making around how the past influenced her current teaching practices. We sought to investigate this linkage to understand why certain teaching behaviors may persist after years of teaching experience and professional development. A more developed understanding of such relationships might provide information about how to mediate teachers' instructional activities that lack a basis in current research to inform professional development. As Feiman-Nemser (1983) contends “unless future teachers get some cognitive control over prior school experiences, it may influence their teaching unconsciously and contribute to the perpetuation of conservative school practices” (p. 11).

## 2. Theoretical framework

To further theorize the concept of schooling, we turned to the literature on teacher identity and drew specifically upon Holland and Lave's (2001) concept of *history-in-person*. Sfard and Prusak (2005) avoid definitions of identity that include “who one is” (p. 16) and instead define identity as stories, more specifically, as “narratives about individuals that are reifying, endorsable, and significant” (p. 16). The work of Holland and Lave (2001) and Holland and Leander (2004) also recognizes the link between stories and identity, but their work emphasizes positionality through the concept of *history-in-person*. An individual's *history-in-person* is “the sediment from past experiences upon which one improvises, using the cultural resources available, in response to the subject positions afforded one in the present” (Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 18). As this definition illustrates, one's past experiences, the resources available in the current context, and the social positions of that context influence an individual's practice. However, Holland and Leander (2004) prefer the use of the term *laminations* (Latour, 1993) to “sediment” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 18), because it recognizes the layering of identity positions and how one's identity can thicken over time. As Moje and Luke (2009) explain “identity as layers of positions (i.e., as laminations) carries with it the histories (hence, the overlap with the concept of histories in person, or even possibly, of habitus) of past experiences” (p. 44).

The concepts of *history-in-person*, laminations, and the thickening of identity emerge from social practice theory and have primarily been used to explain the processes of social formation and cultural production that emerge as a result of complex social, political, and economic struggles (Holland & Lave, 2001). Applied to teacher identity, a teacher's practice can be seen in her encounters with others as she uses her own cultural, historical, and social resources to mediate the world around her, all of which are influenced by enduring struggles and power relationships. These struggles might be shaped by school policies, conflict with colleagues or administrators, or required curricula that conflict with one's beliefs. In this way, to fully understand a teacher's practice, one must move beyond the present context. As Wortham (2004) contends:

categories and models of identity do not jump from the sociohistorical to the ontogenetic [an individual's development over the life span] timescale un-changed. Sociohistorical categories and models of identity get mediated through institutional and more local processes before they contribute to the thickening of an individual's identity. (p. 167)

To be sure, it is impossible to directly trace one's present behavior to a specific past experience. Stories offered in one time and space are representations of stories built in another time and space (Moje & Luke, 2009). Teachers are always engaged in “the act of becoming” (Olsen, 2016, p. 33), and the stories one chooses to tell from their past are intricately tied to their present and their desired future. Thus, the claim here is not that one's personal history is brought to bear directly on one's present activity or that the past is remembered in the same way as it was experienced. Clearly the past and present are dialectically related. An individual's present provides insight on the past and may redefine past experiences in light of new circumstances. Why the past is important, however, is because it shapes one's ontogenetic development and provides a productive resource for decision-making and actions in present circumstances (Donato & Davin, in press). As a result, from an analytical methodological perspective, one's educational history as a language learner must be examined in addition to other contextual factors that have the potential to mediate actions, learning, and development (Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Johnson & Golombek, 2003). Attention must be paid to the nature of “teacher constructed context” (p. 52), recognizing that individuals interact and react to the same institutional context in diverse ways (Sanchez & Borg, 2014). We contend that an individual's personal experiences as a language learner interact with their reactions to local contextual factors to form what Holland and Lave (2001) refer to as *history-in-person* processes.

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