



How do foreign language teachers maintain their proficiency? A grounded theory investigation



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ABSTRACT

Building on Markus and Nurius's (1986) possible selves theory to investigate language teachers' engagement in professional development, this case study examines how nine Italian school foreign language (FL) teachers in two types of high schools (college preparation and vocational schools) experienced and responded to changes in their FL proficiency. Interview data, analyzed with a grounded theory approach, showed that when dealing with professional development, the FL teachers had to decide whether to (1) engage in professional development activities, and (2) maintain their engagement with or without a supportive community. Their decisions and engagement were influenced by the strength of the dissonance between the perception of their actual and possible L2 selves. The findings have implications for designing in-service professional development courses that take into consideration teachers' needs in relation to their school environments as FL teachers navigate the life-long experience of learning and maintaining a foreign language.

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1. Introduction

Language learning is a life-long process and foreign language (FL) teachers are often considered good examples of successful committed advanced learners. Their language proficiency and its improvement over time is crucial for them to be effective FL teachers (Banno, 2003; Reves & Medgyes, 1994) as the language is both the means and the objective of their teaching. Moreover, language proficiency is important for contributing towards FL teachers' identity development because "their experiences as teachers are often situated on the same trajectory as their linguistic development" (Miller & Kubota, 2013, p. 246). As observed by Chambless (2012), there is a possible causal connection between teachers' FL proficiency and the teaching and learning that take place in the classroom. Much of what FL students learn hinges on and is impacted by the aspects of their teachers' proficiency, motivation, and identity.

While acknowledging the significance of teachers' *identities in practice* (Kanno & Stuart, 2011), that is how teachers' identities are shaped by their teaching practices, this paper is motivated by the crucial influence of teachers' proficiency (and motivation to develop it) on their teaching and their students' FL learning. Our interview-based study explores what nine in-service FL teachers in Italian high schools do and the obstacles they encounter in maintaining their proficiency. Based on recent works (e.g., Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014) that have highlighted the importance of vision and goals for language teachers to sustain their engagement in development activities, we chose to use *possible selves* theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and Kubanyiova's (2009) notion of the development of *possible language teacher selves* as a lens to analyze teachers'

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proficiency and motivation in our data. Following our review of earlier relevant research, we explain the rationale for a grounded theory approach, which guides our study, and present our findings. We conclude with implications for FL teachers' professional development and for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Foreign language teachers' proficiency

Earlier research (Bateman, 2008; Fraga-Cañadas, 2010; Yilmaz, 2011) has shown that teachers' self-perceived inadequate proficiency is reflected in more cautious instructional approaches, a decrease in self-efficacy and less use of the target language in class. In particular, in Fraga-Cañadas's (2010) study, Spanish non-native speaker teachers in American high schools experienced fossilization, frustration, and a decline in proficiency due to teaching low-level students for a long time, lack of direct contact with native speakers, and lack of time for practicing the FL outside the classroom. In Yilmaz's (2011) study, Turkish EFL teachers did not rate themselves equally proficient in the four skills resulting in higher self-efficacy in instructional strategies and lower sense of efficacy in engaging students in language-learning activities effectively. These results have important implications, as teachers who do not believe in their ability to promote learning "construct classroom environments that are likely to undermine students' judgments of their abilities and their cognitive developments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 241). Thus, as explained by Chambless (2012), FL teachers' proficiency can directly impact students' learning, as the amount of FL spoken in class, and the teaching approach adopted are a result of teachers' proficiency and deeply inform the whole students' learning process.

However, definitions of FL proficiency can vary greatly, ranging from Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam's (2009) native-like attainment to Piller's (2002) use-oriented description as a temporary phenomenon specific to context, audience, and medium. The former argued that "native like ultimate attainment in adult learners is, in principle, nonexistent" (p. 499), as near-native speakers differed from native speakers when some L2 features were analyzed in greater detail. The latter supported a situated concept of proficiency which is more attainable. This could mean that while FL teachers should master the language they teach, their proficiency level can vary and be specific to their teaching context. Nevertheless, many FL teachers, such as those interviewed in the present study, set achieving native speaker status as their goal as advanced language learners.

2.2. Native and non-native speaker teachers

In her research on teachers' foreign language anxiety, Horwitz (1996) claimed that anxiety and inferiority complexes in FL teachers are caused by the pursuit of an idealized level of proficiency set by a hard-to-attain native-speaker model. In a similar vein, several studies (e.g., Bateman, 2008) have illustrated non-native speaker teachers' insecurity about their FL proficiency and their ability to conduct the class in the FL, which in turn have had negative consequences on their self-efficacy. However, as Medgyes (2001) argued, non-native speaker teachers' role should not be compared to native speaker teachers, because the former provide learner models while the latter provide language models.¹ Their respective strengths and weaknesses often balance each other out, but only when non-native speaker teachers have high overall language proficiency. Thus, as Medgyes added "the most important professional duty that [non-native language teachers] have to perform is to make linguistic improvements in their [target language]" (p. 440). The "professional duty" advocated by Medgyes is often left to FL teachers' own discretion and it can be overshadowed by contingent situations such as lack of time or collaborative professional support. Practicing and maintaining FL proficiency over the course of one's career also involves teachers' intrinsic motivation. Central to understanding such motivation is the dynamic interaction of internal and contextual processes that shape engagement in learning, which is discussed next.

2.3. Teachers' motivation for L2 development

Dörnyei (2009) maintained: "[l]anguage learning is a sustained and often tedious process with lots of temporary ups and downs, and I felt that the secret of successful learners was their possession of a superordinate vision that kept them on track" (p. 25). Building on Markus and Nurius's (1986) possible selves theory, Dörnyei's (2005) model of L2 Motivational Self-System (L2MSS) is based on the motivational power of the vision of future self-guides. The possible selves' promotion (ideal self) or prevention (ought-to self) impetus is triggered by self-regulatory mechanisms. As explained by Higgins's (1987) Self-discrepancy Theory, the tension between individual's actual self and their future selves can transform motivation into action.

While L2MSS has become a widely used framework to investigate learners' motivation to engage in FL learning in different cultural contexts (e.g., Islam, Lamb, & Chambers, 2013; Papi, 2010), only a few researchers (e.g., Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Hiver, 2013; Kubanyiova, 2009; Kumazava, 2013) have used it to investigate teachers' motivation to pursue professional development. One example is Kubanyiova's (2009) study on in-service EFL teachers in Slovakia, in which the perceived

¹ The assertion that native speaker teachers provide language models is contentious in light of recent work on translanguaging and identity (e.g., Creese & Blackledge, 2015), which has called into question what constitutes a language model. Further, other applied linguists such as Davies (2003) and Ortega (2014) have interrogated the native speaker myth.

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