

## A teaching identity: the factors which have influenced it

Begoña García Pérez

Profesora de Enseñanza Secundaria

### Resumen

Desde una reflexión sobre nuestra propia experiencia personal y académica podemos distinguir los aspectos que han resultado significativos para construir nuestra identidad educativa ya sea siendo alumnos o profesores. Al analizar hasta qué punto esta mezcla de factores y situaciones, de sentimientos y emociones presentes en nuestro propio proceso educativo ha contribuido a construir nuestro particular estilo de comunicar conocimientos, de instruir y relacionarnos, descubriremos que son circunstancias que convergen en nuestra práctica actual. Desde esta experiencia podremos analizar nuestro presente e intentar mejorar nuestra actuación en el aula.

**Palabras clave:** experiencia académica personal, identidad educativa, mejorar

### Abstract

From a close observation on our own personal and academic experience we can clearly tell the aspects which have contributed to building our learning and teaching identity. When analysing to which extent this mixture of factors and situations, of feelings and emotions present in our own learning process has contributed to build into our particular style of communicating knowledge, of instructing and interacting with others, we can conclude that all of them are circumstances that converge in our present practice. From this experience we can analyse our present and try to improve our performance in the classroom.

**Key words:** personal learning process, teaching identity, improve

### 1. Introduction

When we come to talk about our academic experience and what has been significant for us to build a personal and educational identity both as a learner and as a teacher, we all of a sudden realize how little we have thought about it in all these years. However, when analysing all the factors and situations that have been present in this process and together with a mixture of feelings and emotions, we can conclude that all of them intermingled have largely contributed to build into a particular style of communicating knowledge, of interacting and instructing others.

### 2. A teaching identity in development

As a schoolchild I was, and still am, a devoted learner. I could grasp from very early years the smooth satisfaction of finishing paragraphs, of passing a page, of gaining knowledge. I was the third of four children with very little or none parental academic assistance and my memories from the first school years are especially relevant if related to my brother who was diagnosed with dyslexia. My brother's disability kept me wondering why he could not read, understand or remember messages, actions that were so mechanical to me. I assisted him so closely, although I was only four years older, that I can clearly recall my struggle to make him work out whatever his homework demanded. I remember dedicating time to the development of basic methods to help him which I would put into practice, unfortunately most of the times with not very successful results. I lacked knowledge on what now I identify as topics dealing with phonological

processing, phonemic awareness and the use of phonics. Obviously, these were issues much above my level of understanding at the time.

I started learning English at the age of ten. I remember clearly how excited I felt holding my first English book. I realize now that my teacher's knowledge of the language was so limited that the classes consisted of reading the silly story in the corresponding unit of the course book, which had nothing in common with our lives or interests at that age and doing the corresponding grammar exercises. The topics and the approach in the book were so adult-oriented; it was printed black and white and full of writing with very few drawings or pictures. Still, it was enough to keep my interest for the language alive. I never got discouraged although I cannot remember any of my teachers for being especially skilled in the language, nor in the ability of teaching a foreign language.

Gradually, I got more interested not only in the learning of foreign languages but also in my own language as well. During Secondary Education I decided that definitely I was to devote to languages. I loved Latin and Greek, I loved Spanish language and literature and most than any other, I loved English. However, the teaching methods were archaic, the course book boring, no live listening practice from taped resources neither from the teachers, long lists of vocabulary divided into topics or semantic fields, translation and exercises on grammar points; no pair or group work, no speaking practice, none of these practices and learning tools we discuss about now. It was imparted as any other subject: teacher-centered and leaving behind the communicative component of a language. I realized it was probably not the best way to learn a language.

I was 17 when I first travelled to London without having uttered a word in English nor heard three sentences together from the same native speaker. However, whatever the method my teachers had used or how ineffective it might have seemed, in no longer than three weeks I could speak quite fluently and I could follow a conversation. How could this be so? Perhaps in the end they were really good teachers and, although I cannot remember any outstanding methods, they were the right ones, or either their approaches favoured my learning style or simply, I was lucky to find my way as a learner. I have no idea about how proficient in English became my classmates, it would be good to know.

### **3. My years at university and the beginning of a teaching experience**

By this time I was a learner with a well-shaped learning style and developed strategies for learning. I had spent a year in England which had opened my mind to different cultures and I had got in contact with many other languages which had definitely sparked my interest and curiosity for going into deeper knowledge of them, further than the oral approach. I took up some of them and no doubt, the learning other languages has clearly influenced my teaching practice.

I started university and at the same time I started teaching English. I quickly understood that planning my classes effectively was crucial for success. I became aware that I had to adapt to my learners' needs, and these were their learning styles even if I knew nothing of such term at that point. I used my intuition basically to prepare activities and to lead my lessons. I knew I had to provide my students with lots of different activities to find the ones that motivated them or which were more meaningful or helped them best to take in and process information. I had started my way into my future position.

At university I had a great variety of teachers with their corresponding teaching styles, cultural backgrounds and subject matter. Some of them limited their lessons to the reading aloud of their notes, they made us absorb them and finally regurgitate them in exams. We learned despite their teaching rather than because of it. I met some others who could really communicate, which at that stage of education I valued immensely. I am thinking now of a teacher who would engage into long explanations trying to develop some kind of pragmatics theory and would present a problem solving activity which we really wanted to solve. I felt the power of language. As for the learning of the language itself, it was already content based and it is amazing now that I think about it, that we found it so natural.

#### **4. My school practice**

##### **4.1. The kind of activities implemented**

According to Gardner, everybody has all types of intelligences up to different degrees. Each person will have developed them ranging from a high to a lower point but no intelligence functions on its own. The way they function is unique to each person. I am aware of the fact that my decisions about the activities to carry out in each class are the direct result of my own profile, personal experience and preferences. The types of learning activities I choose as a teacher are made by choice, not by accident but as I get to know more about my learning style, I find that both are directly related. Students should not be taught only in one particular method as it is possible that this can be antithetical to their learning style causing them to fall behind and perform poorly. If I talk about my personal experience, I gather I act very intuitively when I teach. However, how have I used my learning styles in my lesson plans, in the language learning tasks I set and the assessment and grading I give to my students?

The materials presented in a class should be a mixture of vocabulary input (definitions, words in context, use of words), grammar rules (explanation, eliciting and practice) and also concepts: syntactical and semantic, linguistic and cultural background information. The quantity and type of practice of each should fit the level of the course, the age of students and the kind of group/class where the learning is taking place. Activities devised to satisfy both auditory and visual learners will mean presenting the materials in different ways: flashcards, photographs, diagrams and drawings together with films, video, presentations or pod casts. As for active or reflective learners it is important to cater for both providing them with situations that enable them to participate, to teach them cooperative skills but also reflect in the class: conversations and discussions, team competition or performing, as well as brief writing and question formulation exercises. For sequential learners we will develop strategies dealing with structured grammatical analysis and word dissection whilst we will also take into account global learners and their ability to search for main ideas and guess words.

As Felder & Henriques state (1995), language acquisition is a deductive process (deducing consequences and rules). However, incorporating an inductive component to teaching has proved to promote effective learning: linking the new materials to prior knowledge (discovery or inquiry activities).

I believe that nowadays there are so many resources we can make use of that, just by choosing appropriate strategies (trying to relate to most kinds of intelligences), you can easily adapt the content. I intend to include as many of those techniques as possible in my teaching plan along with a change in the system of assessment tasks if possible (apart from traditional testing), giving students a choice among more

than one activity so as to cater for different learning styles. I think that this broadens my opportunities for improving my teaching and enhances my chance for creativity.

I explain the tasks to the students, not only to give them the instructions but also as to make clear to which part of the syllabus it will contribute, the skills practice, the type of assessment it will undergo, how long it will take, the grade of difficulty, etc. so that they feel informed and take a more active part in their learning process. Furthermore, I care for the language I use although I try to expose my students to other levels. This way they can make hypotheses and develop generalizations about the language in order to produce effective English in the future.

Since I want my students to eventually be able to read, speak, write and understand more fluently in English, I create learning activities based on topics that are relevant to their lives, culture or social interests, as for example teaching with events in the news, using technology they usually handle in their daily life to teach (YouTube videos, pod casts, etc), proposing discussion activities to perform in pairs or groups, providing real writing models as a starting point for a written task, finding real reading texts, introducing vocabulary in a varied way, elaborating projects, power point presentations, etc. The use of these strategies should contribute to presenting or expanding the topic dealt with at that point of the syllabus, not as a kind of reward apart from the every day work but as a teaching tool.

#### **4. 2. Social and affective aspects inside the classroom: Teacher-pupil(s) and pupil-pupil(s).**

*'Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from identity and integrity of the teacher'.* Palmer J. Palmer (1998)

Adults, children and teenagers are distinct, separate individuals; however, we all stay in the same field together. Although we, as teachers, may have the final say in a lot of situations, our student's needs and feelings always matter. We ought to work together to build conflict-free relationships. A code of behaviour should be established in order to promote an effective work atmosphere. Letting students have an input into the rules which will be determined and explained at the beginning of the year will make them feel more compelled to comply with them. If once the year has started they prove not to be working, they should be reformulated. Therefore, a key to a good and safe relationship is an effective classroom management plan. This has proved to have a greater influence on students' achievement than intelligence, home environment, motivation or socio-economic status. It has been demonstrated to prevent misbehaviour too.

Teachers and pupils are collaborators in learning. The teacher should find out about their pupils' learning needs and interests and, then, plan an effective curriculum. Teachers could, to a certain extent, involve their students in decision-making about the classroom. I think the goal here is to make the classrooms more flexible and to help the students become more independent learners. A good and relaxed relationship between the students and their teacher is very important to create a friendly atmosphere. Humour, personal information, explaining goals and accepting their input will also contribute positively to a good and healthy relationship with our learners.

The classroom environment should foster good relationships among peers based on respect and cooperation. There are some variables that can influence learners, including developmental differences, motivational and learning considerations and the classroom contexts. Practices such as working in groups or pairs, in the big group, completion of tasks or assessment in these different kinds of grouping, will enhance the learning process. Cooperative learning has proved to provide positive social skills apart from contributing

to a more friendly class atmosphere or even higher academic scores. The relative influence of peers and groups of peers typically increases with age and development of students. It can become a very relevant fact during teen age so it is the teacher's responsibility as well to care for the good influence of those relationships on their students and to inform parents if it is not the desirable.

### **5. Differences between my actual practice and my experiences as a pupil**

'What you resist, persists' is a helpful proverb. The more energy you put into thinking about something, the more will come out of it. This I apply to my planning and class organization. I try to keep motivation high by means of different strategies and activities and by giving them the chance of choosing among two or three at some point. Learners appreciate the choice; it makes them think the teacher cares.

I think it is important to pay attention to students as individuals whenever it is possible. As a learner I have never felt left apart by my teachers. I give different assignments to difficult students or low achievers to offer them the chance to join in and perform well. Being shamed, ridiculed or set up to fail in front of your peers was a practice not so uncommon in my days. The relationship teacher-pupil was not so highly valued then. Setting clear class rules in which students can take part is a very important issue. In my school days, classroom management consisted of a set of pre-determined rules to be complied or facing the consequences.

Something I find really difficult to design and to change is evaluation and assessment. I value performances as a continuum and keep records of my students' tasks results. However, I still need to make tests in order not to feel too subjective when grading.

In the last years it has become more difficult to keep good order in the classes as teachers' authority is constantly questioned by young people who have been gaining self-confidence as opposed to respectful and loyal attitudes. Moreover, the relationships among students have also changed and the acceptance of violence to achieve ends or negative attitudes conveying racial prejudice, bullying, disability, discrimination, etc has become something rather common among them (this varies depending on the areas and geographical settings). Such practices require us, teachers, to make a big effort and establish and maintain effective classroom control. This wasn't so in the past when the rules had to provide for misbehaviour at a smaller scale.

Our students make choices which will lead them to success through the shortest, simplest route. Probably in doing so they are limiting themselves and their possibilities. I think some years ago we were not so 'practical'. Few students would drop out after compulsory education and many of us would complete university studies without having considered about the future possibilities these offered. Besides, teachers were not especially concerned about boosting students' motivation. Obviously, the social conditions were others and, in my particular case, the geographical setting too.

As for implemented methods, like I explained in a foregoing item, the main technique in the language lessons both at primary and secondary school used to be the course book, few handouts providing extra grammar exercises for reinforcement or vocabulary lists together with the teachers' good intentions and professionalism. The fact is that I managed to learn and I don't take the whole credit for it. On the other hand, my methods consist of the implementation of different kinds of practices on all skills, lots of activities and strategies, the use of the coursebook but adapted and complemented and the use of technologies as far as

possible. All these are combined or chosen depending on the group and schedule and open to be modified on the move.

I think we are very lucky now to count on free or affordable teacher training, lots of printable materials, listening information, books, many studies and research on pedagogy and learning methods, the Internet and facilities at schools: rooms, interactive whiteboards, computers, DVDs, magazines, books, dictionaries and so many others (even if not enough). Although there is much to achieve and to be done, undoubtedly the circumstances have changed enormously for the better.

## **6. Recommendations for improving school and education**

### **6.1. What makes a good teacher?**

*“Teachers need to find ways of creating a space for mutual engagement of lived difference that does not require the silencing of a multiplicity of voices by a single dominant discourse”, Giroux (1992).*

I think there are several conditions to being a good teacher among which I consider the following outstanding. To begin with, a teacher should foster relationships based on care, respect and responsibility. A supportive teacher allows for students’ autonomy. Students can have increased motivation when they feel some sense of autonomy in the learning process. The teacher’s attitude is the most important factor: it refers to everything we do or say in the class. It refers to approach, feelings, awareness and understanding. It can also influence our students’ motivation. Being aware of the fact that teaching requires a command of content that could elude our grasp and being prepared to admit it will facilitate our acts.

A teacher should also highlight the value of education, hard work and persistence. Being a teacher means also being a learner. We cannot teach effectively if we are not also actively engaged in learning. This will allow for the teacher to be aware of the fact that one size does not fit all. Each student is an individual and has the right to be considered and treated as such. We can learn outside the school in specific courses; we can also learn from our students every day, from our colleagues and from our own practice. It is a fact that we all participate in a variety of cultural settings and we should provide our students with the chance of bringing them into the class. Sharing our lives with others apart from contributing to the learning process builds self-esteem, self-confidence and pride. A teacher should be willing to meet the needs of their students a little more effectively each day. To that aim, they will adapt or model the curriculum according to the observation and reflection of every day practice.

Class rules matter. They are unique to each teacher and adaptable to each group of students. They reflect one’s own personality, teaching style and educational objectives. Definite procedures will help students foresee what the course will be like and what it is expected from them. This way, class rules should be agreed on at the beginning of the year and known by everyone. The instructional team should also strive towards a consensus about consistent discipline practices and goals to be achieved.

### **6.2. Improving education**

There are things we can do as individuals, in our classrooms:

- We could let students become more autonomous by promoting project-based tasks: they learn in a more meaningful way, it is a more hands-on approach. Teachers should design activities which allow attaining knowledge through different subjects or fields of knowledge, implying a more cross-curricular approach

which gets different departments to work together on the same topic. Finally, their autonomy would include using more cooperative learning strategies (small group/pair work/whole group) as they generate more ideas and concepts, and they favour the development of social and emotional skills.

- Teachers should try to meet all their students' needs by finding a balance in the range of instructional methods. Overemphasizing any of the approaches may lead to failure and discourage of the other kind of learner. If we find out the way our students learn and try to cater for all these styles in our lessons and the tasks we give to them, we will find teaching more rewarding and our students will have more chances to learn. It is impossible to teach each student exclusively according to their preferences but at least, hopefully, they will be taught partly in a way they prefer. This may lead to a higher standard of achievement and success.
- Teachers should direct assessment in a different way: considering learning as a continuum and keeping records of all performances and attitudes which will provide a detailed profile of learners. Academic progress should be monitored by focusing on areas that need improvement, for reinforcement or extra challenges. All these mean changing the concept of tests as the most valuable way of assessing to a means to learn from mistakes.
- I believe that teaching is 'a commitment to lifelong learning'. A well formed teacher has wide knowledge of learning. In order to become better teachers, to experience our pupils' feelings and to get more critical towards learning processes, we should get into their shoes. Experience is not enough to improve our teaching activity. It should also go together with observation, reasoning and reflection on the daily practice. To this aim will contribute taking courses, attending conferences and teachers' meetings in order to share tips and keep up-to-date in materials and methods, to exchange experiences and discuss about common issues.

Some other solutions would involve collective implications:

- Teachers should research into their own teaching experiences in order not to accommodate to their every day practice but conversely, look for means of improving their role in the classroom and students' learning process. Once they get positive results (for solving conflicts, just to deepen into our practice or get better and broader perspectives) these should be put at other professionals' disposal so that they can contribute to the general teaching practice.
- Adaptation of curricula so that they include online tasks, lesson plans, demonstrations, assignments, etc would be necessary. With online facilities, communication could be more fluent and effective among students, parents and the instructional team.
- Parents should be welcome to participate in the school life and in the classroom, to take a more active role in their children's learning process. In the same way, authorities and schools should devote some professional resources and materials to attend the current social diversity which has become part of our academic setting and classroom reality.
- Resources of time, money and facilities must be restructured. Schools and authorities should provide more funds for the classroom (technology, literacy centers, etc.). Schools should be open for longer during summer periods, afternoon and evenings for all sorts of community needs: meetings, teacher training, social help, parenting classes, etc. In addition, some class periods should be longer to facilitate cooperative strategies.

- Partnerships with associations, universities, government agencies, museums, town council and other kinds of institutions may provide needed materials, technology and experiences for students and teachers.

## References

- Bluestein, J. 2001 *Creating Emotionally Safe Schools*, Heath Communications, Inc, Deerfield Beach, FL.
- Felder, R.M. & Henriques E.R. (1995) «*Learning and Teaching Styles in Foreign and Second Language Education, Foreign*» *Language Annals*, 28 (1), p. 21-31.
- Gardner H. (1983) *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, NY, Basic Books.
- Giroux, H. (1992) *Border Crossing: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*. New York: Routledge Press, p. 201.
- Oxford R.L. (2003) *Language Learning Styles and Strategies: An Overview*. GALA.
- Palmer, P.J. (1998) *The Courage to Teach. Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

---

**Begoña García Pérez** es licenciada en Filología Inglesa por la Universidad del País Vasco. Ha realizado el Máster Oficial en Enseñanza de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera, especialidad en Teaching English in Bilingual Schools en la Universidad de Alcalá de Henares (Madrid) y actualmente imparte clases de inglés en Secundaria, Bachillerato y adultos en 'That's English'. Interesada en todo lo relacionado con la enseñanza de inglés, las nuevas tecnologías y el bilingüismo.

Received 17-Oct-2010 / Revised version accepted 9-Jan-2011