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Guided by images – Chilean novice teachers' visions of themselves

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Guided by images – Chilean novice teachers' visions of themselves

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Mental imagery of 'future selves' is considered a powerful means for motivating learners, and also teachers, whose own motivation is an important basis for the creation of engaging teaching-learning environments. This multiple case study accompanied Chilean novice teachers of English over 18 months and explores the use of visualizations of teacher selves as a reflection tool in early career development. What images of themselves and their classroom environments do novice teachers create when prompted to visualize themselves as 'motivating teachers'? What role do these visualizations play in supporting novice teachers in implementing methodological innovations? And do novice teachers value the use of visualizations? Two contrasting cases demonstrate variability in the evolution of visions, and illustrate how these can fulfil different roles in assisting teachers during their induction phase.

Introduction

As national curricula for ELT around the world are revised to keep up-to-date with global developments in language teaching, so are teachers required to integrate new methodologies into their lessons (Grassick and Wedell 2018). They are challenged to develop new visions of what is possible in their classrooms, fundamentally different from what they experienced as learners. A key stage for these changes to become effective is the early career induction phase, when novice teachers may feel motivated to implement ideas recently acquired in pre-service teacher education. As they encounter 'real' school life, many novice teachers also re-examine their vocation to stay in the profession. Professional support is essential for them to continue developing competences, such as creating motivating classroom environments. Adequate tools and strategies for teacher induction are crucial to buttress teacher motivation and professional growth. Holistic approaches to teacher education, such as the use of visualization techniques, or the reflection on 'future possible teacher selves' as self-motivational strategies, have received increasing attention in research (e.g. Kubanyiova 2014; Kalaja and Mäntylä 2018). However, there is still little empirical evidence about their utility in early career teacher development.

In Chile, English is a compulsory school subject for 10 to 18-year-old students. The national curriculum suggests a task-based methodology (Ministerio de Educación de Chile 2013). Four-to-five years' undergraduate teacher preparation programmes integrate subject specialist and pedagogy courses with staged practicum phases, culminating in a four-month 'professional practicum' guided in cooperation between schools and university. After its successful completion, teachers are qualified to start teaching at a full teaching load. There is currently growing awareness for the need of induction programmes for newly qualified teachers; however, incipient government programmes have not reached complete coverage. Those that exist seek to encourage

successful professional insertion and long-term retention, a task that requires the use of adequate support strategies.

The aim of this longitudinal multiple case study is to explore a reflective tool for novice teacher professional development, consisting in teachers generating mental images of their 'ideal language teacher selves' and their ideal motivational classrooms in regular intervals. The use of these visualizations intends to address the connection between teacher *and* learner motivation, as part of a larger research project examining novice teachers' developing cognitions about learner motivation. Thus, it tackles the need to develop teachers' self-motivational strategies for 'building resilience and sustaining hope' (Dörnyei and Kubanyiova 2014: 124) during the critical phase of professional insertion, while supporting teachers' development of a motivational teaching style. The study accompanied Chilean novice teachers for up to two years and aims to answer the following questions:

- What images of themselves and their classroom environments do novice teachers create when prompted to visualize themselves as 'motivating teachers'?
- What role do these visualizations play in motivating novice teachers to implement methodological changes towards meaningful, communicative language use (and away from de-contextualized grammar teaching) proposed by the national curriculum?
- How do novice teachers evaluate the use of the visualizations during early professional development?

Following an interpretive approach to research in the analysis and discussion of two contrasting case studies, we hope to contribute to the development of visualization tools and a deeper understanding of their implications.

Theoretical framework

Recent theorizing on teacher education has identified the need for more holistic approaches. Core reflection (Korthagen 2013), for example, suggests attending not only to the teaching context and its practical aspects, but also to deep reflection on teachers' personal visions, missions, and strengths. To prompt this reflection, visualization techniques may constitute a valuable complement. Dörnyei's (2009) idea of using visualizations of 'future possible L2 selves' for motivating language learners, based on Markus and Nurius (1986), was expanded in Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) to language teacher education. This approach builds on earlier explorations of the perceived benefits of visualizations in teacher education, such as the possibility to imagine what is possible (especially if your own past as a learner was different from your anticipated future as a teacher), and to develop a sense of direction and purpose. By creating instances for teachers to reflect on the gap between their idealized vision and their real practice, teachers may feel motivated to work towards this vision. For the generation and verbalisation of these visions, some studies use writing prompts (e.g. Hammerness 2006). However, guided imagery might be more powerful in drawing out unconscious ideal visions: here, participants are first brought into a state

of relaxation, then asked to close their eyes and focus on their 'inner eye' with some softly spoken prompts. Then, participants are asked to draw or talk about their visualization experience, leading to a final reflection contrasting the vision with their reality (cf. Hadfield and Dörnyei 2014).

The study

This study was carried out between 2017 and 2019, with 17 novice teachers graduated from a pre-service ELT programme at a Chilean university. Data collection started immediately after the final practicum. It consisted of group meetings with an average of four participants per meeting, divided into four phases: 1. A guided relaxation. 2. A guided visualization addressing three aspects: a vision of an 'ideal, motivating classroom', a metaphor of the teacher 'self', and a vision of an ideal society reflected in the 'microcosm' of their classroom. 3. Participants were asked to draw or write down what they had seen. 4. They were interviewed in pairs by one of the three researchers. For teacher development reasons, the relaxation and visualization parts were held in English; the interviews were conducted in Spanish to ensure comfort and precision in the participants' responses. We slightly adapted the visualization script from Kubanyiova (2014; see appendix); a 'why?' question that appeared in the original prompt was omitted, as it might distract the participant: 'Why?' questions 'require a cognitive focus ... which runs counter to the imagery experience.' (Hall, Hall, Stradling and Young 2006: 24). However, the question appeared in the follow-up interview in which the teachers' beliefs about learner motivation were explored, too. The interviews were repeated after six, twelve, eighteen, and in some cases twenty-four months, to observe patterns develop over time. In the final interview, participants were invited to evaluate their experience with the visualizations.

Out of the 17 initial participants, seven cases were pre-selected as complete (a minimum of three interviews) and representative of novice teachers entering a career in mainstream schooling. None of them was involved in any official induction scheme. For this paper we then selected two cases that are representative in that they share central features with most other participants but that they also demonstrate how the visualization exercise can serve contrasting functions during the induction process.

The cross-sectional analysis consisted of a process of coding and was complemented with a discourse analysis approach that focused on semantic relationships (e.g. contrasts) and the participants' use of temporal markers. The selected quotes were translated into English.

Findings

Summarizing the seven complete cases, the visualizations of ideal classrooms provided the expected multi-sensory images: colourful classrooms, posters around the walls, some explicit references to nature (trees outside windows, etc.). Auditory

impressions, such as students making 'positive noises', or music, were identified. The most frequently mentioned feeling was happiness. Classroom interaction was usually described as collaborative and learner-centred, with the teacher in a supporting role and learners involved in hands-on creative tasks. Over time, the participants created increasingly realistic images, for example seeing their own students. Some claimed that their visualizations addressed specific learner needs, such as improving reading comprehension. The unusual approach was evaluated positively, especially its relaxing effect. The following two cases (names are pseudonyms) illustrate how contextual and personal factors might assign different functions to the visualization technique.

Nicole – A stable vision in the face of difficulties

Nicole started her career as a highly motivated teacher, emphasizing her own responsibility and capacity to influence her students' commitment to learning English. Despite exceptional grades in her practicum, her employment trajectory was more complicated than anticipated: for two consecutive years, her one-year probationary contracts were not renewed, so she had to find a new position every summer. She related this to her lacking enthusiasm for dealing with the administrative side of teaching in high-control school contexts. When asked about her needs to develop new motivational strategies after her second year she responded: 'At this moment, what I really need is for *me* to be motivated... the administrative problems really make me feel overloaded, stressed out.' (I_5) Her teaching contexts varied widely, including a predominantly male industrial school, a rural all-girls school marked by students' low self-esteem, and an academically oriented school where English was highly valued.

Despite these experiences, her visions remained surprisingly stable over the five semesters: 'In my ideal classroom, I see a lot of different materials (games, school supplies, etc.) and 'spaces' where students can learn English… . I feel confident and peaceful and hear a lot of people laughing. My students are playing games in groups because it's fun and they can help each other learn.' (I_3) The words *fun*, *games*, *smiling / laughing*, and *learning vocabulary* were repeated literally in all her interviews. Likewise, she repeatedly mentioned *active* and *autonomous* learners. As the metaphor of herself, she developed the vision of a 'scout leader' guiding discoveries (I_1), a recurring idea with new aspects appearing in each interview:

> 'Learning English is a whole adventure … they all are my followers so we are going to do the crazy things that the teacher wants so we can learn English and it's all like fun… do other, different things … more practical.' (I_2)
> 'A person who … gives them different tools that they use to accomplish different objectives.' (I_4)
> 'So I helped …, but here the protagonist role is always [taken by] the people who participate in the activity. Not those who organize.' (I_5)

To evaluate the utility of the visualizations (I_5), she reported that these helped her support students in taking risks, and implementing engaging, learner-centred tasks.

However, she felt restricted in her autonomy to do more 'scout-like' activities, such as taking her students to museums or parks. She also thought that the visualizations helped her to stay motivated, even though 'the context doesn't motivate you to be better.' She valued the unconstrained mode of the guided imageries, as here, rather than writing a reflection, 'I can do anything I like because it's my mind.' Albeit somewhat demoralized in her last interview, she compared the visualizations to vision boards, used as a tool to attract success, and as a mental support to reaffirm her mission as a teacher against the odds: 'My ideal classroom is noisy, because they are learning a language and they are talking, but the reality is … that the other colleagues of the other subjects "Hey, make the kids shut up!" I am the expert.' Summarizing her experience as a novice teacher, she still stayed on a positive note: 'Very challenging but gratifying. … I survived the bullets. … My vocation is still unbroken.'

Ximena – Visions for self-monitoring

Contrary to Nicole's case, Ximena found immediate employment stability in a school with a supportive and trusting environment, which helped her face a heavy workload. Her visualizations seemed to play an entirely different role in her professional development: they appeared to work as a self-correcting device towards the implementation of innovative methodologies she had learned about at university:

> 'Something like really crazy happened to me, because when you said "enter your classroom" I saw the typical [classroom] where everyone is sitting down and paying attention, and in that moment I said [to myself] "no, I can't think like this, how can this be my ideal lesson, so typical." … And there it changed. And then … I saw them [seated] around desks in circles, doing like a project, … and me … checking what they were doing, but in general working by themselves, and this is something that I have never done.' (I_1)

A frequent topic in her visualizations was the students' use of the target language, and the contrast between reality and her visions: 'The first time I wrote that they speak in English. The second time I wrote that they *try* to speak in English and I liked this "try" because maybe the first time it was too … unreal. Like I feel it's more … process than final.' (I_2) Her difficulty to get students to meaningfully communicate in English reappeared in the final interview:

> 'I was entering the classroom and saw groups that were working together and they were sharing opinions … I heard they were speaking in English. … They were sharing opinions about the story, … in the school where I work, this could not happen. I mean, it [would be] very difficult to teach a lesson with another sense that was not more grammatical … They have a very low level of English. … In the jigsaw I mentioned before, what happened is that I taught that lesson. I mean, because of that I visualized it because it was one of the best lessons that I had with that year 10 group, but what [really] happened is that they read a text in English, they looked for information in English, but they still didn't have the

[skills to do the] sharing, so they did it in Spanish…. So, maybe move on with that and in the future have them share ideas but in English.' (I_4)

Interestingly, when prompted to create a metaphor of herself, she oscillated, in the four occasions, between two different images: First, a realistic version of herself: 'I saw myself simply standing there, just the way I was... I am the motivation tool and that's it.' (I_1) A year later, she repeated this idea: 'it's the image of myself making them laugh and have fun, giving them confidence.' (I_3) In the other two interviews, she saw herself as the teacher in the movie *Freedom Writers.* She associated this with her students' complex social backgrounds, and her need to invest in their developing confidence as capable learners. This image seemed to fulfill a double function: It made her create a 'future possible self' as a form tutor (I_3) while also helping her reconcile with the excessive workload associated with caring about her students. She recommended watching the movie regularly 'because it really motivates' (I_4).

When evaluating the visualization experience (I_4), she highlighted three ideas: its potential to support goal-setting: 'It is a reflection that … is done rarely, so it helps … if not to organize yourself, but at least to have that aim'; the opportunity to re-live an already taught lesson: 'something I have already done but in an improved version'; and the contrast between her ideal lesson and her 'apprenticeship of observation': 'I am super teacher-centred and my ideal lesson is the total opposite. Everything I experienced during my primary and secondary education was like that, so I find it difficult to change the methodology.'

Discussion

The two contrasting cases illustrate how visualizations can fulfil very different roles in supporting novice teachers. Nicole's clear vision could assist her in taking risks in the classroom (Grassick and Wedell 2018) when the whole-school context provided insufficient support for innovative approaches. Her image of the 'scout leader', who starts by inviting her students to join her in an adventure and ends in her stepping back while students take the protagonist role, illustrates how one image is gradually filled with new meanings, reflecting the varying roles the teacher needs to develop as she acquires more confidence in her students' self-regulatory capacities. However, her case also forces us to wonder how 'strong' a visualized ideal self needs to be to act as a motivating force when a school culture 'of compliance' (Grassick and Wedell op.cit.: 264) thwarts teachers' basic needs of autonomy and relatedness (cf. Ryan and Deci 2000; Hiver, Kim and Kim 2018), undermining their motivation to teach.

Ximena's more unstable vision, fluctuating between seeing herself and invoking the 'Freedom writers' teacher, seemed to act as a source of motivation by helping her identify personal strengths, for example her sense of humour, as suggested in core reflection (Korthagen 2013) or by giving a 'heroic touch' to an excessive workload. It also seemed to have potential in her developing mental images of learner-centred classrooms against a prevailing 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie 1975),

exacerbated by a work context that continued being traditional. Still, more specific support will be needed to 'map the journey from dream to reality' (Hadfield and Dörnyei op.cit.), ideally involving her colleagues to create greater contextual coherence (Grassick and Wedell op.cit.). This could help her close the gap between vision and reality and develop the self-efficacy necessary to stay motivated (cf. Hiver *et al.* op.cit.).

Our participants created visions of motivating classrooms that are in line with curricular requirements: they mostly saw themselves monitoring students during learner-centred, task-based lesson phases. However, when analysing these images and then re-checking the script, we realized that the prompts 'as you walk around the classroom' and 'what are they working on?' might have suggested more learner-centred classrooms than the teachers would have imagined with a different script (such as suggesting: what do you see 'as you stand in front of your students?' or 'what are you talking about to your students?'). As Hall *et al.* (op.cit.: 50) assert, counsellors' interventions can affect 'the flow of the client's images' through subtle suggestions that may manipulate the outcome of a guided imagery. This is something we had not taken into account before undertaking this study. Given the consistence of the produced images with curricular requirements, we believe that the script (in our case, inadvertently) accomplished the 'purpose' of guiding the novice teachers to create visions of themselves managing a learner-centred classroom – just as therapists would use guided imagery of a walk through a meadow to help clients relax. It would be naïve to believe that the association between a 'motivating teacher self' and a learner-centred classroom had as its only source the methodology classes at university, especially as it stands in stark contrast to most of our participants' experiences during the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie 1975), where English tended to be taught in L1, in a teacher-centred way, following a grammar-based syllabus. The 'self-corrections' we observed in Ximena's case study would confirm this notion.

Conclusion

Regarding the novice teachers' evaluations of the use of visualizations, we draw three conclusions: First, the participants valued the holistic, creative format; it seemed to help them go beyond more rational reflective approaches. Second, the teachers confirmed the theoretical claim that visualizations can help keep teaching goals in mind, especially in difficult times. Third, for the enactment of more complex teaching strategies, the visualizations seemed to provide insufficient support. We therefore suggest that teacher development could combine Korthagen's core reflection approach with visualizations of motivating classrooms and future 'motivating teacher selves', as these may bring teachers' strengths and personal aims into view. On the basis of this, strategic, contextually situated, and supported goal-setting will be necessary to map out concrete steps towards those aims, such as developing strategies to foster learners' on-task use of the L2.

More research will be needed to evaluate visualization techniques as tools for teacher development and curricular innovation. It should consider the effect on student motivation and learning, especially if whole departments are invited to develop visions of learner-centred, communicative, motivating language classrooms. Thus, combined teacher development and research could continue providing a source of teacher motivation, as our participant Andrea stated: '…these images came to my mind in the most chaotic moments, such as "oh … I can't go on", it was like … "remember how good you felt."' (I_3)

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Visualization exercise: Visions about motivation

Close your eyes. Connect yourself to your breath, taking it deep down into your lungs. Feel your breath in your lungs … your tummy … your arms … your hands … your legs … your feet … make yourself comfortable on your chair, relax your shoulders, neck,

jaw, tongue, teeth, eyebrows ... your arms and hands ... your legs ... your feet ... feel the chair, the ground beneath you.

Now in your inner eye open the door to your ideal, beautiful, motivating future classroom.

Visualize your students, you yourself as the teacher-motivator. What do you see? feel? hear? as you walk around your classroom? What are you doing? What are your students doing? What kind of things are they learning? What topics, activities, texts, are they working on?

Create this mental picture of your classroom. Make it vivid and clear. Take it with you on your journey.

Now, create a mental picture of yourself, as a motivating teacher. Is there an image or a metaphor that could capture the way in which you visualize yourself?

Taking your 'ideal classroom' beyond its walls, the way in which your students learn, interact, behave... - out into society: What would be the relationship between what goes on in your ideal classroom and the kind of society you would like to see in the twenty-first century? How could your classroom be an instance for a positive change? How could you be an 'agent of change'?

(Adapted from Kubanyiova 2014: 84, and Hammerness 2006: 93).