An Autobiographical Study of Language Teacher's Perceived Psychological Dynamics: Methodological Issues and Insights

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Abstract

Psychological research in second language acquisition (SLA) is a growing field. Much of this research has primarily focused on examining the language learner with comparatively little emphasis on exploring the language teacher. Moreover, psychological research informed by process-oriented approaches views individuals' psychological constructs stable individual difference variables. Recently, there has been a growing interest in the complex dynamic systems perspective, which has led researchers to focus increasingly on the dynamic nature of individuals' psychological variables. This study explores the psychological dynamics of two male participants working at tertiary-level as English language teachers in Pakistan over the long-term timescale of years. Data were generated using autobiographical narratives. An inductive approach, which is inspired by Grounded Theory was then used to analyze the data. The findings demonstrate both stability and change in teachers' experiences, thus suggesting the dynamic nature of their psychology. The paper concludes by discussing the methodological challenges facing future research on individual's psychological dynamics.

Keywords: autobiographical narratives, complexity perspective, dynamism, English language teachers, psychology

Introduction

A vast body of research on psychology in language learning and teaching has examined learners' and teachers' psychological constructs, such as cognitions, self-efficacy, anxiety, motivation and many more (Borg, 1999; Cowie, 2011; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Feryok, 2010; Kubanyiova, 2012). A review of literature indicates that research on individuals' psychology in Second Language Acquisition

(SLA) has tended to focus primarily on the language learner. Apart from some notable exceptions (Saleem, 2018), psychological aspects of language teachers in particular, are relatively less explored and research within this domain indicate clear gaps. Furthermore, in the past, research on psychological aspects in SLA has conceptualized variables such as motivation, attitude and others as stable individual difference variables (Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner, 1985) and has tended to focus on examining individuals' psychological dimensions using questionnaires. Recently, researchers have increasingly recognized the importance of examining the dynamic nature of individuals' psychological variables (Feryok, 2010; Kubanyiova, 2012; Mercer, 2011).

This article will extend understanding of language teachers' perceived psychological dynamics by exploring the ways in which teachers' psychology appears to develop over time. The qualitative study reported in this paper seeks to explore the dynamics of language teachers' psychology. It provides background information for the study on language teacher psychology. Research focusing on the key psychological variables in second language (L2) teaching is reviewed to critically evaluate typical methodological approaches. Then, in light of the methodological issues, a discussion on the findings is presented and conclusion drawn with possible suggestions for future research into language teachers' psychology.

Complexity and dynamism are the key features of complex dynamic systems framework, yet very few studies on learners' and teachers' psychological aspects tend to undertake a complexity-informed inquiry. For instance, studies have considered how this perspective might help to explore the nature of beliefs involved in language learner self-concept (Mercer, 2011) and motivational dynamics (Waninge, Dörnyei & De Bot, 2014). Even though SLA research has increasingly engaged with this perspective, it has not yet been employed to explore an individual's psychology as an integrated whole, and to explain how the various components of the system interact and develop over time. Therefore, this study proposes a qualitative inquiry informed by complex dynamic systems perspective in order to gain an understanding of teachers' psychological dynamics.

Research Question

1. In what ways do teachers' psychology appears to be dynamic?

Literature Review

Despite the fact that teachers play a vital role in teaching and learning processes and also in developing a healthy classroom environment, language learning psychology research has tended to focus primarily on the language learners (Mercer, Oberdorfer & Saleem, 2016). They highlight the importance of teachers' personal and professional welfare, which has gains not only for teachers themselves, but also for learners and thus, argue that teacher psychology is equally if not more important than learner psychology.

Educational research has shown how intrinsically motivated and self-determined teachers motivate learners (Hanfstingl, Andreitz, Müller & Thomas, 2010) as well as how disengaged and demotivated learners adversely affect teachers' stress levels (Frenzel & Stephens, 2013). However, very few studies examine teacher psychology and research within this domain indicates clear gaps. A considerable body of research on teacher psychology in SLA focuses on examining cognitions and identity. Borg's (2006) encompassing term 'teacher cognition' includes in its scope an array of concepts or constructs, such as attitudes (Yoshiyuki, 2011), pedagogical content (Borg, 1999; Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver & Thwaite, 2001), prior learning experiences (Golombek, 1998; Hayes, 2005), language teaching practices (Woods, 1996), language learning processes (Peacock, 2001) and identity (Liu & Xu, 2011). Over the last two decades, researchers have extensively studied these constructs in the field of language teaching, a comprehensive overview of which can be seen in Borg (2006) and Cheung, Said and Park, (2015). Studies on teacher cognitions have tended to employ research approaches that significantly contribute to our understanding of its dynamic nature (Freeman, 1993). A considerable number of these studies draw on longitudinal qualitative data to show how language teacher cognitions for example, developed over a period of time (Nunan, 1992; Wyatt & Borg, 2011). However, such studies present a fragmented understanding of the dynamic nature of cognitions by focusing on either beliefs or attitude and not psychology as a whole. Moreover Mercer, Oberdorfer and Saleem, (2016) point out that although there are some well-established domains of enquiry in teacher psychology in SLA, research in this field is generally less developed when compared to research on learner psychology.

Recent research is increasingly recognizing the absence of empirical works

on some key aspects related to teacher psychology. One particular aspect that many researchers believe remains under-researched is language teachers' motivation (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Falout, 2010). Among the few studies that consider examining ESL teacher motivation, the focus has mainly been on primary and secondary level language teachers (Kassabgy et al., 2001). Little is known about tertiary-level ESL teacher motivation (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Falout, 2010). Moreover, most of these studies rely on quantitative method, which provides a snapshot perspective enabling insights into teachers' motivation at a single moment in time (Dörnyei, 2005).

Similarly, it is only recently that researchers have started paying attention to teacher autonomy in SLA (Benson, 2007; Lamb & Reinders, 2008). While the field still remains relatively less explored, a few studies that have examined teacher autonomy have shown how significant it is for learners as well as for teachers' personal and professional wellbeing (Pearson & Moomow, 2005).

Another area with considerable implications for a healthy teaching learning environment and for teacher well-being concerns teacher emotions; however, there are a very few studies examining language teacher emotions (Cowie, 2011; King, 2016). One particular teacher emotion that has been extensively researched is stress. Horwitz (1996) for instance, examined non-native speaker (NNS) teachers including pre-service teachers' anxiety and revealed that most of the NNS teachers reportedly experienced a considerable degree of stress and perceived their language deficiencies to be associated with their anxiety. Similarly, Mousavi (2007) studied the causes of stress among native speaker (NS) and NNS EFL teachers. The findings of this study indicated that the factors causing stress among teachers include concerns of being non-native and their perceptions of language competence. One notable exception that explored complexity of language teacher emotions as a whole is Saleem (2018), who showed through his study how the teacher's emotions appeared to undergo constant changes over the course of one academic term. Whilst longitudinal studies have investigated the dynamic nature of teacher cognitions, little research has been carried out to examine the dynamic character of other psychological aspects, such as teacher emotions, motivations and others (Cowie, 2011; Kubanyiova, 2009) or teacher psychology as a whole for that matter. Keeping in view the developments as well as the gaps in research on language teachers' psychological aspects, it is argued that teachers' psychology research needs to

expand further and employ longitudinal designs in order to explore the dynamic developments of an individual's psychology as a whole.

Thus, based on consideration of the literature, which suggests that research on affect-related variables tend to adopt a linear and reductionist view and focus primarily on the learners, in this article I argue for taking a holistic approach that explores teachers' diverse psychological experiences including cognition, emotions, motivations and behaviors across the course of their academic and professional life. Moreover, although there is increasing recognition of the fact that the psychological factors are interrelated and unstable (Dörnyei, 2010), what has not yet been done is to explore teachers' cognitions, emotions, motivations and behaviors using a theoretical framework, such as the complexity perspective, that directly studies systems that are complex and dynamic.

Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) identify several characteristics of complex dynamic systems. First, complex systems are heterogeneous, having a multitude of interrelated components. Another feature is its dynamic nature that enables the system to evolve and change over time (De Bot, 2008). These changes in the system are non-linear meaning that any amount of change in an initial state creates unpredictable changes in the later states. Also, complex systems are contextualized, that is, they are related to other systems (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). They co-adapt by responding to and influencing changes in other systems and also draw on resources and influences from other systems (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). Complex systems self-organize despite chaotic patterns of interactions among their components for an order to emerge (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

Methodology

The methodological design of this small-scale study drew on the principles and procedures of qualitative case study research (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014) informed by complex dynamic systems perspective in order to explore the meaning and significance of contingent and individual phenomena in relation to teachers' lived psychological experience over time (Brown & White, 2010, p. 434). Considering that the broad purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of teachers' psychological dynamics, I have sought a method of inquiry that serves as a means by which people give their lives meaning across time (Pavlenko, 2007).

To achieve this aim, data were generated using teacher autobiographies. I have chosen to employ the term teacher autobiography in line with the rationale put forward by Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik (2014), who view autobiographies as teachers' reflections on practices, teaching contexts, emotions, developments and language learning. This method assumes that the construction of ones' own reality is set in their stories of experience and illustrates the temporal notion of experience, recognizing that one's understanding of people and events changes (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In this study, my role as a researcher is to discover the connectedness of the participants' story as it moves through time, and thus making explicit the transfer of knowledge, progressing from an incomplete story to a more complete one (Gudmundsdottir, 1995 as cited in Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Data Collection Method

In order to explore teachers' psychological dynamism, data were generated using autobiographies. Teacher participants were asked to retrospectively reflect on their English language learning and teaching history. To support teachers' retrospective reflections about their psychological experiences, teachers were provided with a set of guiding questions to support teachers' retrospective reflections about their psychological experiences (e.g. Can you tell me something about your language teaching history, What experiences or/and people have been important to you on your journey to becoming a language teacher?, What are some of the things that you would like to change about your job/work in the years to come?). In order to allow teachers' retrospective stories across the course of their academic and professional lives to emerge, the guiding questions were designed considering both thematic and dynamic dimensions.

Participants and Setting

The present study generated data from two male tertiary-level English language teachers in Pakistan. The first participant teacher, Martin (a pseudonym), was a 33 year old English language teacher at a university in Pakistan where he had been working as a research assistant. Prior to joining this university, Martin had been teaching English language and communication skills courses at a state university in Pakistan. Martin considers this experience to be the most challenging experience as he had to teach in rather difficult circumstances soon after completing his Master's in English linguistics. Martin had taught English for seven years before

he began to work as a research assistant. According to him, the main reason to quit the teaching profession and work as a research assistant was his lack of motivation to teach.

The second participant, Simon (a pseudonym) on the other hand, was strongly passionate about teaching English language. He was 27 years old having a Master's in English Literature. At the time of this study, he had been teaching English language to non-English majors, undergraduate students for three years at a university in Pakistan. For both Martin and Simon, English was their L2 and they had spent a minimum of 12 and a maximum of 16 years in learning English language. In Pakistan, the minimum requirement for tertiary-level teaching is a Master's degree and pre-service teacher training is not mandatory; therefore, both teachers started teaching immediately after completing their professional degree. The completed teacher autobiographies varied in length. Simon's autobiography was spread over 2 pages (1256 words) while Martin's was approximately 4 pages (2334 words).

Data Analysis

Inspired by Grounded Theory, an inductive approach to data analysis was adopted. Data were coded and analyzed with no preconceived framework at the outset of analysis. The data were coded line-by-line using the software Atlas.ti version 7.5.15. Once the line-by-line or open codes highlighting the significant aspects of the autobiographies were formulated, a second wave of coding was carried out and supercodes created until no new codes emerged. The supercodes identifying major patterns in the initial coding were generated so that conclusions could be drawn and verified (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). In addition, memos were generated during the coding process to formulate questions related to the methodological and functional aspects of exploring the dynamics of teachers' psychology through autobiographies. Additionally, in order to understand teachers' psychological dynamics, data were analyzed separately on a word document as a matrix, which enabled both chronological and thematic organization of data generated using autobiographies (Saldaña, 2013). The supercodes and memos were then considered in light of a complex dynamic systems perspective. Following is a discussion of the findings. In the results section 'PD1' refers to the primary document.

Findings

In this study, the data analysis revealed that teachers' psychology does not appear to be fully static, rather the interaction of their diverse psychological aspect gives rise to a constant change in their psychological experiences. The changes in teachers' psychology were apparent not only in terms of strength and valence, but also in social contexts. Moreover, the factors affecting change in psychological experiences varied for each teacher. It was possible to gain understanding of these individual variations given this study's use to autobiographies, which enabled teachers to retrospectively reflect on their unique lived experience.

Teachers' Psychological Variability

In this section, I will consider the data to understand the ways in which teachers' psychological experiences appear to be dynamic. Although it is difficult to fully separate each teacher's psychological experiences, analyzing the data in this way is phenomenologically more valid (Dörnyei, 2010) and also useful to connect with the literature.

Professional motivation. The teachers' data revealed psychological variability from a long-term perspective particularly, on the timescale of years. An example of this can be seen from a selection of Martin's autobiography, for instance, when he reflected upon his motivation to become a language teacher and reported a change of interest from teaching to researching, he expressed:

> *"After all these years, my motivation to remain a language teacher has almost died. I am not really sure why this has happened, but I feel that I am now more inclined to research work than anything else like language teaching."*

Although the rationale behind using autobiographies was to explore the dynamics of teachers' psychology on a timescale of years, interestingly the data appears to suggest that whatever teachers' describe is only a reported change of their psychological experiences with no explicit reference to when exactly these changes occurred. Moreover, Martin's reported change in motivation to teach hints at the negative motivational valence and the strength or intensity with which his motivation to teach appears to change, as he reportedly perceives it to have almost

died. Moreover, it is interesting to see the degree of uncertainty he experiences in terms of the factors influencing his motivation, which suggests connections between his cognitions and motivation (Kubanyiova, 2012).

Pedagogical beliefs and practices. In addition to the motivational component, the data revealed changes in other components of Martin's psychology as well. One such example is the reported change in his pedagogical beliefs and practices. This is evident, for instance, when he states:

> *"Yes, I have changed quite a lot. I have gone through a constant change in my beliefs, ideology and my style of teaching. Yes, now I do not teach to practice my speaking skills rather to allow my students to practice language."*

Once again, the degree of his reported change in cognitions and behaviors is clearly evident, as he perceives himself to have changed quite a lot. However, in his data, he does not reflect on the factors affecting this change, which suggests the limitations autobiographical narratives can have as a research method when compared to face-to-face semi-structured interviews, which might enable insights into the factors influencing change in teachers' lived experiences to emerge. Moreover, as discussed in the examples above, dynamism at one level suggests a reported change in psychological experiences. But a second level of interpretation that relates to these changes in, for example, Martin's beliefs and practices, is the stability in beliefs evident for that specific moment in time during which it was held. Whether it is his earlier belief to improve his own language skills or the latter one, which is more student-centered, these beliefs tend to exhibit a sense of stability within a particular timeframe (Wyatt & Borg, 2011).

From a long-term perspective of years, another interesting aspect that relates to the dynamics of teachers' psychology can be seen in how Simon's present feelings and cognitions appear to emerge from his past teaching experiences as he reports:

"When I was in my first year as a teacher, a student asked me what a collective noun was. I knew the answer practically, but didn't know in theoretical

terms. Now that I know what a collective noun is, I wish the moment to come back so that I could answer my student confidently."

The above example shows changes in Simon's psychology as he experiences teaching in diverse teaching contexts over the long-term timescale of years. This suggests that it is not possible to meaningfully separate psychological experiences this teacher had undergone across different contexts and timescales (King, 2016). The data analysis revealed that while there were similarities in teachers' gender and professional background, and even the educational level they taught at the time of this study (tertiary), both teachers' description of the their psychological dynamism on the long-term timescale of years varied. Such variations suggest the individual nature of their psychology.

Teachers' Psychological Stability

In this study, whilst each teacher's psychology displayed considerable variations on the long-term timescale of years, it also revealed periods of relative stability in certain dimensions of teachers' psychology. The major psychological dimensions which showed relative stability include teachers' motivation, attitudes and beliefs.

Motivation and Attitudes. Simon's reported data showed stability in motivation and attitudes, such as when he describes his teaching experience. He stated:

> *"As of now, nothing has been able to change my motivation. I am as enthusiastic about teaching English language as I was when I began teaching four years back."*

> *"My attitude has never gotten negative and remains positive come what may!"*

Whilst Simon reported stability in his professional motivation and attitudes, he does not reflect on the possible factors which kept his motivation stable over the course of his professional career. As discussed earlier, this suggests the limitations of employing autobiographical narratives as a research method when compared to

face-to-face semi-structured interviews.

Certainty of Beliefs. Another aspect of teachers' psychology, which does not appear to change is the degree of certainty of their beliefs. At several instances in his retrospective account, Martin expresses his strong conviction for teaching English language:

> *"I strongly believe that my attitude towards English language has not gone through much modification. It has mostly remained the same: socioeconomic empowerment."*

Thus, whilst teachers' psychology appeared to be dynamic, it can be thought of as exhibiting on the one hand fluctuations as evident from Martin's change in motivation to teach while, on the other hand, displaying long-term stability. In this respect, Simon for instance, viewed his attitude to remain positive, while Martin considered socioeconomic empowerment to be a constant source of motivation for him to teach English language.

Discussion

One significant aspect that emerged from this study is the fact that a close understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the autobiographical guide can enhance the outcomes of the autobiographical task. Even though the guiding prompts triggered participants' thinking and led them to share their academic and professional experiences, the structural weaknesses of the narrative guide also led to participants providing information as though they were completing a question/answer task rather than telling a story of their academic and professional experiences.

Thus, whilst the findings of this study suggest that the use of autobiographical narratives enabled teachers' psychological dynamics to emerge, it may be more useful to employ research methods that enable face-to-face probing, such as semi-structured interviews, with specific reference to the topic and greater scope of generating rich information.

Moreover, the complexity framework can be useful in examining individuals' psychology and the functioning of the system can be meaningfully understood

through the interconnections between various components (Dörnyei, 2010). The ways in which teachers expressed their psychological experiences showed how various affective, cognitive and behavioral components of teachers' psychology form a complex system, which is closely interrelated to each other.

The findings also confirm that teachers' psychology appears to be dynamic as the data showed both stability and change in teachers' psychological experiences. As noted earlier, Martin's motivation and belief changed with respect to its content. But in term of certainty with which he held specific beliefs about his motivation to teach, there was more stability. Even though the dynamics and stable dimensions were somewhat evident in teachers' autobiographies, but given that their accounts were brief (or following a question/answer format), it was difficult to interpret their psychological changes and developments on specific timescales. Such information might possibly be elicited by either employing multiple research methods, such as interviews, diaries and others. Also, it would be more meaningful to examine the dynamic nature of teachers' psychology on the specific timescale of days, weeks and months to understand how the short-term changes in ones' thoughts, emotions, motivations and behaviors interact with the long-term psychological changes and personal development. Indeed, this would require engaging with other research tools such as weekly diaries, observations and stimulated recalls.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study provide a clear understanding of the dynamic nature of teachers' psychology as well as of the limitations of autobiographies as a research method to elicit data on teachers' psychological dynamic. This is not to suggest the inappropriacy of this research method per se, as a range of previous studies have shown the usefulness of generating descriptive data through diaries and narratives. Instead, in this study, the participants' overall interest and willingness to engage with these particular research methods suggest that researchers perhaps need to adapt in response to particularities of the research settings. An analysis and interpretation of teachers' autobiographies offer practical insights to help the researcher become aware of the strengths and weakness of the autobiographical guide and how it can be better adapted for use in the future research. An important consideration in this regard includes designing of other research tools such as weekly diaries and stimulated recalls in order to examine the psychological changes and developments across different timescales.

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