

## **How do Foreign Language Teachers Maintain their Proficiency? A Grounded Theory Approach**

Lorena Valmori  
Second Language Studies Program  
Michigan State University  
valmoril@msu.edu

---

The recent increase in studies using the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005) to investigate language teachers' engagement (or lack thereof) in professional development (e.g., Hiver, 2013; Kubanyiova 2009; Kumazava, 2013) shows the increasing interest in bridging the research gap between language teacher education and teacher motivation. With the aim of contributing to this body of motivation research, this interview-based study uses a grounded theory approach to address the issues of how foreign language (FL) teachers in two types of Italian high schools (college preparation schools and vocational schools) experience and respond to changes in their proficiency. Findings show the influence of these pedagogical contexts on teachers' proficiency and engagement in development as well as the dynamic complexity of motivational processes. When dealing with professional development, FL teachers face two main decision-making moments: 1) deciding whether or not to engage in professional development activities; 2) maintaining their engagement with or without a supportive community. Their decision to engage often depends on the emotional dissonance between teachers' actual and possible L2 selves. The results have implications for designing in-service professional development courses with a bottom-up approach that take into consideration teachers' needs according to their school environments and enhance teachers' L2 selves' emotional guiding power.

Research in SLA has long prioritized adult learners' capacity to attain advanced L2 proficiency (or lack thereof) over the description of advanced L2 performance abilities and the necessary engagement to maintain them (Byrnes, 2012). Language learning is a life-long process and foreign language (FL) teachers are often considered one of the best examples of successful committed advanced learners. Arguably, their language proficiency and its improvement over time is crucial for them to be effective FL teachers (Banno, 2003;

Reves & Medgyes, 1994; Vélez-Rendón, 2002) as the language is both the means and the objective of their teaching. Moreover, language proficiency development is important for building FL teachers' identity because "their experiences as teachers are often situated on the same trajectory as their linguistic development" (Miller & Kubota, 2013, p. 246). The growing literature on language teacher education (see Schulz, 2000 and Vélez-Rendón, 2002 for overviews) has also shown that FL proficiency is interrelated with many other

factors such as previous experiences, pre-service programs, teachers' beliefs, and teachers' reflection and collaboration, which together contribute to language teachers' FL development. In her historical overview of FL teacher development, Schulz (2000) highlighted that "[t]he preparation of ... FL teachers has been a frequently discussed topic during the past century" (p.495). However, to better understand how FL teachers manage their dual role as both life-long FL learners and FL teachers as well as grapple with what motivates them to continue their development, empirical research should also address the more neglected area of in-service teachers' development.

The recent growth in the number of studies that have used Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System to investigate language teachers' engagement (or lack thereof) in professional development (e.g., Hiver, 2013; Kubanyiova 2009; Kumazava, 2013) shows the increasing interest in bridging the gap in research between language teacher education and teachers' motivation. This paper seeks to contribute to the field by delving into the actual practices that in-service FL teachers use and the obstacles they encounter in maintaining their proficiency. I begin by reviewing previous findings about the role of FL teachers' proficiency and motivation in teaching. Next, I explain the rationale for this qualitative study and for a grounded theory approach. I then provide the method and results of the analysis by means of excerpts and a flow chart which summarizes the proposed grounded theory of FL teachers' engagement in maintaining proficiency. I

conclude with implications of the present study for FL teachers' professional development and for future studies.

### **Foreign Language Teachers' Proficiency**

In his discussion of teachers' language ability, Banno (2003) cited several studies (e.g., Brown, 1994; Hadley & Yoshioka-Hadley, 1996; Harmer, 1998; Shimizu, 1995) that identified sufficient oral proficiency, standard accent, clear pronunciation, and good grammar knowledge as essential characteristics of a good language teacher. Arguably, the concept of FL teachers' proficiency is multifaceted and needs to be defined and contextualized in its relationship with teaching experience and teaching approaches.

Definitions of FL proficiency can range from native-like attainment (see Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2008, 2009) to Piller's (2002) use-oriented description as a temporary phenomenon specific to context, audience, and medium. Looking at proficiency from a cognitive perspective, 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 sociolinguistic situated concept of proficiency which is more attainable. Arguably, FL teachers should master the language they teach; however, their proficiency level can vary and be specific to their teaching context. In Italy, where the current study is situated, during the 2013 national teachers' competitive exam for tenure positions, the bar for FL

teachers' proficiency level was set at a minimum of C1 (proficient user) according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Language teachers in Italian high schools are therefore expected to be able to "express [themselves] fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions...[and] use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes" (CEFR, 2001, p.24). Such command of the FL is essential because, as explained in Chambless (2012), there is a possible causal connection between teachers' target language (TL) proficiency and the teaching and learning that take place in the classroom. According to her, "[FL teachers] have to provide abundant and varied input as well as guide students to interact, interpret and negotiate meaning" (p.144). FL teachers' proficiency therefore seems to impact students' learning directly, as the amount of TL spoken in class, and the teaching approach adopted as a result of teachers' proficiency deeply inform students' learning process.

### **Native and Non-native Speaker Teachers**

A survey of over 200 EFL teachers (Reves & Medgyes, 1994) showed that many non-native speaker teachers felt insecure about their FL proficiency, with negative consequences on their self-efficacy. The discrepancy between the high expectations on FL teachers' proficiency and their insecurity about it can undermine teachers' confidence and motivation. Horwitz (1996), in her research on teachers' foreign language anxiety, pointed out that language teachers are expected to be experts

in their subject matter and speak flawlessly in front of the class, but like any other teacher, they have some knowledge gaps in their teaching specialty and there is always the possibility of mistakes and vocabulary lapses. Horwitz claimed that anxiety and inferiority complexes in foreign language teachers are caused by the pursuit of an idealized level of proficiency set by a hard-to-attain native-speaker model.

Medgyes (2001) argued, in his comparison of native English speaker teachers and non-native English speaker teachers, that both types of teachers are potentially equally effective, as the former provide language models to students, while the latter are learner models. Their respective strengths and weaknesses balance each other out, but only when non-native English speaker teachers have high overall language proficiency. Medgyes claimed that "the ideal non-native English speaker teacher is someone who has achieved near-native proficiency in English" and therefore "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 lack of collaborative support among others. In light of the importance of language teachers' proficiency for their profession and their students, how FL teachers maintain their proficiency and their sustained motivation warrant investigation.

### **Students' and Teachers' Motivation**

Ushioda and Dörnyei (2012) maintained that “[l]anguage learning is a sustained and often tedious process and [they] felt that the secret of successful learners was their possession of a superordinate vision that kept them on track” (p.25). Practicing and maintaining FL proficiency over the course of one’s career involves teachers’ intrinsic motivation, which is defined by Dörnyei (2001) as “the inherent joy of pursuing a meaningful activity related to one’s subject area of interest, in an autonomous manner, within a vivacious collegial community, with self-efficacy.” (p.159). The level of effort and persistence can be influenced and modified by external conditions and constraints of the social context of the job, such as stress, restricted autonomy, insufficient self-efficacy and an inadequate career structure. Over the course of a decade, Dörnyei’s framework of L2 motivation developed into a self-system approach, in an effort to move away from linear models and take into consideration the dynamic interaction of internal and contextual processes that shape engagement in learning. His *L2 Motivational Self-System* (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009) is based on the motivational power of future self-guides. Building on Markus and Nurius (1986) seminal paper, Dörnyei’s model is made up of two main types of possible selves: 1) *ideal self*, what one would like to become (hopes, aspirations, or wishes); and 2) *ought-to self*, what one believes one ought to become (based on one’s sense of duties, obligations, or moral responsibilities). The possible selves’ promotion (*ideal self*) or prevention (*ought-to self*) actions are triggered by self-regulatory mechanisms.

Higgins’s (1987, 1998) *Self-discrepancy Theory* explains that the tension between learners’ L2 actual self and their future selves can transform motivation into action to reduce the discrepancy if learners’ emotions are involved. Only when strong emotions such as fear, hope or obligation are tied to the L2 future selves can self-guides operate their motivational properties. The *L2 Motivational Self System* has become a widely used paradigm to investigate learners’ motivation to engage in learning (e.g., Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009); however, only a few researchers have used it to investigate teachers’ L2 motivational selves.

In keeping with Dörnyei’s (2005) *L2 Motivational Self-System* and Higgins’s (1987) *Self-discrepancy theory*, Kubanyiova (2007, 2009) developed a theoretical model of *Language Teacher Conceptual Change* that provides a framework to understand “why teachers engage in specific classroom practices [and also] why some of them develop ... while others remain unaltered” (p. 318). The framework is based on the construct of a *Possible Language Teacher Self*. In this model, the *ideal self* represents language teachers’ aspirations, the *ought-to self* represents teachers’ perceived external obligations with regards to their work, and the *feared self* represents possible negative consequences when obligations are not lived up to. In her study on in-service EFL teachers in Slovakia, the perceived discrepancy and emotional dissonance between teachers’ actual self and their ideal, ought-to or feared selves failed to trigger teachers’ engagement in reform activities. Such activities contradicted teachers’ ought-

to selves and were not perceived as a means of achieving the desired condition.

Along a similar line as Kubanyiova, Hiver (2013) used the construct of a *Possible Language Teacher Self* to explore language teacher development. His study on Korean in-service EFL teachers showed that continuing teacher development was an emotional endeavor: teachers driven by ideal teacher selves conceived it as positive enhancement, while teachers driven by feared teacher selves perceived it as reparatory in nature and accompanied by negative emotions. One of Hiver's premises was that emotions permeate all facets of teaching and they are therefore "significant catalysts driving decisions to engage in continuing teacher development" (p.213). He highlighted that emotions are conducive or detrimental not only to teachers' decision to engage in professional development but also to sustain that decision, as the perception of anomalies between present and future selves are inseparable from affective states. Given that teaching is an emotionally charged vocation involving self-concept and aspects of personal and professional identity, it is fair to assert that teachers' motivation and commitment undoubtedly affect their learners. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) underscores the importance of a teacher-student relationship, as he argues that "the best way to get students to believe that it makes sense to pursue knowledge is to believe in it oneself" (p.72). Put simply, the positive impact of good teachers may be attributed to the strength of their commitment towards the subject matter, which gives students a similar willingness to pursue knowledge.

Students look for role models who are committed and believe in what they do (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

In light of the impact of FL teachers' proficiency and motivation to improve on FL education, Chambless (2012) called for more empirical studies, especially on "what happens to teachers' proficiency level post-graduation [and whether] in-service teachers tend to maintain their [...] oral proficiency" (p. 157). Such empirical research is needed to fill the gap between pre-service language teacher education and what FL teachers encounter over the course of their teaching career. When professional development is not compulsory and is expected to be teacher-initiated, it is essential to understand how initiation mechanisms work and how they can be triggered. An investigation of data about FL teachers' engagement in professional development can shed light on (a) FL teachers' needs at different stages of their career and in different environments, and (b) how best to create conditions for bottom-up professional development to support TL maintenance and improvement.

### **The Exploratory Quantitative Study**

Research (Bateman, 2008, Chacon, 2005, Cooper, 2004; Eslami & Fatahi, 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. Moreover, self-perceived inadequate proficiency could send a negative message to students about their language learning abilities and ultimately provide a negative role model for language

learners. In particular, in Fraga-Cañadas's (2010) study, surveys indicated that 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 TL outside the classroom.

In contrast to Fraga-Cañadas's results, an exploratory survey with Italian FL high-school teachers showed a significant, positive change in proficiency (e.g., speaking, pronunciation, listening and reading), and engagement in activities (e.g., speaking the TL and general media use in the TL) to maintain their proficiency over the course of their teaching careers. Moreover, analysis showed an effect of type of school, as teachers in college preparation schools were almost six times more likely to improve their writing skills and five times more likely to improve their speaking skills than teachers in vocational schools. The relationship highlighted earlier (e.g., Eslami & Fatahi, 2008; Fraga-Cañadas, 2010; Yilmaz, 2011) between teachers' proficiency and teaching approach was corroborated by results that showed that teachers who perceived improvements in their proficiency were four times more likely to use a communicative approach than individuals who perceived that their proficiency had not improved. Finally, regarding the relationship between proficiency and motivation, the data indicated that teachers in different types of schools had similar levels of motivation when they perceived that their proficiency had improved over time. However, teachers' motivation in vocational schools increased

further when they self-reported either a stabilization or decrease in their proficiency. Their motivation also increased when teachers in college preparation schools felt their proficiency had decreased. These apparently counterintuitive results show the limitations of linear models in L2 motivation research, as temporal and contextual variability also play a role in the dynamic complexity of motivational processes.

Further, Ushioda and Dörnyei (2012) called for more qualitative methods of inquiry to complement the quantitative paradigm "in an effort to address the dynamic and situated complexity of L2 motivation" (p.402). The current qualitative study on teachers' engagement in professional development is therefore a follow-up research project inspired by the unexpected findings of my exploratory quantitative study. The quantitative inquiry left open many questions regarding the possible reasons and the nature of teachers' engagement (or lack thereof) in maintaining their proficiency. By means of semi-structured interviews, the present study delves into foreign language teachers' perception of their progress in language proficiency, its contribution to in-class practices, and the nature and form of their commitment to maintain it. I analyzed interview data with a grounded theory approach to ensure a bottom-up perspective. Within this framework, issues and possible trajectories for meaningful in-service teachers' professional development practices emerged from the analysis of the data.

### **A Grounded Theory Approach**

Strauss and Corbin's (1998) *Grounded Theory Approach* refers to a theory that emerges from data which are systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. In this study based on semi-structured interviews, I combined Strauss and Corbin's systematic approach with Charmaz's (2006) interpretive one. While the former provides structured theory-building procedures from emerging themes, the latter, within a constructivist framework, highlights the researcher's interpreting role, as theories are grounded in the views and perspectives of the individuals involved. In conceptualizing the research interview not just as a tool, but as a social practice (Talmy, 2010), the discourse between the interviewer and the interviewee is seen as being situated and co-constructed by them. In other words, the research interview is a site for investigation itself, where the "voice" of the interlocutors is situationally contingent, and both the "what" (the content) and the "how" (the linguistic and interactional resources used) collaboratively generate the data. Thus, from this perspective, not only the data but also their analysis are collaboratively produced (Charmaz, 2006; Talmy, 2010).

While case studies make up much of the qualitative research concerning FL teachers (e.g., Fraga-Cañada, 2009, Ryan, 1998; Sarroub 2001), there is a paucity of studies in this methodology (i.e., grounded theory) which is oriented toward theory-building (e.g., Pajak & Blasé, 1989; Watze, 2007). In his longitudinal study on how nine novice high school FL teachers in the U.S. changed their pedagogical knowledge in the first two years of teaching, Watze

(2007) explained that instead of studying individual participants, grounded theory analytical procedures "facilitated consideration of the data as a single unit and helped to develop an explanatory theoretical framework across participants" (p.68). The aim is therefore to go beyond single cases, and to consider common (or diverging) emergent trajectories participants took within the broader context. With the same intent, building on the constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2006) to maintain participants' presence throughout, I conducted semi-structured interviews in this study to enable teachers to address the issues of proficiency and challenges in maintaining it in their own words and to be able to reconstruct common trajectories out of the whole data set. As explained by Miller, Bonner, and Francis (2006), with this methodology "issues of importance to participants emerge from the stories that they tell about an area of interest that they have in common with the researcher" (p. 3). The research is thus guided by questions on an issue of common interest. This enabled me to use an inductive approach, without preconceived ideas to prove or disprove, but an interest to shed light on the issue through the data.

### **Research questions**

The following research questions guided the interview-based study:

*1. How do foreign language teachers perceive the change in their proficiency during the course of their teaching career?*

2. *What do foreign language teachers do to maintain their proficiency over time?*

3. *How can foreign language teachers' perceived proficiency influence their teaching practices?*

### **Methodology**

The qualitative nature of the current study requires an introduction of the Italian high school context where the study is situated. After the description of the context, I introduce the participants, my positionality as a researcher in this context, and the data collection procedures.

### **Participants and Teaching context**

**The context.** This study is situated in the Italian high school system, which comprises three types of high schools: college preparation, technical, and vocational. They differ from each other in terms of final language learning goals and levels, types of students, and teaching approaches. The high school system offers the possibility of studying a limited range of foreign languages, which are unevenly distributed: 97.8% of students study English, 26.7% French, 7.5 % Spanish, and 5.8% German (Eurydice, 2012). The Italian Ministry of Education has set the final proficiency level for college preparation schools as B2+/C1 (MIUR, 2005) on the CEFR, and B2 for technical and vocational schools (INDIRE, 2010). Students in college preparation schools are generally more inclined to study and tend to continue their studies after graduation. Learning one or more foreign languages, in particular English, is for them part and parcel of a well-rounded education. Students in

technical schools receive in-depth instruction in one specific area (e.g., chemistry, mechanics, business) and, depending on their future goals, they might see learning a foreign language as peripheral in their education. Students in vocational schools are more inclined to study practical subject matters and receive training designed to prepare them for vocations such as plumber, mechanic, and electrician. They often have variable academic performances and had behavioral issues during their previous schooling, thus learning a language can be a challenging endeavor for them.

The three school environments (college preparation school, technical school and vocational school) present teachers with very different challenges. Therefore, it is understandable that a long teaching experience in one type of school could affect and inform teaching approaches, teachers' proficiency, and their engagement in maintaining it.

**The teachers.** Participants were nine Italian FL high school teachers (seven female and one male) from a pool of 84 FL teachers who took part in an exploratory online survey. After taking the anonymous survey, these nine teachers consented to follow-up interviews. Sampling was both purposeful (foreign language teachers with different lengths of teaching experience working in different types of high schools) and convenient (volunteers). This self-selected sample of teachers cannot be considered representative of the population of Italian FL high school teachers, while their voluntary participation in the study can be considered a sign of their active interest

Table 1. *Participants' information.*

Pseudonym	Years taught	Language taught	Current type of school
Suzy	30	English	College preparation school
Gloria	30	English	College preparation school
Betty	27	English	College preparation school
Lucy	13	Spanish	College preparation school
Christy	15	English	Vocational school and College prep.
John	26	English	Vocational school
Tanya	13	English	Vocational school
Stephanie	12	English	Vocational school
Julie	6	French	Vocational school

and commitment to their professional development.

The women's ages spanned from late thirties to early fifties and the man was in his fifties. To ensure participants' confidentiality, I used pseudonyms throughout this paper. All teachers had studied foreign languages and literatures at university, except one (Lucy) who studied translation and interpretation. While five teachers had worked in different types of schools, John had only worked in vocational schools and Lucy, Betty and Gloria had worked only in college preparation schools. At the time of the interviews, four teachers were working in vocational schools, four in a college preparation school, and one had classes in both types of schools. Table 1 summarizes the main information about the participants.

**Researcher's positionality statement.** As a researcher and former instructor in the Italian context, I was able to

view the issue of teachers' engagement in professional development from both an emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspective. On the one hand, I knew the context of Italian high schools as an insider; on the other hand, my current role in a university context enabled me to take an outsider's perspective. My experience as a former high school teacher facilitated my contact with teachers via my former colleagues and gaining their trust. My stance as a member of the teachers' community by virtue of my former teaching experience was clear from the teachers' frequent use of high school jargon (e.g., CLIL<sup>1</sup> and LEND<sup>2</sup>), showing the underlying idea that we shared a common ground of knowledge and experience. This stance enabled me to lead the interview in the form of a conversation between colleagues where teachers felt comfortable to talk without feeling judged by an outsider.

## Material and Procedures

<sup>1</sup> CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning.

<sup>2</sup> LEND: Lingua e Nuova Didattica (language and new didactics).

The present study comprises nine interviews with the nine Italian FL teachers mentioned earlier who worked in two different types of high schools in Italy (college preparation schools and vocational schools). The interviews took place in June 2013 as part of a larger study that also included an anonymous online survey about FL teachers' experiences and professional development. The interview questions (see Appendix) were based on the on-line survey and were designed as follow-up to expand previous quantitative data. The interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes each and took place via Skype or in person. All interviews were recorded, using the computer software Audacity, transcribed, and translated from Italian into English. During the interviews I applied the 'ethics of care' advocated by Kubanyiova (2008) for situated research. Acknowledging issues with proficiency, especially when they are related to one's career, can be face-threatening for teachers and undermine their self-esteem and the perception of their self-efficacy in class. To respect participants' boundaries, no further questions were asked if participants showed embarrassment or were not at ease with the topic. Research findings were shared with participants at the end of the project in order to assure a fair distribution of research benefits (Christians, 2000).

### **Data Analysis**

Building on Strauss and Corbin (1998), I analyzed the data using a bottom-up approach, first with an open coding system followed by an axial coding system.

Through recursive readings of the data, I coded the interview data by circling and highlighting participants' words and phrases related to recurring topics that emerged. Subsequently, I identified the central phenomenon (the axis) and the different properties and dimensions around it, by making links between the codes and grouping them into the three main themes. For example, codes such as "learning how to explain the rules", "learning the grammar explicitly", "learning English for specific purposes", and "improving fluency by living abroad" were different aspects of the theme "changes in proficiency" with two sub categories "changes due to teaching" and "changes due to other reasons".

After exploring interviewees' concepts of proficiency (research question 1), open-ended questions tapped into their language learning process as learners and teachers (research question 2), and the proficiency-teaching relationship (research question 3). The main focus was to (1) understand how teachers experience and respond to a change in their foreign language proficiency, and (2) form a theoretical framework that could provide explanations for how foreign language teachers develop their proficiency as well as account for variations.

### **Results**

Following the coding steps suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), the recursive coding process between the nine interviews revealed three main themes: (1) changes in proficiency, (2) activities to maintain

Table 2. *Summary of themes*

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>
1.Changes in proficiency 1.1 changes due to teaching 1.2 changes due to other reasons	How teaching or other events have changed and influenced teachers' proficiency and knowledge.	"I started from a good level but then I studied a lot on my own over the years to prepare my classes and I improved." (Betty)
2. Activities to maintain proficiency 2.1 Useful practices 2.2 Obstacles and problems	In which activities teachers engage to maintain their proficiency.	"I read, watch movies and I also go to professional development courses. Ah, of course I go abroad in summer." (Tanya)
3.Relationship between FL Proficiency and FL teaching	The relationship teachers see between their proficiency and teaching.	"Speaking English every morning in class helps me, but it also helps my students. I practice ...if you always expose them to the language it is easier for them." (Betty)

proficiency, and (3) the relationship between FL proficiency and FL teaching. Table 2 summarizes the themes and provides an example for each theme.

Within each theme some patterns emerged: Two teachers, Lucy and John, often had opposite points of view about both changes they experienced in their respective pedagogical contexts and what they thought was useful for them to maintain their FL proficiency. On the other hand, the other teachers, especially Tanya, Stephanie, Christy, and Julie, had more moderate positions regarding the differences between the two types of schools. This could be due to the fact that the latter were vocational-school teachers with experience in teaching at other types of schools, while Lucy and

John had only taught in one type of school (college preparation school and vocational school, respectively). Their long experience in a single school environment made their views representative of the two ends of the continuum of Italian high-school education system. For this reason, while the voices of all nine teachers are intertwined to construct a model of teachers' engagement in professional development, the excerpts chosen for this study are taken mainly from Lucy's and John's interviews to give a clearer sense of the difference between school environments.

The following sections report the findings of the analysis to answer the research questions that guided the study. First, I provide the teachers' definition of

proficiency as a background to understanding the changes teachers perceived in their proficiency (research question 1), then I discuss what they perceived to be useful activities to maintain proficiency (research question 2), and finally I report teachers' reflections on the relationship between FL proficiency and FL teaching (research question 3).

### **Teachers' Definitions of Proficiency**

During the interviews, the teachers provided a definition of FL proficiency. Their definitions were very similar and could be summarized as the ability to communicate (i.e., convey and understand meaning) in the target language. Each teacher clarified what he or she thought to be key aspects in operationalizing and evaluating proficiency, and their answers varied from knowing the necessary lexicon (e.g., Tanya: "I always tell my students that if they use the right words even if the grammar is all wrong people will understand them"), having good pronunciation (e.g. Stephanie: "if they don't pronounce the words right they won't be understood"), being able to use strategies (e.g. Lucy: "it is not necessary to know the exact word for each situation, but it is necessary to find a word, an alternative way"), and, finally, to implementing intercultural competence (e.g. Tanya: "an efficient FL speaker can adapt the way he/she speaks according to the different interlocutors"). This definition, with all its different nuances, shows that teachers perceive the foreign language as a tool to achieve both task-based goals and general intercultural communication. Most of the interviewees set high proficiency

standards for themselves and stated that their goal as learners was to become like a native speaker. Defining native-likeness as a goal for their ideal self (Dörnyei, 2005; Kubanyiova, 2009) already hinted at the teachers' drive and commitment in pursuing life-long learning and engaging in activities to maintain proficiency. However, they admitted to setting less ambitious goals for their students because the communicative competence they wished them to achieve clashed with the reality of their teaching environment, syllabus, and time limitations. Therefore, depending on the type of school, they had to set very clear, limited, and functional goals related to the students' future language needs in their prospective workplaces.

### **Changes in Proficiency**

In light of the working definition of proficiency provided in the last section (i.e., the ability to convey and understand meaning in the TL), all teachers talked about overall positive changes in their proficiency that occurred during the course of their careers, both due to their teaching the target language and other factors. They all acknowledged that their FL proficiency was good (or very good) at graduation, but once they started teaching, they nevertheless needed to develop a deeper understanding of the mechanical, pragmatic, and semantic aspects of the language together with other strategic skills related to their type of school and students. For example, Christy admitted that she "knew [she was] saying it right, but [she] couldn't explain the rule" and she "had to study the grammar [she] taught."

Moreover, coming from a literature background, they all had a rich vocabulary, but it fell short of the lexicon for the specific purposes they were supposed to teach. For example, Stephanie reported “learning words like ‘invoice’, ‘promissory notes’ or other specific business terms by teaching them.”

The two excerpts below show how teaching in different school settings affected teachers’ proficiency in somewhat opposite directions. In Excerpt 1 Lucy, who after graduation spent years working abroad, reports how teaching in a college preparation school challenged her already high proficiency in Spanish. In contrast, Excerpt 2 shows how John, who never lived abroad and started teaching upon graduation, experienced a different type of challenge in teaching English for specific purposes in vocational schools.

Excerpt 1: Lucy

Then [...] I started teaching. I had to look at the language from the perspective of a teacher. [...] Learning and using the language is one thing, teaching it is another. So I had to learn a lot of things, the way to explain the rules, to reflect on the associations, I had to enrich my vocabulary with all the synonyms and opposites, these were things that I didn’t need in my previous jobs. These things help the learners to organize their information. Teaching has a different goal, so it needs different competences that you can develop with the experience and the requirements of teaching.

Excerpt 2: John

I have no time for certain aspects of the language. The language is adapted to the usage...to what I need it for. In class I have to use an impoverished language, because through the language I also convey some content. Do you know CLIL? I convey business content through the language, and they understand me. Through English I teach the language and I also teach something else. For example, we’re talking about franchising, promissory notes, or other specific business contracts...All these contents, they don’t know them in Italian either and they have to grasp them in English. And I see that they learn something. I don’t talk about grammar.

Lucy’s and John’s students had opposite needs and, as a consequence, teaching may have led these teachers to opposite changes in their proficiency. For Lucy, it meant enriching her vocabulary in order to help her college-bound students learn synonyms and strategies, give students more input, and, finally, acquire the necessary metalinguistic knowledge to be able to explain the rules. On the other hand, for John, teaching meant simplifying his lexicon to make sure he used the “right words at the right level”, to enable comprehension of new concepts, and to avoid his vocational students’ frustration. For John (and some of the other teachers in vocational schools) the proficiency change

was a trade-off, which meant sacrificing the development of vocabulary and grammar for comprehension and content. They nevertheless perceived the change as a global growth, in which the neglected linguistic aspects were compensated by newly learned pedagogical skills necessary for their particular environment. John, for example, commented: “If I lost some words, the flip side is that I can better manage the class [...] knowing the language is not enough to be a good teacher”. Christy’s experience was along the same line when she said: “Teaching didn’t give me a better FL competence, but from a methodological point of view I improved.” The positive feeling of an on-going compensation process corroborates findings in previous research (Berry, 1990; Fraga-Canadas, 2010), which showed that teachers valued ‘good methodology’ as sine qua non for teaching and a way to compensate for a lack of linguistic knowledge.

Finally, all interviewees perceived proficiency changes as necessary and inevitable. As the language they teach changes, they have to keep up with it, and this was clearly stated by Lucy when she said: “If I spoke as I used to when I graduated 20 years ago, I would sound like a book of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.” Tanya also had a similar concern and said: “I keep up with the changes in the language by watching recent movies.” Moreover, as Lucy stated, “there is a change because there is always something new to learn [...] teaching helps learning [...] as we keep on growing, we keep on changing.” The analysis showed that changes in teachers’ proficiency can take different trajectories shaped by the needs

that emerged in the different school environments, which influenced teachers’ use of vocabulary, grammar, and methodologies. Nevertheless, changes are overall perceived as growth and improvements as they helped to increase teachers’ self-efficacy. This is in line with previous findings (Bandura, 1997; Yilmaz, 2011) on the relevance of teachers’ language proficiency for their perceived self-efficacy.

### **Useful Activities to Maintain Proficiency**

When talking about activities available for teachers to maintain their proficiency, the divide between the teacher in college preparation schools and the ones in vocational schools became increasingly evident. All of the teachers talked about several types of exposure to foreign language and culture that were available, such as the Internet, TV and movies in the FL, newsletters by teachers’ associations, books, summer trips and a nationwide foreign language teachers’ organization (LEND) which organized activities for professional development for the different languages. In Excerpt 3, Lucy paints an enthusiastic picture of a cohesive group of Spanish teachers in her school (and other college preparation schools in the city) who collaborate and share knowledge and useful experiences. In contrast, Excerpt 4 follows John’s account of his unsuccessful attempts over the years to set up meaningful professional development activities in his school. His proactive attitude was not aligned with his colleagues’ interests, and John was left alone to deal with professional development. In this excerpt, he also

expresses his attitude toward the activities offered by the English section of the professional-development group LEND.

Excerpt 3: Lucy

Ah, and then we go to the LEND meetings. Our coordinator is the national president for Spanish. The Spanish group is very good and compact. We're friends, there are teachers from different schools, we like meeting up, some are writing textbooks or they bring new textbooks for us to have a look at them. We share a lot of information. We want to be up to date, to keep up with the language and culture. There is a common constructive attitude. I must say we've been lucky, it all comes down to it in the end: the people.

Excerpt 4: John

In the past I used to read more than now [...] but I drifted apart from literature because...I don't think it was useful. [at LEND].. They are self-referential, a microcosm of literature. The distance is too big. In some schools there are completely different worlds. But even where I am [vocational school], if you value some aspects you can do something positive. How can you think to teach literature in a vocational school? [...] From next year...I don't know. Internet is my main source of self-professional development. [...] Of course I'm missing the spoken

part...and listening...I'm missing communicating directly.

While Lucy seemed to have a rich network of relationships that provided plenty of opportunities for professional and language development (“We’re friends [...] We’ve been lucky. It all comes down to it in the end: the people”), John felt isolated and was left alone to deal with what he called *self-professional development* (“the Internet is my main source of self-professional development [...] of course I’m missing communicating directly”). The excerpts show the importance of a supportive and collaborative environment (or lack thereof) in determining teachers’ engagement in professional-development activities. All teachers were concerned about maintaining and developing their proficiency and Tanya summarized her situation by saying: “If you don’t do anything, you’ll lose it.” However, only the teachers who taught (or had taught) in a college preparation school seemed to see the activities offered by LEND as a valuable resource. Betty, who had always taught in a college preparation school, said that “[she] went to a lot of courses organized by LEND ... it was very useful because [they] shared their experiences, spoke in English, even though now there were just a few of [them].” Suzy noted that as a novice teacher 30 years ago LEND had been crucial for her in an era when the access to sources was not easy. At that time “the experienced teachers used to read about the newest methodologies and conveyed the gist to the novices. They were mediators... when [Suzy] understood how to access those materials [she] started doing it on [her]

own.” Some of the other teachers knew about the organization but, because of time constraints, they valued and viewed other resources as more useful for their needs. For example, Stephanie commented: “I know about them [...] but I don’t have first-hand experience with it. I think it is more useful to speak among colleagues of the same school and share methods and content.” John underlined the strong inclination of the organization LEND toward college preparation school teachers’ needs and interests. He felt that they had no room and interest for the needs of teachers from a variety of school environments. He also felt that the different types of schools were “different worlds” and he did not see a bridge between them. Left alone by his own colleagues who for different reasons (lack of time, motivation, interest, or willingness to share) did not participate in the activities he organized in his school, he still valued professional development. John considered the Internet his main source of professional development, but he recognized its shortcomings. To him, a community willing to share was the only way to practice active communication.

John’s colleagues’ behavior is in line with findings in the teacher motivation domain, where dissonance between teachers’ ideals and their educational environment can be detrimental to their motivation and commitment (Kubanyiova, 2009). John explained their lack of commitment by reporting the words of a colleague of his who did not want to participate in the professional development activities organized by the school: “He said he didn’t want to waste his time with

professional development. He said that the level [of his students] was so low that he didn’t even need a degree for the English he was teaching [...] the context is so demotivating.” Nevertheless, this same context did not discourage John and the other vocational-school teachers interviewed from looking for professional development. Context dissonance can have an opposite impact according to its interplay with *Possible Language Teacher Selves* (ideal, ought-to, and feared) (Hiver, 2013; Kubanyiova, 2009). In particular, context dissonance triggers development when teachers feel there is a gap to be reduced (discrepancy between actual and possible selves with emotional involvement) and their engagement in development matches their intrinsic aspirations. On the other hand, a dissonant context hinders development when there is no tension between actual and possible selves, and/or when the ought-to selves (their perceived external obligations and expectations) and ideal selves (identity goals and aspirations) contradict one another. In the case of the nine teachers, development seems like a way to reconcile the actual selves with their ambitious goal to become “like native speakers” and/or meet professional expectations. This is shown by Stephanie’s comment: “[I have no time] I just do what is ethically correct.” Tanya also expressed an ethical concern about teachers’ proficiency: “If teachers’ proficiency is high, school will form better students and everybody will benefit from it.”

However, the professional development courses organized by LEND did not match John’s possible selves and he pursued development alone, although he felt

sharing experiences was the way to grow and therefore experienced frustration in his colleagues' lack of collaboration. These findings corroborate Kubanyiova's (2009) results, which showed how two types of dissonances can trigger engagement: 1) actual versus future selves; 2) actual self versus unfavorable context factors. The former is evidenced by many comments of the teachers in this study (e.g., Lucy, Tanya, Stephanie, Betty) who are driven by the aspiration to become "like native speakers". The latter is exemplified by John and the colleagues he talks about, who are influenced differently by the same unfavorable contextual factors, probably because of their different internalized ideal and ought-to selves.

### **Relationship between FL Proficiency and FL Teaching**

All teachers acknowledged that FL proficiency was a precondition for their job. This common ground is summarized by Lucy's statement: "If I don't know the language, what am I doing there? I mean...it is obvious." As noted by Stephanie, her FL proficiency is "a matter of personal pride", "gives [her] confidence and authority", and "is a guarantee for the students". In spite of her high FL proficiency, Tanya admitted that in her vocational school "[she] speak[s] in English in class only when there is a picture in the book and [she] ask[s] questions to describe it." This is allegedly due to students' low level, but can also have other reasons as similar situations are also described by teachers in other types of schools. Suzy, for example, at a college preparation school, also admitted that in

class she did not speak in the TL the whole time. Experience helped her to overcome her fear of making mistakes and also to "adopt methodologies that enabled [her] not to speak for the whole hour...as one goes with what one feels stronger with." Stephanie encountered a similar experience and explained that at first she did not speak English in class because of her "immaturity" and inexperience, as she thought it was not natural to speak to students in the target language when they knew she was Italian. She reported "getting there little by little", by gaining authority and overcoming her sense of being fake. She also added that speaking well in the target language in the classroom served as a warning for the students that they could not get away with being lazy and speaking their L1 in class.

Excerpts 5 and 6 show how both Lucy and John, in their respective school environments, conceived FL use in class as the foundation of their teaching practices and a crucial point for their students' learning process.

#### Excerpt 5: Lucy

For what I need to do, my proficiency level is...I have an excellent proficiency. It is fundamental for the students because they need a role model. They also learn a little by imitating a model, not only studying. And of course if they are continuously exposed to good models they learn more, also unconsciously. [...]

#### Excerpt 6: John

I put up skits, this makes you use simple words [...] the ones they know. You repeat them and you enhance their ability to communicate. [...] The native speaker tends to teach sentences that you're not able to generate over and over again. This way of teaching is limited. The non-native speaker suggests a mechanism of building and deconstructing the language, and this has more value. I put the student and his/her limits as the center. In order to do this, you have to have been a student yourself before.

Both excerpts suggest that in the classroom, FL teachers are role models for their students, who can learn language and strategies from life-long learners. To be learner models (Medgyes, 2001), teachers first need to be confident with their proficiency and then to overcome the fear that the students may not understand everything or want to speak the foreign language with a non-native speaker. John underscored that the non-native speaker teacher can understand his/her students' needs and frustrations better and can provide them with more accessible language samples and strategies to use it. This is in line with Medgyes (1994), who stated that non-native speaker teachers, through self-awareness, develop empathy that enables them to adapt their output to the learners' level and needs. Along the same line, Julie reported that students negatively commented on a very proficient teacher that could not connect to their needs by saying "since she is so good,

she should have stayed at university." For learners, their teachers' perfect command of the TL is therefore not the main and only important characteristic. Teachers admitted coming to terms with the unattainable native-speaker model as clarified by Betty's comment: "I don't feel inferior if I don't speak perfect English." Nevertheless, teachers also said that their good proficiency directly affected their confidence in teaching and therefore their perceived professional self-efficacy. Self-efficacy (or lack thereof), as demonstrated in the case of supportive and unsupportive school environments in the previous section, can trigger the desire to improve proficiency and consequently engage in professional development activities. What makes the difference is once again the emotional strength of possible future selves. The interviewees underscored that their efforts to improve were twofold: they wanted to improve for themselves (to feel confident in class) and for their students' sake. In this case, teachers' ideal and ought-to selves seem to exert the necessary emotional dissonance with teachers' actual selves to lead to self-initiated development. When the mismatch between actual and future selves does not have the emotional strength and the necessary plausibility and practicality, negative self-efficacy beliefs can be detrimental for initiating development in the same way as non-collaborative environments can.

### **General Discussion**

In this qualitative study, I focused on potential patterns and processes among FL teachers in two types of high schools

(college preparation and vocational) in the Italian context. This focus is consistent with assumptions of grounded methods used to infer a theory that "evolves from the study of a phenomenon situated in one particular situational context" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 174). The information I gathered and analyzed through the interviews presented an insightful glimpse into how a small group of high-school FL teachers maintain their TL proficiency.

In relation to the guiding research questions that investigated teachers' experiences of and responses to self-perceived changes in proficiency, I developed a theoretical framework to illustrate some common trajectories (Figure 1). The flow chart shows that after university graduation some teachers (e.g., Lucy and Stephanie) went abroad, but came back eventually to teach at school like the rest of the group. They all experienced that teaching required different knowledge and use of the language according to the type of school at which they taught and sought professional development that could match their needs. Some teachers in vocational schools mentioned colleagues that perceived they did not need further development and whose proficiency probably did not improve over time. The teachers in the study all looked for development. However, while some (e.g., Lucy, Suzy, Tanya, and Betty) found groups and courses that matched their needs and allowed them to engage in development within a community, others (e.g., John, Stephanie, and Julie) did not find such a match and engaged in self-

development activities. In either case, teachers who engaged in any type of professional development activities perceived their proficiency had improved.

In Figure 1, based on the possible development trajectories teachers experienced, it is evident that regardless of teachers' proficiency at graduation, FL teaching inherently changes teachers' knowledge of and about the TL. The different school environments inform the changes, and this can lead to a plateauing of (or decrease in) proficiency or development, according to the discrepancies between teachers' actual and possible future selves (Kubanyiova, 2009). In other words, if teachers perceive the context as a challenge and also perceive their actual L2 teacher's self as not adequate for it, this discrepancy may trigger the search for activities to reach their possible L2 teacher's self (*ideal, ought-to or feared*). It is noteworthy that the same context can affect teachers' choice to engage in development in opposite ways (e.g., John and his colleagues). Teachers' possible selves are derived from social comparisons (e.g., White & Ding, 2009), and the complex dynamics between individual teachers' ideal selves and their ought-to selves constructed in the social context can have opposite outcomes of commitment in professional development or lack thereof.

Any change in proficiency can be perceived as a holistic form of growth when the development matches teachers' possible selves (their needs or the needs of their school environments). Teachers thus look

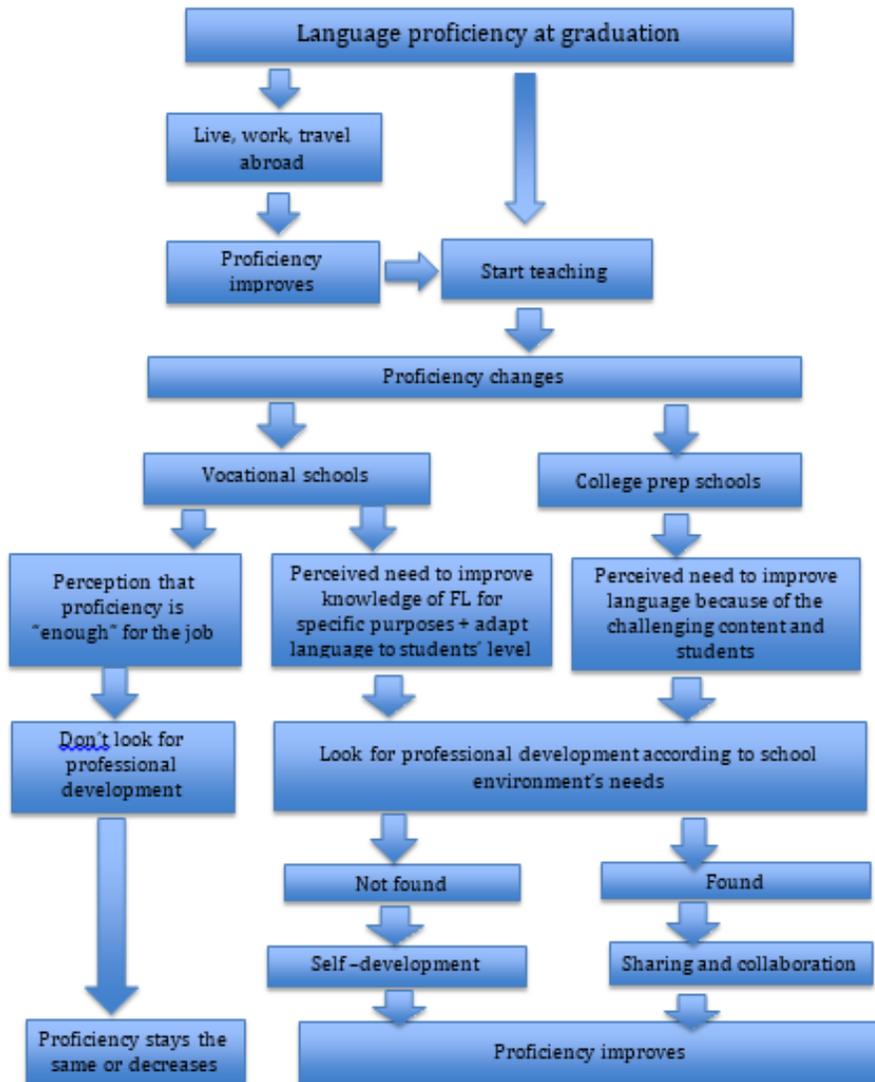


Figure 1. A proposed grounded theory of FL teachers' engagement in maintaining proficiency.

for and engage in TL development activities informed by the needs of their school environment. As a further step, once teachers decide to engage in professional development, it is important that there is the possibility of undertaking it in a collaborative community. Thus, the issue is not only about what to do, but also how to do it. Interview data (e.g., Lucy and Suzy) showed that teachers' development groups and courses are not just opportunities to

access resources; rather, they afford opportunities to share these resources in a constructive environment. Foreign languages exist only as expressions of a community as they are a means of communication among individuals used to express feelings, share experiences, and negotiate opinions and points of view. Thus, sharing resources, experiences, and collaborating with colleagues contribute to the communicative and interactive processes

that make learning and teaching languages real, effective, practical and ultimately pleasant (e.g. Lucy, Betty and Tanya). However, when no collaborative community is found, development can still be pursued individually (e.g. John), if the primary drive is to realize one's ideal self.

The theoretical framework of FL teachers' engagement in TL development put forward in this paper shows that teachers face two main challenges when they choose to engage: (1) the influence of the pedagogical context in activating possible self-guides, and (2) finding a sharing and collaborative community. The specific school context in particular shapes teachers' needs and may or may not drive them toward looking for development depending on the emotional dissonance between their actual and possible selves. Then, when looking for development, teachers may find a sharing and collaborative community that constructively helps them to reduce the *actual-versus-possible-self* gap, or they might not find it and make the hard decision to pursue development by themselves.

These findings have implications for designing in-service professional development courses with a bottom-up approach that addresses the two key decision-making moments teachers face: 1) deciding to engage in professional development activities; and 2) maintaining their engagement in professional development activities with or without a supportive community. Activating possible balanced self-guides is crucial and helps determine teacher engagement. In order for the motivation to maintain proficiency to be transformed into action, both individual

factors (e.g., possible selves) and contextual factors need to interact in a mutually reinforcing manner.

In light of these findings, pre- and in-service development should work on raising teachers' awareness about their possible selves (personal goals, perceived obligations and responsibilities, and feared consequences) and on balancing them. Empirical studies (e.g., Hock, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2006; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006) designed activities for language learners to activate and sustain the vision of the plausible ideal L2 self by means of creative ideal-self-generating activities, methods of imagery enhancement and reflexivity in order to create concrete pathways. Such methods are based on the idea that promoting certain conditions (e.g., a vivid *future self* image, perceived plausibility of ideal self, harmony between ideal and ought-to self, priming, and accompanying procedural strategies) enhances the motivational impact of the ideal and ought-to selves. Thus, activities that raise learners' awareness of their abilities and skills have been used to create visions of their ideal self (e.g., a *possible self* tree with branches and other elements representing both desires and fears). Other activities, such as guided imagery, have been used to strengthen learners' vision. Such methods could be adapted and applied to encourage pre- and in-service FL teachers to activate plausible and sustainable L2 selves where goals and action plans are possible and desirable. Balancing L2 possible selves is also crucial, as shown in Kubanyiova's (2009) study. It is important to note that when the goals of teacher

development courses do not match the intrinsic or extrinsic aspirations of teachers, or when a teacher's ought-to self is overemphasized, no intervention, change, or development can occur. Ushioda and Dörnyei (2012) argued that "self-perceptions are socially grounded [and]... emerge in a continuous interaction with the social environment" (p. 354). Because L2 possible selves have a cumulative strength and work better when their promoting and preventing properties interact toward the same goal, it is crucial to also work at the school contextual level, so that the internalization of external influences is harmonized with the ideal self.

What was missing for some teachers in this study was a sense of community and a supportive network that could accompany them in the life-long journey of maintaining their proficiency. Findings suggest a need to take into account Horwitz's (1996) call for a supportive and nonjudgmental network of colleagues to alleviate teachers' feelings of FL anxiety. By means of a careful bottom-up analysis of the specific needs of different school environments, FL teachers' organizations should work toward promoting primarily a sharing environment for teachers to engage in meaningful development activities that match teachers' internalized (ideal and ought-to selves) goals.

The proposed theoretical framework about teachers' trajectories in maintaining

proficiency is based on data from a small group of teachers, who were self-selected and belonged to two out of the three types of high schools in Italy. In this way, I chose to pursue depth rather than breadth in this paper. Nevertheless, further data should be collected from teachers in technical schools in order to have a broader picture of teachers' needs and challenges in the three different school environments. Moreover, in keeping with qualitative research practice (Friedman, 2012; Creswell, 2013), interview data should be triangulated with classroom observations for a better understanding of how the proficiency-teaching relationship described by the teachers is reflected in their classrooms. Another crucial piece of information could be provided by data from professional development courses (by examining their topics, aims, frequency and evaluations). Triangulating such data with data concerning teachers' needs and beliefs could help identify and bridge the main perceived and actual gaps in FL teachers' professional development. Finally, although some similarities exist in high school contexts across countries, this qualitative study is situated in the Italian context. Data from FL teachers from other countries could enable us to paint a better picture of how FL teachers navigate the life-long experience of learning and maintaining a foreign language.

## References

- Abrahamsson, N., & Hyltenstam, K. (2008). The robustness of aptitude effect in near native second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 30(4), 481-509.
- Abrahamsson, N., & Hyltenstam, K. (2009). Age of onset and nativelikeness in a second language: Listener perception versus linguistic scrutiny. *Language Learning*, 59(2), 249-306.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman.
- Banno, E. (2003). A cross-cultural survey of students' expectations of foreign language teachers. *Foreign Language Annals*, 36(3), 339-346.
- Bateman, B. (2008). Student teachers' attitudes and beliefs about using the target language in the classroom. *Foreign Language Annals*, 41(1), 11-28.
- Berry, R. (1990). The role of language improvement in in-service teacher training: Killing two birds with one stone. *System*, 18(1), 97-105.
- Brown, H. D. (1994). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Byrnes, H. (2012). Advanced language proficiency. In S. M. Gass, & A. Mackey (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 506-520). New York: Routledge.
- Chacón, C. T. (2005). Teachers' perceived efficacy among English as a foreign language teachers in middle schools in Venezuela. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, (21), 257-272.
- Chambless, K.S. (2012). Teachers' oral proficiency in the target language: Research on its role in the language teaching and learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 45(S1), 141-162.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. London: Sage.
- Christians, C. G. (2000). Ethics and politics in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (pp. 133-155). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Csizér, K., & Kormos, J. (2009). Learning experiences, selves and motivated learning behavior: A comparative analysis of structural models for Hungarian secondary and university learners of English. In Z. Dörnyei, & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 98-119). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. (2001). Retrieved from [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_en.pdf)
- Cooper, T. (2004). How foreign language teachers in Georgia evaluate their professional preparation: A call for action. *Foreign Language Annals*, 37, 37-48.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). Intrinsic motivation and effective teaching: A flow analysis. In J. L. Bess (Ed.), *Teaching well and liking it: Motivation faculty to teach effectively* (p. 72-89). Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.

- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). Teacher motivation. In Z. Dörnyei (Ed.), *Teaching and researching motivation* (pp. 156-180). Harlow: UK Pearson Education Limited.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahawah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2009). The L2 motivational self system. In Z. Dörnyei, & E. Ushioda (Eds.), (2009). *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 9-41). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (Eds.). (2009). *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2009). Motivation, language identities and the L2 self: Future research directions. In Z. Dörnyei, & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 350-356). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Eslami, Z.R., & Fatahi, A. (2008). Teachers' sense of self-efficacy, English proficiency and instructional strategies: A study of nonnative EFL teachers in Iran. *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, 11(4), 1-19.
- Eurydice and Policy Support. (2012). Key data on teaching languages at school in Europe 2012. Retrieved from [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key\\_data\\_series/143en.pdf](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/143en.pdf)
- Fraga-Cañadas, C. P. (2009). Investigating native and non-native high school Spanish teachers' language practices inside and outside the school setting: A mixed methods approach. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The Ohio State University: Columbus.
- Fraga-Cañadas, C. P. (2010). Beyond the classroom: Maintaining and improving teachers' language proficiency. *Foreign Language Annals*, 43(3), 395- 421.
- Friedman, D. A. (2012). How to collect and analyze qualitative data. In A. Mackey, & S. M. Gass (Eds.), *Research methods in second language acquisition* (pp.180-200). Malen, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hadley, G., & Yoshioka-Hadley, H. (1996). The culture of learning and the good teacher in Japan: An analysis of student views. *The Language Teacher*, 20(9), 53-55.
- Harmer, J. (1998). *How to teach English*. Essex: Pearson Education.
- Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, 94(3), 319-340.
- Higgins, E. T. (1998). Promotion and prevention: Regulatory focus as a motivational principle. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 30, 1-46.
- Hiver, P. (2013). The interplay of possible language teacher selves in professional development choices. *Language Teaching Research*, 17(2), 210-227.
- Hock, M. F., Deshler, D. D., & Schumaker, J. B. (2006). Enhancing student motivation the pursuit of possible selves. In C. Dunkeò, & J. Kerpelman (Eds.), *Possible selves: Theory, research and application* (pp. 205-221). New York: Nova Science.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1996). Even teachers get the blues: recognizing and alleviating language teachers' feelings of foreign language anxiety. *Foreign Language Annals*, 29(3), 336-372.
- Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione, Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa (INDIRE). (2010). Istituti professionali. Linee guida

- per il passaggio al nuovo ordinamento [Vocational schools. Guidelines for the change to the new educational system]. Retrieved from [http://www.indire.it/lucabas/lkmw\\_file/nuovi\\_professionali//linee\\_guida/\\_LINEE%20GUIDA%20ISTITUTI%20%20PROFESSIONALI\\_.pdf](http://www.indire.it/lucabas/lkmw_file/nuovi_professionali//linee_guida/_LINEE%20GUIDA%20ISTITUTI%20%20PROFESSIONALI_.pdf)
- Kubanyiova, M. (2008). Rethinking research ethics in contemporary applied linguistics: The tension between macroethical and microethical perspectives in situated research. *The Modern Language Journal*, 92(4), 503–518.
- Kubanyiova, M. (2009). Possible selves in language teacher development. In Z. Dörnyei, & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 314-332). Tonawanda: NY Multilingual Matters.
- Kumazava, M. (2013). Gaps too large: Four novice ESL teachers' self-concept and motivation. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 33, 45-55.
- Markus, H. R., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41, 954-969.
- Medgyes, P. (1994). *The non-native teacher*. Hong Kong: McMillan Publishers.
- Medgyes, P. (2001). When the teacher is a non-native speaker. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (3rd ed) (pp. 429-442). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Miller, E. & Kubota, R. (2013). Second language identity construction. In J. Herschensohn, & M. Young-Scholten (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 230-250). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mills, J., Bonner, A., & Francis, K. (2006). The development of constructivist grounded theory, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 1-10.
- Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (MIUR). (2012). Decreto concorso ordinario per docenti [Decree on the competitive exam for teachers]. Retrieved from <http://hubmiur.pubblica.istruzione.it/web/ministero/cs250912>
- Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (MIUR). (2005). Livelli di apprendimento scuola secondaria di secondo grado [Proficiency levels in secondary schools]. Retrieved from [http://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/normativa/2005/allegati/dlgs\\_secondo\\_ciclo\\_all\\_d\\_bis.pdf](http://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/normativa/2005/allegati/dlgs_secondo_ciclo_all_d_bis.pdf)
- Oyserman, D., Bybee, D., & Terry, K. (2006). Possible selves and academic outcomes: How and when possible selves impel action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91(1), 188-204.
- Pajak, E., & Blase, J. J. (1989). The impact of teachers' personal lives on professional role enactment: A qualitative Analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 26(2), 283-310.
- Piller, I. (2002). Passing for a native speaker: Identity and success in second language learning. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 6(2), 179-208.
- Reves, T., & Medgyes, P. (1994). The non-native English speaking EFL/ESL teacher's self-image: An international survey. *System*, 22(3), 353-367.
- Ryan, P. (1998). Cultural knowledge and foreign language teachers: A case study of a native speaker of English and a native speaker of Spanish. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 11(2), 135-153.

- Ryan, S. (2009). Self and identity in L2 motivation in Japan: The ideal L2 self and Japanese learners of English. In Z. Dörnyei, & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 120-143). Tonawanda: NY Multilingual Matters.
- Sarroub, G. J. (2001). A collective case study of the implementation process of the Nebraska foreign language framework by six teachers. *The Modern Language Journal*, 85(4), 499-511.
- Shimizu, K. (1995). Japanese college student attitudes towards English teachers: A survey. *The Language Teacher*, 19(10), 5-8.
- Schulz, R. A. (2000). Foreign language teacher development: MLJ perspectives 1916-1999. *The Modern Language Journal*, 84, 495-522.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. London: Sage
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Taguchi, T., Magid, M., & Papi, M. (2009). The L2 motivational self-system among Japanese, Chinese and Iranian learners of English: A comparative study. In Z. Dörnyei, & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 66-97). Tonawanda NY: Multilingual Matters.
- Talmy, S. (2010). Qualitative interviews in applied linguistics: From research instrument to social practice. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 30, 128-148.
- Ushioda, E., & Dörnyei, Z. (2012). Motivation. In S. M. Gass, & A. Mackey (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 396-409). New York: Routledge.
- Vélez-Rendón, G. (2002). Second language teacher education: a review of the literature. *Foreign Language Annals*, 55 (4), 457-467.
- Yilmaz, C. (2011). Teachers' perception of self-efficacy, English proficiency, and instructional strategies. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 39(1), 91-100.
- Watze, J. L. (2007). Foreign language pedagogical knowledge: Toward a developmental theory of beginning teacher practices. *The Modern Language Journal*, 91(1), 63-82.
- White, C., & Ding, A. (2009). Identity and self in E-language teaching. In Z. Dörnyei, & Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 333-349). Tonawanda NY: Multilingual Matters.

**Appendix**

## Questions for the semi-structured interview

1. What constitutes foreign language proficiency for you?
2. What is your experience as a learner of the target language? (in terms of years, institutions, outside classroom activities, motivations etc..)
3. What were your goals as a learner?
4. What is your experience as a teacher of the target language?
5. What are your goals as a foreign language teacher?
6. How important is it for you to achieve target language proficiency? And for your job? For your institution? And for your students?
7. How much effort are you willing to put into pursuing the maintenance of your language proficiency?
8. What activities do you think are useful/available to maintain your proficiency?
9. Do you think your proficiency is affected by teaching? If yes, how?
10. Do you think teaching affects/ed your proficiency? If yes, how?
11. In your opinion, what are the main challenges in teaching a foreign language?