

# What made me the teacher I am?

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I introduce the audience to various factors that affected my career and made me the teacher I am. I will first present the various features of Hungarian teacher training and teaching profession to make it understood what a Hungarian EFL teacher's identity comprises of, and then outline the impact that this identity has had on my career as a teacher inside and outside of Hungary. The second half of this paper introduces my teaching experiences in Japan. I am currently an EFL teacher at Meisei University in Tokyo. As the Japanese are not used to meeting foreigners who speak English but whose native language is not English, my position as a teacher can involve criticism (or even prejudice), as non-native teachers have not been widely acknowledged yet in Japan. Yet, my identity as a non-native teacher of English allows me to provide a strong role model for my students, and gives me valuable insight into their learning difficulties, needs and identities.

## **English teachers in Hungary**

I come from Hungary, Europe. I graduated from Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), which was founded in 1635 and has been a leading institution of higher education and research in Hungary since then. It trains a great number of teachers on a high level (Department of International Education and Mobility Rector's Office, 2013): teachers graduating from ELTE have a strong background of theory as well as practice in their study fields which is reflected in their teacher identities.

However, English teachers do not form a homogenous group. Depending on when they

received their education, they show considerable differences. At the moment there are three generations of English teachers in service in Hungary. The first group attended higher education before the end of the Communist regime in 1989. At that time, Russian language was compulsory at school, and only a few students could study English in the major cities. Basically, Grammar-Translation Method was applied in the lessons with the barest minimum of communicative tasks.

The second group, to which I belong, entered teacher training between 1990 and 2005, that is, before the pan-European implementation of the

Bologna Process. There were great changes in the education system during that period. Russian language was not mandatory any more, and at the same time, there was a sudden demand for English teachers. Therefore, many Russian language teachers were re-trained to become English teachers. In general, their language proficiency was quite low and they were lacking cultural knowledge also.

As the Russian oppression seized, borders opened to the public and it became easier for students to study abroad and for educators to keep their knowledge up-to-date. The proficiency level of English teachers rose rapidly and soon re-trained Russian teachers were only to be found in junior high schools but not in levels above. In relation to the methods, there was a move away from grammar translation to the communicative methods. From this generation on, the latest findings of research and modern teaching methods have been accessible to students.

The third group of English teachers studied under the new, Bologna-Process education system. It caused the transformation of the whole higher education system introducing 3 years of undergraduate and 2 years of graduate studies at universities instead of the traditional 5 years.

These groups of teachers have different educational backgrounds, experiences and living conditions; consequently, their identities and attitudes to teaching methods are also dissimilar. What all of them experience now is that the teaching profession is publicly disrespected and the government reduces the budget spent on education annually; therefore, the standards of education are decreasing rapidly. Even though the gross wages are raised annually, resulting from the taxation changes the net income of teachers' has remained unchanged since 2008 (Közalkalmazotti Bértábla 2013 calculated on the basis of the Central Budget Act 2013 (Hun)). As the world has become money and profit oriented,

people with low salaries are considered inferior to the rich. This implies that teachers are not respected by many. Consequently, most young teachers leave the profession – or the country – and the elder ones long for an early retirement (Solymos, 2012.).

## Teachers' Voice Survey

To support the above statements about the state of teachers in Hungary, I conducted a mini survey. In four days between the 3rd and 6th of June I had 50 respondents (see Appendix). They are teachers of all levels of education. The average age of respondents was 34.4 years. There were 15 male and 35 female respondents. The results are summarised as follows:

- The teaching profession and teachers are not appreciated: 96%
- Attitude to teaching and teachers in the past few years has become worse: 84% (has not changed: 16%)
- there is uncertainty, depression, fear of losing their jobs, unpredictable future, and they are overburdened
- Their social and financial state is unsatisfactory/ poor: 56% (not bad but could be better: 44%)
- Plan to leave the profession mostly because of financial reasons: 30%.
- Love teaching and would rather have a part-time job along with the full-time teaching than leave the profession: 70%
- Plan to leave the country: 10%

Here are a few quotations from the respondents, which describe the situation of teachers perfectly, translated from Hungarian:

“Teachers are disrespected.”

“As the profession is not respected and does not provide financial stability, there is a tendency that those start teacher training who were not admitted anywhere else; therefore, the standards are decreasing. There is a lack of well-educated and devoted new generation.”

“There are two types of teachers left at schools: those who have no other choice and the devoted and enthusiastic teachers, who, in spite of all the difficulties do wonders to educate students. It is due to the latter group that Hungary still has education.”

Since June, when I gave my presentation, there have been changes, and a new framework of secondary school education has been implemented from September 2013, which comprises the rise of wages by approximately 50% and the teaching hours from 22 to 26/ week.

### **My teaching career**

Having read the situation of education and teachers in Hungary, the reader might not be surprised to hear that I had reservations against a school job after graduation. However, as I love teaching I did not want to leave the profession completely, I had a non-teaching full time job and secretly – as it would have been unacceptable to my boss – worked part time as a teacher. When I was offered a position at Meisei University, Tokyo, I did not hesitate.

### **Japan**

As an English teacher in Japan, I face different problems and difficulties. Teachers are highly respected. Here, it is no problem to photocopy handouts for my students or order any teaching materials I need. At Meisei, and generally, university teachers have considerable freedom in selecting materials and compiling the syllabus as opposed to lower levels of education, where teachers must follow a strict curriculum to prepare students for examinations which allows little space for communicative activities (Kurihara, 2013).

English is compulsory from junior high school. However, as various test results (e.g. Eiken) are essential for graduating to higher levels of education, the lessons concentrate on preparing students for the tests. Consequently,

students come to dislike English as they dislike tests. Students are not taught to communicate in English, moreover, they do not have anyone to talk to in English; therefore, they do not see the point in learning it.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports Science and Technology (MEXT) is making attempts to alter the system. According to a research conducted in 2004, at that time there were many teachers whose language ability was rather low, and in order to compensate for the lack of communicative competence concentrated their lessons on teaching grammar. In addition, some teachers were not aware of what communicative language teaching was (Sakui, 2004). Since then, Japan has invested a lot in teacher training and study abroad programmes. MEXT sends teachers to study abroad to improve their teaching and language skills and then make lessons more communicative. Although this is a great opportunity, the problem arises when these teachers return to Japan and see that the system of examinations for students has not changed yet. In that environment, no matter how eager they may be, teachers often find it complicated to implement in practice what they newly learnt abroad (Kurihara, 2013).

### **English teachers in Japan**

There are three types of English teachers in Japan regarding their native language: Japanese English teachers, English native speaker (NS) teachers, and non-Japanese non-natives (NNS). Although they are widely recognised and employed outside their home countries in Europe, NNS teachers are still facing criticism and non-acceptance in Japan. EFL teaching positions are divided into positions for Japanese English teachers and NSs, which leaves no space and validity for the NNS EFL teachers. A reason why NNSs are not considered equal to their NS colleagues is the unrealistic objective that

students set for themselves. That is, they wish to achieve the native speakers' abilities for the fulfilment of which a NNS teacher is not good enough, as far as they are concerned.

### **Why is a NNS teacher good?**

Research has revealed that both NS and NNS teachers have their advantages and disadvantages (e.g. Árva & Medgyes (2000), Madris & Canado (2004), Meadows & Marumatsu (2007), Medgyes (1992), Merino (1997)). It is true that a NNS cannot compete with the native speakers' range of vocabulary and communicative competence; however, a native speaker will never understand completely what difficulties the learners are facing. It is because, even if they have learnt foreign languages themselves, they cannot fully understand the difficulties connected to English language learning. NNS teachers are able to share experiences of anxiety and ways to overcome it, help with introducing learning strategies that worked for them, and serve as an example of a successful language learner. They can emphasise world Englishes and prove the usefulness of speaking a foreign language. The above characteristics also make NNS capable of helping students define their own realistic and achievable goals.

As a NNS, I attempt to raise my students' awareness of the points above and motivate them to find their own, achievable objectives and approach it step by step as I did. I also introduce my own culture to them and emphasise how English has been a means of self-actualisation to me. I try to motivate them to see the joy and the challenge in learning and speaking English and strive to see them progress and learn to love the language as I did.

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**Appendice****Teachers' Voice Survey – English version**

age:	sex:	Responses	
		Number	Percent
1. How long have you been working as a teacher?			
	a. 1-5 years	24	48%
	b. 6-10 years	8	16%
	c. 11-20 years	4	8%
	d. longer than 20 years	9	18%
	e. I retired	2	4%
2. Are teachers and the teaching profession respected in Hungary as far as you see?			
	a. highly respected	0	0%
	b. respected	2	4%
	c. little respected	21	42%
	d. not respected	16	32%
	e. disrespected	11	22%
3. Has the attitude to teachers and the teaching profession changed in the past few years?			
	a. No, it's the same	8	16%
	b. It has improved	0	0%
	c. It has become worse	42	84%
4. What is the atmosphere like at your school among the teachers? Do the government regulations and the new bills affect it?			
5. Are you satisfied with your social and financial state?			
	a. yes	2	4%
	b. it could be better, but it is not very bad	20	40%
	c. no	23	46%
	d. I can hardly make ends meet	5	10%
6. Are you planning to leave the profession? Why? If you already left it, why did you opt for it?			
7. Any other relevant opinion or comments. (optional)			

The Hungarian version and comments are available from the author.