

# Reflecting on a Professional Teacher's Path: An Autobiographical Account

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Each aspiring teacher undergoes a journey to develop as a professional. Some decide to become a teacher at an early age and later achieve that goal; others go through complex processes to obtain a teaching job. By reflecting on their trajectories, teachers can reset themselves and accelerate their self-development. However, teachers have insufficient opportunities for sharing their journeys in narrative accounts. Presenting real voices encourages teachers as it includes “a complex combination of description, explanation, analysis, interpretation, and construal of one’s private reality” (Johnson & Golombek, 2011, p. 490).

On June 11th, 2017, the Teacher Journeys Conference 2017 was held at the Nishinomiya Campus of Konan University. I attended the conference and presented my background as an English language teacher. By presenting my journey as a teacher, I had an opportunity to reflect on my work history. I am a professor at a four-year private university in Japan, but my road to becoming an English teacher was not straight. Rather, it was more complicated and circuitous. This paper illustrates snapshots of my journey to becoming an English teacher and concludes with a suggestion for reflective study using an autobiographical narrative approach.

## **An English Teacher’s Journey**

### ***Prompt to Think About a Teacher’s Career***

My journey to becoming an English teacher was complicated and arduous. In my early years at the university, I was majoring in International Economics in the Department of Business, and my minor was foreign languages (mainly English). Looking back on my university years, my intention to become an English teacher began to crystallize when I started to work part-time as a tutor at a local supplementary school. Students could not earn a certificate to teach English at my university, but I became interested in teaching English. During my junior year, I joined a study abroad program in England for three months as an exchange student. This essential event was a catalyst for my preparations to become an English teacher. The English class for the exchange students was invigorating. While I was taking the English class, I often thought about how I would teach English. I often thought, “If I teach English, I will do it like this,” or “This activity would be appealing if I did it like this.” By the end of my senior year, I had decided where I was going after graduation. To experience teaching English, I decided to teach at a supplementary school.

## **A Professional Teacher’s Path**

After finishing my bachelor’s degree, I got what I wanted: I became a full-time English instructor at a private supplementary school. Even though I mainly taught English for entrance exams, this job was important because I was actually teaching English. I found joy in teaching and using trial and error to develop my teaching skills. However, I sometimes felt inexperienced while teaching. My teaching methods were insufficient, which made it difficult for me to provide adequate guidance to students. After teaching for only a year, I entered an MA TESOL program at a state university in the United States. Cultivating a new area of expertise while studying abroad was quite challenging because I had no prior knowledge of the field of linguistics and education. I always struggled to follow the courses. At the beginning of the MA

program, I thought that I would acquire the professional skills and knowledge of English teaching and quickly find a teaching job in Japan. However, that shallow thought disappeared little by little. I gradually developed an interest in a particular research area, second language (L2) writing, and became involved in research. This interest sparked a desire to cultivate leadership abilities and acquire research skills. I spent two and a half years in the MA program, completing my MA thesis as an optional course, developing specialized knowledge, and improving upon myself.

## ***Discursive Positioning as an English Teacher***

Even though I finished the MA degree, I had trouble getting a full-time job in the field of education. All my applications to colleges or universities were rejected. I applied to private junior and high schools, but I was unsuccessful because I was not a certified teacher. I found some part-time work, at a supplementary school and an English conversation school, and started an English teaching certificate program through a correspondence course. I felt frustrated when I just taught “test-oriented” skills because I could not guide my students using my own knowledge and experience of teaching English. In addition, I had a stubborn pride, asking myself, “What am I doing? Will I continue teaching test-taking techniques even though I studied abroad?” This was a stressful and agonizing period during my journey to becoming a teacher. After completing the teaching certificate program, I finally got a full-time position at a private high school. I savored the joy I felt when I received my acceptance letter. It was a small thing, but at that moment I had accomplished one of my goals: becoming a professional, full-time English teacher.

It was quite meaningful work for me to teach English at a high school. Unlike teaching at a supplementary school, I could try various teaching approaches that I learned in graduate school. I thought that I would accumulate teaching experience until I approached the age of 40, and then, if possible, I would start a Ph.D. program. While I was teaching in high school, I found that I had little time to do research or follow the current trends in the field. As I mainly taught students who wanted to attend college, I spent a lot of time preparing for classes, holding making-up classes, and teaching individually. As my contract renewal date approached, I was at a loss which to choose: continuing to teach high school or starting afresh in higher education. Eventually, I applied for a full-time position at a university. To be honest, I was uncomfortable because I felt that I was drifting from one job to the next. Besides, I had nothing to do if I could not get a job. I went for a few hiring interviews and fortunately gained a full-time position as an assistant professor at my current institute.

I have been teaching at my current workplace for 12 years. Many people have said to me, “Are you happy with your present status?” Even though I am a professor, my teaching journey has been ongoing and will continue. I am still not satisfied with my teaching ability or my research progress. I have reflected on my teaching methods and developed a teaching style that suits the learning environment and students’ level. Furthermore, I need to continue my strong commitment to my research. I need to publish more research papers and present them at both domestic and international conferences. For these reasons, my journey as an English teacher is unique and unfinished.

## **Coda**

This paper narrates my journey to becoming an English teacher, progressing from a supplementary school instructor to a university professor. Using autobiographical narratives has been applied in research as a practical approach in the area of L2 education. By doing so, actual experiences and personal realities can be elucidated to explore language teachers’ identities and emotionality through their professional lives in different contexts (Barkhuizen, 2017). Teachers’ autobiographical narratives are a relevant research tool for L2 teacher education. Reflecting on teacher journeys with a narrative approach encourages open discussions through a qualitative approach to pursuing self-development as a language teacher.

## **References**

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