The ESL Teacher as Plurilingual: An Australian Perspective

ELIZABETH ELLIS
University of New England
Armidale, New South Wales, Australia

This article reports a study on a little-researched area: the linguistic repertoires of teachers of English as a second language (ESL) to adults. It proposes that, to heed recent calls to recognise learners’ plurilingualism and to incorporate learners’ languages in the ESL classroom, teachers’ plurilingualism must be acknowledged and valued. This study investigated the language biographies of plurilingual and monolingual teachers of ESL in Australia and found them to be characterised by a wide range of circumstantial and elective language learning experiences. The effect of different experiences on teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about language learning and teaching are presented and discussed, drawing upon literature from language teacher cognition. Plurilingual teachers were found to see language learning as challenging but possible, whereas monolingual teachers associated language learning with their own unsuccessful experiences and saw it as difficult and potentially humiliating. Circumstantial plurilinguals were found to have a wide range of language experiences which contribute to their understanding of familial language use and issues arising from child and adult migration. All the plurilinguals were found to have gained useful insights about language teaching from their own experiences, and the article argues that these should be seen as a resource for systematic reflection in teacher education.

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Learners’ first language (L1) is a vital contributor to additional language development and to the learners’ developing identities as second language (L2) users. Yet there has been little emphasis on or research into the kinds of teacher language background which might best facilitate the inclusion of learners’ languages in the English language classroom. Learners are in the process of becoming plurilingual, and, as this article argues, they can best be assisted in that process by teachers who are themselves plurilingual. This article does not, however, focus on the debate about the relative merits of native speakers (NS) and nonnative speakers (NNS) as teachers. Important
though that debate has been, I contend that it is an unhelpful dichotomy which limits the thinking about teacher language background. This article argues instead that experience in L2 learning and L2 use is valuable for all English language teachers, whether gained by a plurilingual upbringing or by later formal learning. The article focuses on the Australian adult ESL context, where English is taught through the medium of English to mixed-language classes of immigrants and refugees. It begins by tracing the historical development of the profession, discussing how this history, and the reality of mixed-language classes fronted by a teacher who is expected to be an expert only in English, contributes to a “monolingual habitus” (E. M. Ellis, 2008; Gogolin, 1994). The languages that teachers speak, or have studied, have so far received little attention in the literature, except for the structured language learning experiences sometimes incorporated into teacher education courses, which are examined later in the article. This study sets out to demonstrate that teachers’ language histories are both complex and dynamic and contribute to their professional knowledge and beliefs in important ways.

The Council of Europe (2012) defines plurilingualism as “the repertoire of varieties of language which many individuals use, and … therefore the opposite of monolingualism; it includes the … ‘first language’ and any number of other languages or varieties.” The teachers in this study are plurilingual and monolingual individuals with varied language repertoires who teach English through the medium of English to mixed-language classes of learners who are themselves plurilingual. In a sense, we are all plurilingual. Even so-called monolinguals possess “layers of … language: regional and social variations as well as ‘technical’ language which they will continue to expand” (Piccardo, 2013, this issue). As I discuss below, teachers categorised as monolingual for the purposes of this study also had plurilingual competences, but to a lesser degree than those categorised as plurilingual. As Piccardo (2013) states, “monolingual speakers do not really exist, only unaware plurilinguals do” (p. 606).

Yet as I argue, the plurilingualism of teachers is neither examined nor nurtured in the Australian adult TESOL classroom.

THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONTEXT OF AUSTRALIAN TESOL

Whereas more than 300 languages are spoken in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), plurilingualism is largely a feature of first- or second-generation immigrants, and language shift to English
monolingualism is common (E. M. Ellis, Gogolin, & Clyne, 2010). Bilingual education as seen in North America and Europe is rare in Australia. In 2009, a pilot program began in New South Wales, with four schools offering bilingual programs in English and (one of) Korean, Japanese, Mandarin, and Indonesian (Department of Education and Communities, 2013), but such initiatives are few in number. The only systematic bilingual program has been developed for Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory, where by 1986 there were 20 schools operating bilingual programs in over 20 indigenous languages and English (Devlin, 2009). By 2008, the number of schools was reduced to fewer than 5. For an in-depth analysis of the history and politics of indigenous bilingual education in Australia, see Simpson, McCaffery, and McConvell (2009). There is not, then, a ready pool of teachers qualified in bilingual teaching methods that might be deployed to teach ESL for adult migrants.

Tuition in ESL for adult immigrants to Australia is the province of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) that since 1948 has been administered by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Newly arrived immigrants are entitled to 510 hours of free English tuition, which is aimed at providing a “functional level of English” or “basic social proficiency in English assessed at International Standard Language Proficiency Rating (ISLPR) 2 across all four macro skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking)” (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012).

Since the early days of the AMEP, English has been taught through the medium of English, and bilingual teaching (instruction through the medium of two languages), with few exceptions, has mostly been absent. In the 1980s, there was a small but active bilingual program (O’Grady & Wajs, 1987), but this program all but disappeared when AMEP programs were put out to tender in the 1990s (Joyce, 2001). Hence, learners’ languages have hardly figured in the adult language teaching profession (E. M. Ellis, 2006), and it has not been considered necessary for teachers to be plurilingual given the monolingual approach to teaching. This English-only focus has attracted critiques (Phillipson, 1992) and, more recently, arguments to move towards a “more multilingual TESOL” (Taylor, 2009). Whereas some of these critiques may also apply to Australian TESOL, each country has its own historical, political, and cultural context that shapes its attitudes and practices in language learning. The following section therefore provides a brief outline of the development of TESOL in Australia and explains why ESL teachers’ other languages are not considered necessary, or not considered at all.

In the late 1940s, Australia was faced with an influx of tens of thousands of refugees from postwar Europe who were known as displaced...
persons. The languages of the early arrivals were Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, and German, and language diversity increased with later arrivals. The refugees’ need to learn English posed a major challenge to the existing language teaching profession, which at the time consisted of teachers of French, German, Latin, and Ancient Greek. Early advertising called for teachers who were speakers of Russian, German, Baltic, or Slavonic languages, but the attempt to recruit bilingual teachers was soon dropped in favour of the method known as situational English, which involved teaching English through English only (Martin, 1998). Curriculum designers were aware of the direct method teaching of languages that proposed banning the use of the L1 in order to better support the development of the L2 (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004). This approach was in keeping with the behaviourist psycholinguistic theories prevalent in 1950s education that saw the L1 as constituting old habits which would interfere with L2 acquisition (R. Ellis, 1994).

Clearly, from its beginnings the practice of teaching ESL in Australia was established as monolingual rather than cross-lingual (Stern, 1992). This establishment took place through the timely confluence of three contextual and theoretical factors. These were, first, the pressing practical problem of teaching English to a large number of immigrants speaking languages not shared by Australian teachers; second, the belief that the direct method would enable learners to use the language and to move into the workforce quickly; and third, the educational principles deriving from behaviourist theory which made logical the choice of an audiolingual method and the exclusion of learners’ L1.

Although there have been numerous developments in second language acquisition theory, educational approaches, and pedagogy since the postwar years (Feez, 2001), the profession still features English-only classrooms conducted by a teacher who is monolingual or is encouraged to behave as if she or he were monolingual. The direct method still holds sway, and hence it has not been seen as necessary for teachers to speak an L2. This article argues that with the growing awareness of the importance of incorporating learners’ language repertoires into the ESL class, there is a concomitant need to look at teachers’ language repertoires. This is in order to see the various language backgrounds and plurilingual language awareness that may contribute to teachers’ professional knowledge and beliefs, and hence to the ways they plan and teach.

L1 in the ESL Class

Arguments in support of the inclusion of the L1 in the ESL classroom are covered by other contributors to this issue, so I only mention
them briefly here. First, the L1 forms a part of learners’ experience that they bring to any new learning situation. As Corder (1992) states, “they already know something of what a language is for, what its communicative functions and potentials are” (p. 25). Much of what is known about learning suggests that previous knowledge and skills are used in the building of new skills. Swain and Lapkin (2005) describe the L1 as “our most formidable cognitive resource” (p. 181).

Second, the L1 forms an important part of a learner’s identity (Norton & Toohey, 2011), and the adult learner’s sense of self is intimately entwined with it (Forman, 2007). We know that adult learners will continue to use the L1 alongside English throughout their life and that the goal of being a competent plurilingual speaker is much more appropriate than the unattainable goal of native-speaker competence (Grosjean, 1999). In a discussion of his model of multicompetence, Cook (1999) makes the point that even when a bilingual is communicating in one language, the other language is residually activated, and all teaching activities are cross-lingual: “The difference among activities is whether the L1 is visible or invisible, not whether it is present or altogether absent” (p. 202). Among many others, these arguments in support of the incorporation of the L1 in the teaching of the L2 are discussed at length in Hall and Cook (2012).

Furthermore, there is research-based evidence from both my own data (discussed below) and from other studies that shows ESL teachers themselves find it difficult or impossible to learn via the monolingual approach utilized in their own classrooms. Birch (1992), for example, in his study of teacher trainees learning Thai as part of their program, commented that

most of them felt that they could not have coped as well with the Thai lessons if English had not been used in class to explain features of the language. This contrasted with their own insistence that only English be used in their English classes. (p. 293)

Similarly, Brooks-Lewis (2009) found her experience as a beginner in an all-Spanish class “disquieting and disillusioning” (p. 217). A useful perspective regarding the implications of these experiences for ESL teachers’ languages and the matter of whether it is useful for teachers to be plurilingual can be found in the literature on language teacher cognition.

Language Teacher Cognition

Teacher cognition began to attract interest in the 1980s with Shavelson and Stern (1981) maintaining that teachers are “rational
professionals who make judgements and decisions in an uncertain and complex environment” (p. 456). The emphasis shifted from what teachers do to the cognitive processes underlying their actions and hence to the knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes that underlie teaching. In other words, the “judgements and decisions” that teachers make every day in planning and teaching are guided by their professional knowledge and beliefs, which may derive from any number of sources. These sources include teachers’ own schooling experience, their formal teacher training, their classroom experience, and their other life experiences. It therefore becomes useful to research the nature and origins of teachers’ professional knowledge and beliefs.

In studies of language teacher cognition, the constructs used to describe what teachers know and believe have varied enormously. These constructs have included teacher knowledge (Freeman, 2002); teachers’ mental lives (Walberg, 1977); teacher beliefs (Burns, 1992); beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge (Woods, 1996); conceptions of teaching (Freeman & Richards, 1993); teachers’ personal theories (James, 2001); and teachers’ personal practical knowledge (Golombek, 1998). In a review of the field, Borg (2006) identified more than 35 such terms.

This article focuses on what teachers know about language, language learning, and L2 use, and the origins of that knowledge. There is not yet a well-developed literature on what Goodson (1992) calls the “personal, biographical and historical aspects of teaching which locates the teachers’ lives in a wider contextual understanding” (p. 234). Golombek (1998) suggests that L2 teachers’ knowledge is in part experiential, but teacher education has largely focused on the empirically grounded body of knowledge that is imparted through formal learning rather than on “examining what teachers’ experiential knowledge is, and how they use that knowledge” (p. 447).

Teachers’ experience can be categorised into two main kinds: classroom teaching experience, which informs and shapes their practice in important ways, and life experience, which includes language learning experience. The role of experience is highlighted by Schön (1983), who developed the concept of the reflective practitioner and contrasted research-based theories and techniques with knowing-in-action. Wallace (1991) modified these concepts for the language teaching context and proposed a distinction between received knowledge (e.g., from teacher education courses) and experiential knowledge. He also proposed a reflective model for teacher education in which both received and experiential knowledge lead to practice and, through continuous cycles of reflection, to professional competence. It is reasonable to suppose that language learning experience may be an important part of teachers’ personal histories which form part of the life experience contributing to the knowledge and beliefs underpinning practice. It is
therefore surprising that ESL teachers’ language learning experience has received little attention in the literature (Gutierrez-Almarza, 1996), except in the context of the structured language learning experience (SLLE; E. M. Ellis, 2006).

The SLLE is an encounter with language learning that takes place in the context of a teacher education program. The purpose of the SLLE is to invite professional reflection on language learning. Its length varies from a single lesson (Weed, 1993) to a semester-long program (Birch, 1992). The SLLE’s outcomes are described as providing preservice teachers with increased empathy with learners, increased understanding of the processes of second language development, and heightened language awareness. SLLEs which involved preservice teachers living in the L2 environments of Thailand and Mexico while they studied the language also reported that participants encountered in a highly personal way the phenomena of culture shock, unfamiliar teaching styles, and living in an L2 that had previously had only theoretical value to them (Birch, 1992; Suarez, 2002).

Two other studies, instead of imposing an SLLE, investigated teachers’ language learning biographies. In one of these studies, participant researchers analysed their own language learning autobiography in order to find out how their apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) had shaped their teaching philosophy and practices (Bailey et al., 1996). Bailey et al. (1996) claim that “conscious knowledge of our [language learning] histories may help us to overcome the tendency to imitate, unwittingly, the behaviour of others” (p. 16). Nenchin’s (2011) study investigated the language and literacy autobiographies of ESL teachers, finding that the language-learning and language-using experiences of both native-speaker teachers and nonnative-speaker teachers had a powerful influence on their professional identity.

The debate about the relative merits of NS and NNS teachers (L. Ellis, 2002; Llurda, 2005) is clearly relevant here, but I regard the question of native-speakerdom as only one aspect of a teacher’s language repertoire and experience. The definition of an NS is elusive (Davies, 2003), and such a binary division misrepresents the complexity of teacher linguistic identity (Reis, 2011; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2009). Faez (2011) suggests that linguistic identities should be viewed using a sociocultural lens emphasising the dynamic, dialogic, multiple, and situated nature of identity. In a group of 25 teacher trainees, she identifies six categories of linguistic identity: bilingual, English L1 speaker, second-generation English speaker, English-dominant, L1-dominant, and English variety speaker. She does not claim that these categories are exhaustive, but they illustrate the range and complexity of the relationships teachers have with the languages they have grown up with, learned, and used. Such a perspective
accords with the growing recognition of individual linguistic systems as complex, dynamic, holistic, and interrelated (see Piccardo, 2013, this issue).

THE STUDY

This study investigated the professional knowledge and beliefs and the language biographies of 31 ESL teachers located in seven Australian sites. The research questions were as follows:

1. Does the language learning experience of teachers of ESL to adults contribute to teachers’ professional knowledge and beliefs?

2. If so, what kinds of language learning experience make a contribution and in what ways?

Data were gathered from classroom observations, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and the elicitation of a language biography from each teacher. Classroom observations were conducted in order to provide a rich and grounded context for questioning teachers about their teaching practices and beliefs. Large parts of the subsequent interviews became monologic as the teachers gave extended narratives about their past and present teaching. Thus, teachers’ reported knowledge, beliefs, and experience emerged spontaneously, and the more than 300 pages of transcribed data obtained were rich and varied. Underlying beliefs are not easy to elicit via direct questions, such as “What is your belief about ...?” or “What is your understanding of ...?” Beliefs may not always be consciously accessible, and teachers may answer an abstract question according to what they think they ought to, or would like to, believe. As Woods (1996) wrote, “A belief articulated in the context of a ‘story’ about concrete events, behaviours and plans, is more likely to be grounded in actual behaviour” (p. 27).

The interview protocol is included in the Appendix. It can be seen that the researcher’s interest in the teacher’s language background is only flagged in the later questions, after elicitation of the teacher’s approach to teaching aspects of English. The first question about teacher background was open-ended and general: “What aspects of your personal or professional background contribute most to your teaching of ESL?” Of 28 answers obtained, 8 were classified as “my learning and/or teaching of languages,” 4 as “growing up in a migrant family,” 6 as “experience of travel and contact with other languages and cultures,” and 5 as “teaching experience and professional development.” Three responses were classified as Other—language-related, and 2 were classified as Other—non-language-related. It can be seen from this
data that 21 teachers spontaneously nominated their language or language-related experiences as being central to their identity and practice as ESL teachers.

The study’s aim was to recruit teachers with a wide range of language backgrounds—monolinguals, early bilinguals, those with formal L2 learning, native and nonnative speakers. Categorisation of language background was done retrospectively on the basis of the language biography, which was elicited only at the end of each interview. This timing served two important purposes. The first was to ensure that monolingual teachers were included, because they are unlikely to volunteer for a study which purports to be about teacher plurilingualism. Second, this timing ensured that in the interviews, any mention of the teacher’s language experiences influencing their teaching beliefs was made spontaneously, without prompting from the researcher.

Of the 31 teachers, 29 were female and 2 were male. Their ages ranged from early 20s to early 60s, with most being between 30 and 55. All had tertiary qualifications in TESOL, with the minimum of a degree plus a certificate in TESOL and the maximum of a master’s degree in education and/or applied linguistics. Their ESL teaching experience ranged from several months to more than 20 years, and some had taught other subjects or other languages.

The 31 language biographies were analysed first, in order to develop workable groupings of language background. The following broad definition of a bilingual (henceforth plurilingual) was adopted: “an individual who has access to more than one linguistic code as a means of social communication” (Hamers & Blanc, 2000, p. 6). Although these language biographies were elicited orally, other approaches have involved individuals completing written questionnaires, as in the Council of Europe’s European language portfolio section on language biography, or the gathering and analysing of written plurilingual memoirs (Besemer & Wierzbicka, 2007). Such approaches can be used both for research into the richness and complexity of linguistic repertoires and for pedagogical awareness-raising activities as seen in the work of the Council of Europe (2012).

Biographies were mapped using the following dimensions for each language:

- proficiency at highest achievement (with subsequent attrition also recorded)
- how the language was learned/acquired
- at what age the language was learned
- reason for learning the language
- affect towards the language
frequency of current use of the language

Proficiency was self-defined by the teachers, because it was clearly not feasible to assess proficiency in all the 29 languages spoken amongst the teachers, and self-definition was consistent with the qualitative, interpretive methodology of the study. Self-definition was combined with other information from the biography to characterise proficiency as near-native, high, medium, or low. Teachers’ discourse in describing their proficiency was of interest because it was found to indicate affect towards the language and also illuminate attitudes towards language learning.

This method of classifying the teachers’ language biographies provided a rich picture of individual experiences that reflected the complexity of the connections between people and their languages. In attempting to cast light on the issue of whether teachers’ languages have any relevance to their teaching of ESL, a major consideration was how to categorise teachers’ language learning backgrounds. This had to be done in such a way as would permit patterns to be discerned in terms of similarities and differences between those teachers who were users of second languages and those who were not, and also between different kinds of language learning experiences.

Interestingly, no evidence was found that teachers valued any particular languages over others in their repertoire. That is, there was no indication that they regarded proficiency in an elite or dominant language as better than proficiency in a minority language.

Repeated readings of the biographies led to the following three major groupings:

- circumstantial plurilingual (CP; \( n = 8 \)): those who had become plurilingual through force of circumstance such as immigration or growing up in a plurilingual family
- elective plurilingual (EP; \( n = 14 \)): those who had by choice learned a second language beyond early childhood
- monolingual (ML; \( n = 9 \)): those who did not meet the above definition of plurilingual

The first two of these categories were developed using a modified form of Valdés and Figueroa’s (1994) categories.

Of the circumstantial plurilinguals, all eight had first acquired a language that was not English in early childhood, and two of these individuals had two first languages (Swedish/Finnish and English/Urdu) as a result of experiencing the one parent one language approach as a child. Three of the circumstantial plurilinguals considered themselves to be nonnative speakers of English, although all three had near-native proficiency. Another three could also be described (using
traditional terminology) as balanced bilinguals (BB), including the Swedish/Finnish and English/Urdu users and another individual whose dominant language was English but who reported native proficiency in Schwäbian. Three of those with an L1 other than English but who were now dominant in English were children of European migrants to Australia—one was born in Australia and the other two arrived at ages 2 and 3.

The elective plurilinguals were all native speakers of English and had learned other languages such that they could function competently and be seen by others to function in another language. Although they had learned languages of the school curriculum (mainly French and German), there were also many instances of formal and informal learning as adults, such as languages acquired through living overseas. These languages included Uzbek, Turkish, Nepali, Khmer, Mandarin, and West African Krio. The monolinguals were all native speakers of English, but most had had some language learning experience, which varied from a few words picked up in-country to some years of study which had nonetheless resulted in only low proficiency.

The circumstantial plurilinguals had also formally studied additional languages to those acquired earlier in life, although some of the elective plurilinguals, as mentioned above, had been obliged through marriage or work to become immersed in an L2 context. The monolinguals had all experienced elective and some circumstantial, albeit unsuccessful, exposure to language learning. In relating the language biographies to teachers’ reported beliefs, it became clear that what was of interest was circumstantial or elective experiences of, for example, growing up with two languages, child migration, adult migration, studying an L2 as an adult, or marrying a speaker of another language. And those experiences can reside in a person in any of the three categories. The line between NS and NNS was blurred among the circumstantial plurilinguals, with three identifying as NNS, but a further five having grown up with a language other than English. Three of these identified as BB.

**FINDINGS**

Data from two of the major themes which emerged and which contribute to addressing the research questions are reported here. The first theme is that of teachers’ beliefs about L2 learning—what it is, what it involves, and how they viewed their own and students’ L2 learning. The second theme is the largely spontaneous connections that teachers made between their own language experiences and their approach to teaching ESL.
In teachers’ experiences of learning and using a L2, the most significant difference was between the plurilinguals, both circumstantial and elective, and the monolinguals; that is, between those with substantial and successful second language learning experience and those with minimal and largely unsuccessful second language learning experience.

**Plurilinguals on Language Learning**

Plurilingual teachers described their language proficiency in confident, neutral terms which suggested that language learning is normal and natural, and challenging but possible. Thus Greta compared her proficiency in three of her four languages: “So at home we spoke Swedish all the time, Swedish is the one I’m more comfortable with—than Finnish—I’m more comfortable with English than I am with Finnish actually as well” (Greta, CP NNS).

Simone, Shanaz, and Helena described their proficiency in various languages directly, without either self-promotion or modesty and also without negative inferences:

Then I spent 18 months in France so...I’m virtually fluent in French...not as good as English, but—I don’t know all the ins and outs—but I can say whatever I want to say. (Simone, BB CP)

Well, I speak Urdu and Hindi...I speak Panjabi fluently, and I read and write Urdu; therefore, I read Arabic. (Shanaz, BB CP)

The phrases from the data which have been interpreted as confident and neutral include “I’m comfortable with X,” “I’m fluent in X,” “I can say whatever I want to say,” “I speak X,” “I speak X fluently,” “I read X,” “my listening skills were good,” and “that was my strength.”

Where the plurilinguals had lower levels of proficiency in some languages, the same neutrality of description was evident:

My Indonesian’s good, my Khmer is—I just studied for 8 or 9 months when I was there so I was able to communicate it on a basic level—yeah—just the spoken sort of thing—street language. (Felicity, NS EP)

The plurilinguals, then, seemed to be quite comfortable with reporting their language achievements, even if these are not high, in quietly unemotional terms. This matter-of-fact stance may arise from the confidence which the successful learning of at least one additional language can give. This stance also extends to the plurilinguals’ discussion of their unsuccessful attempts at language learning, including discontinuing a low-level course or living abroad but failing to learn much of the
language. Fourteen of the plurilinguals described such circumstances, as in the following examples:

I’ve learned a bit of German, when I was at uni, but it’s just very basic—tourist sort of thing… I just happened to take that because I thought it’s interesting. (Rebecca, NNS BB)

I did try to learn one of the tribal languages [Mende], and that I found [difficult]… I couldn’t get past the greetings and one or two of the phrases. (Anna, NS EP)

Here, the point is that there is no shame in trying and not getting very far, perhaps because plurilinguals recognised that this limited achievement is simply a step on a road they have travelled before. Their previous successes seemed to provide assurance that the plurilinguals were competent language learners, so that later failures or abandoned attempts did not define them.

Although the plurilinguals talked about language learning as a normal part of life, this is not to suggest that they viewed language learning as effortless. On the contrary, those who had learned a second language formally (as opposed to acquiring it in early childhood) were well aware of the concentration, perseverance, and, at times, frustration involved. The following examples are from circumstantial and elective plurilinguals discussing their elective plurilingual experiences.

Lidia clearly remembered her frustration with using English; she had studied in Chile, but upon arrival in Australia she could understand very little:

The frustration is one of the things you never forget, and you remember that you had similar problems [to her students] and what you did to overcome [them]. (Lidia, NNS CP)

Simone described a long struggle to learn French, in which she now has near-native proficiency:

It actually took me a long time to learn French even though it was very... I really enjoyed it. I found it very hard as well, by the time I got to uni, my grammar was still hopeless, still just a total muddle... but then when I went to France, I found that I could understand it and then, just once you’re there it took off. (Simone, BB CP)

Colin, fluent in four languages, talked of how he made the effort to maintain his German because he did not wish to lose it:

Because I’ve been... [it’s] almost 25 years since I started, and I still speak it when I get the chance, because I know how hard it is to learn a language, so I’m not prepared to just forget it again! (Colin, NS EP)
Colin knew that language learning takes effort and dedication, and recognised the threat of language attrition from lack of practice. Plurilinguals, then, both circumstantial and elective, described their levels of proficiency dispassionately. They seemed to regard progress and attrition in language learning as normal and predictable, having weathered language learning failures without damage to their overall perception of themselves as learners. They also evidenced beliefs that language learning takes effort, persistence, and time, but that ultimately learning is entirely possible.

**Monolinguals on Language Learning**

In this study, the teachers classed as monolinguals all described some contact with language learning, either formal or informal. It is thus possible, as well as consistent with the aims of the study, to examine the teachers’ professed beliefs and views about the nature of this experience.

In describing their proficiency in languages they had studied, the monolinguals in general did not exhibit the same neutrality as the plurilinguals. The monolinguals’ talk instead characterised language learning as fraught with difficulty and charged with the potential for embarrassment and failure. Their comments tended towards self-berating and suggested that the monolinguals see language learning as desirable but something they have failed to achieve. As the interviewer, I meticulously avoided indicating an interest in teacher plurilingualism, until elicitation of the language biography at the end of the interviews, in order to avoid influencing the teachers’ responses about their L2 experience.

Three comments were made by monolingual teachers that conveyed the view that the speaker had poor skills in learning language in general:

[Interviewer: Do you speak any other languages yourself?]

No, and what’s more, I’m a very poor language learner. (Hilary, ML)

Hilary’s firm and rapid response followed by an emphatically negative self-evaluation suggested that the opinion she gave was a well-established one. Her response suggested that she had given previous thought to her own lack of language learning success and was accustomed to presenting herself in a negative light, albeit with dignity. Kim and Michelle also used unfavourable descriptions of themselves as second language learners and users:
As a learner of another language, I’d probably be a bad learner. I’d probably slide, do my best to slide out of the lessons! (Kim, ML)

I’m hopeless. I can’t speak any other languages. (Michelle, ML)

There were also specific instances given of perceived lack of skill or ability by eight of the nine monolinguals. Examples of these remarks are as follows:

I learned Japanese through a continuing education course, and I must say I wasn’t very competent. I wasn’t a very good student….I think it was because I found it all too difficult and I thought “Ohhhhh, I can’t do this!” and I really did want to be able to be a little bit competent with it, yeah, but I wasn’t really a good student. I don’t know … I found it too hard. (Tina, ML)

[In Japan] feeling totally inadequate with the language, because I practised my Japanese over there and no one could understand what I was saying. (Tina, ML)

Connie talked of learning Anmatyerr, an Aboriginal language, through living amongst its speakers. She was able to ask questions or make comments but could not understand answers or continue a conversation.

And then I went out and started uttering deep and meaningful sentences like “The dog is sitting,” and someone would say, “Oh, he’s a good dog that, I’ve had him for 10 years, he can catch kangaroos like billyho, everything.” Oh, oh, oh, oh! [miming confusion] Well, I got to the stage where I could understand that, but all I could say back was “Yes” [laughter]. Pretty pathetic really! (Connie, ML)

The terms used by the monolinguals in regard to their L2 learning were far more judgmental and negative than anything said by the plurilinguals, even when the plurilinguals were recounting their failures. We see in the above quotations pejorative words and phrases such as “totally inadequate,” “I wasn’t very competent … not a good student,” “too shy,” “pretty pathetic really,” “I’m a very poor learner,” and “I’m hopeless.” Michelle, who spent time in India, described how she did not manage to learn any of the local language:

You’re going to ask me, did I learn any Hindi. The answer is nooooo [upward intonation]. (Michelle, ML)

The slightly defensive responses by Michelle and Hilary suggest that they saw their lack of language learning as a failing. In Australian discourse, a common way of dealing with one’s failings is to employ
self-deprecating humour, and this tendency is evident in the following excerpts from monolingual teachers:

But I don’t think I’ve ever said anything that anyone’s ever understood really (laugh) in French. (Connie, ML)

My Vietnamese students that try to teach me words—and I know that I’m saying something entirely different and I cannot hear any difference in what I’m saying at all! (laughter). (Hilary, ML)

Michelle’s account of her non-learning of Tamil concluded with a summing up of her lack of competence as a language learner:

I think I learned how to say “hello” in Tamil after a year—that says it all! (laughter) (Michelle, ML)

There were also several references to the difficulty and potential humiliation which can be suffered by a learner, either at the hands of an insensitive teacher or by attempting to use the language with native speakers. Connie talked of how she saw language learning as fraught with danger of making a fool of oneself:

[I made] the usual mistakes people make when they’re learning to speak a language: They’re trying to be incredibly polite, and they’re actually using the word for penis or something. It’s so humiliating! (laughter) (Connie, ML)

Frances recalled how “stupid” she felt at her lack of progress in a Spanish evening class:

Look at you! [meaning herself] … And I’m not a stupid person… just that it’s really difficult… that it’s not easy to remember what you’ve done last week, like [mimicking a critical teacher] “Don’t you remember it this week? Well, why not?” (Frances, ML)

Although both monolingual and plurilingual teachers recognised the difficulty and threat to the ego involved in language learning, the plurilinguals had successful experience to mitigate their sense of failure or inadequacy as learners.

The monolinguals’ talk was peppered with self-deprecating references and jokes which suggest pessimistic beliefs about these individuals’ ability to learn and use additional languages. Monolinguals could therefore empathise with their students regarding the hardships of language learning, but they had no experience of success to share. They did not mention any positive aspects of language learning—that it can be fun, that differences in languages can be a source of endless fascination, that it can be exhilarating to experience a sudden
breakthrough in the ability to communicate, that seeing the world through the prism of another language can enrich one’s life.

**Connections Between Teachers’ Language Learning and ESL Learners**

We now turn to the second major theme presented in this article: data showing direct links between teachers’ own second language(s) and their work as ESL teachers. Sometimes these links occurred in response to a direct question asked after elicitation of the language biography: “Q20: Does your L2 experience inform your teaching of ESL in any way? If so, how?” However, a great deal more data was obtained from participants’ spontaneous references to L2 experience while talking at length about these individuals’ teaching and their learners.

Learners of ESL are in the process of becoming plurilingual (Cook, 1999), and almost all will continue to use the L1 alongside English. Many of the teachers categorised as circumstantial plurilinguals referred to their experiences of growing up or becoming plurilingual and pluricultural, either through migration or having grown up in a migrant family. The following examples show how this experience was realised through key aspects of plurilingual language use: translanguaging (García 2009), linguistic aspects of immigration, and plurilingual identity:

My children both speak English a lot of the time at home, and then if I want to get things done quickly it’s English…. They do find it harder to grasp if I speak Cantonese to them, so they’ll take a minute to work out what I want them to do. But if I speak English they immediately know what I want. And at home [with my husband] it’s half-half. (Rebecca, NNS BB)

We [my mother and I] actually tend to speak English, but when it’s serious she slips into Polish, but we don’t really notice, and I’ll just use a good Polish word—because some Polish words are wonderful—but I don’t actually speak to her in Polish. But I might just tell her something secretly in a shop. (Ofra, NS CP)

These teachers were familiar with code-switching to accomplish specific ends: manage children, talk of personal and more serious matters, and maintain private conversations in public.

Four of the circumstantial plurilinguals had migrated to Australia as children, and a fifth was born of immigrant parents in Australia. All of these individuals talked of linguistic aspects of immigration. These
aspects included encountering English for the first time when entering school, feeling different from the rest of Australian society, feeling ashamed of their immigrant parents, dissociating themselves from their L1, and later feeling regret at loss or attrition of the L1.

A further aspect of how circumstantial plurilinguals related to their learners’ experience lay in the teachers’ experience of plurilingual identity. Helena claims that her family language is a powerful part of her identity, even though she has only a receptive ability in Austrian German:

I’ve lost a lot of the language and so on so…what is it about me that makes me, having been born in Australia and aged 51, and with not a very strong ethnic community to support my parents and so on, what makes me still feel—that my ancestry’s Austrian? In the census and that? I [realised that] it is your thinking. Just how you think and feel about different things and so I think that’s just terribly important, and it’s terribly enriching. (Helena, NS CP)

Helena mused about why she feels the need to mark her ancestry as Austrian in the census, despite her few connections to Austria. She concluded that growing up with aspects of Austrian identity influenced her thinking and feeling, and she regarded this identity as a valuable, if somewhat undefinable part of herself.

The last theme considered in this section is the insights gained about language learning and language teaching from the teachers’ own experience. Teachers can base their classroom decision making on the knowledge they gain from teacher education, their experience in the classroom, and their life experience. Lortie (1975) writes of the apprenticeship of observation whereby school pupils unconsciously absorb ideas about teaching from their own teachers, and these ideas, he claims, are powerful and can override what is learned from teacher education. However, the teachers’ experiences which emerged in this study were far broader than simply formal learning of languages in school and included adult language learning, learning in-country, marrying into a language community, and distance study. These experiences were powerful, judging by the way teachers talked about them unprompted and related them to their current practice. There was, however, little indication that teachers took these experiences at face value or decided that “because my teacher taught me this way, I should also teach this way.” Rather, the teachers appeared to draw on their positive language learning experiences to reinforce what they had learned in college or on the job. Teachers also appeared to draw on their negative experiences in order to make conscious decisions to change their actions. In other words, there was a good deal of reflection on the teachers’ own experiences and often an attempt to make
sense of these experiences and to link them to the formal study of pedagogy.

Two aspects of language learning experience which the teachers spoke of as influencing their practice are considered here. First is the teachers’ knowledge about their own learning strategies, learning preferences, and communication strategies, and the insights this knowledge gives them into what students do as language learners. Second is the teachers’ firsthand knowledge about the affective aspects of being a language learner, or what it is like to be a language learner.

Lidia related how she improved her extensive listening skills when she arrived in Australia by keeping the radio on whenever she was at home. At first, she understood very little, but she persevered until she understood everything:

I say to the students... if they keep doing it [listening to the radio], one day they’re going to wake up in the morning, and they’re going to turn it on and say, “Oh, oh yeah, that makes sense.” (Lidia, NNS, CP)

Anna gave an example of how she was able to use visualisation of the written word in French to understand what she was hearing, and to generalise from these patterns:

One of the things that helped me in French was being able to visualise words. As soon as I realised the word nation, for example, it looks the same in both languages, and I realised I had to listen for nation [as pronounced in French] instead of nation [in English], and I transferred that to other words that had the same form. (Anna NS CP)

These are the kind of learning strategies which feature in many ESL textbooks and teacher training courses, but the plurilingual teachers in this study possessed direct experience with using these strategies. A monolingual teacher lacks this experience and must take on trust the textbook’s assertions. She or he must say to students in effect, “Although I have no experience of successful learning strategies, I am going to teach you how to learn a language.”

Several of the plurilingual teachers explicitly represented themselves as language learners in order to show empathy to students:

I tell them what my background is and that I’ve done various languages and taught them and travelled there, and so on. And then I always say to them... I do understand... I know what it’s like and I understand, I’m sympathetic. (Colin, NS EP)

I just say, “Look, if I could do it, you can do it too.” Yeah, it’s hard, it’s hard, and they say, “Oh, this is so difficult,” and I say, “Yes, I know,” so in some way, they see me as “Oh no, she can do it, maybe I can do it too.” (Lidia, NNS CP)
Lidia had the additional credibility of having learned English as a second language. She was thus doubly a model for learners as a successful language learner and a successful learner of English, and she used her success to motivate the learners.

Several teachers, both plurilingual and monolingual, referred to their own language learning experience as a catalyst which made them realise the importance of particular teacher actions or dispositions:

When I finished that course in Mandarin ... that was only about three years ago, I went back and I said to my classes, “I will slow down—and tell me if I do anything too fast, I will repeat until you all understand.” (Elide, NS CP)

[I remember in my language class] getting so dazed, and thinking, “Now I must ... when I’m going to do an explanation I must keep it really simple—one-word explanation or one or two,” because if you go off on a great big long bla bla bla bla then the person feels overwhelmed. (Val, NS EP)

**CONCLUSION**

Teachers’ language biographies revealed rich and complex prior experience with language learning, to which the labels of NS and NNS do not do justice. Teachers’ linguistic repertoires included circumstantial and elective plurilingual experiences in a wide range of languages learned or acquired in different ways and at different ages. Even those teachers categorised as monolingual had some L2 repertoires, and all teachers’ experiences were shown to resonate with the ESL teachers’ work, albeit in a publicly unacknowledged way.

In terms of beliefs about language learning, data reported here show that teachers with more plurilingual experience regarded language learning as possible. They were under no illusions as to the challenges that learning a L2 presents, but the teachers’ successful experiences led them to express optimism that they and, by extension, students, could become successful L2 learners. The monolinguals, however, overwhelmingly saw language learning as difficult and damaging to their self-esteem, suggesting that they perceived the task confronting students as primarily an obstacle rather than an achievable goal.

Most insights yielded by plurilingual experience about language teaching came, predictably, from the 22 plurilinguals in the study. However, some of the monolinguals had knowledge and beliefs that came from limited contact with language learning. For example, those
who had studied French and Latin at school found this grammatical background useful in analysing English grammar and Latinate vocabulary. There were clear differences between monolinguals and plurilinguals in areas of experience that are only possible for plurilinguals, such as code-switching and an understanding of plurilingual identity. In other areas, monolinguals appear to have developed insights that were similar to those of the plurilinguals but fewer in number, and these insights were restricted to the experience that the monolinguals did have (for example, as learners in beginners’ classes) and proportionate to the sophistication of their language learning. Monolinguals naturally did not have any experience of plurilingual language use such as translanguaging, drawing on the linguistic effects of immigration, or of experiencing plurilingual identity. The data suggest that the insights which develop from language learning exist along a continuum, so that the monolinguals who only just fell short of the definition of plurilingual have richer insights than those at the most monolingual end of the continuum.

This article has proposed that more attention be paid to the language learning experience of ESL teachers as a resource (Ruiz, 1988) upon which they can draw to the benefit of their learners and of their own professional development. If we as educators are to be serious about moving away from a monolingual approach to ESL and including learners’ L1s in the teaching of ESL, we must admit that teacher plurilingualism is a prerequisite to developing an in-depth understanding of what it is that learners confront as they add English to their linguistic repertoire.

THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Ellis is a senior lecturer in linguistics at the University of New England, in Armidale, New South Wales, Australia, where she coordinates the Master of Applied Linguistics program. She taught ESL and EFL for many years and has worked in teacher education in Australia, Lao PDR, Uruguay, Brazil, Spain, Indonesia, and France.

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N.B. In 16 out of 31 cases, the researcher was able to observe a class before the interview. Wherever possible, questions were tied to specific teaching incidents which had been observed as a means of drawing out more general knowledge, beliefs, and insights. Answers were probed as information or beliefs were revealed, and there was no attempt to restrict teachers’ contributions to the questions here.

**Interview Questions**

**ABOUT STUDENTS**
1. Tell me about the course you are teaching.
2. Tell me about the students in this class.
3. Tell me about a student who is having trouble, and about a student who is making good progress.

**THE CLASS JUST OBSERVED**
4. [Select several instances of teaching/learning and ask the teacher why s/he took a particular course of action.]
TEACHING SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE
5. What is your approach to:
- teaching grammar,
- teaching vocabulary,
- teaching pronunciation, and
- using metalanguage in teaching?

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE
6. What is your approach to students using their first language in the classroom?
7. What do you think are the challenges of teaching English through English?
8. How does English differ from other languages? What special problems does it present to students?
9. How did you learn the English language yourself?

TEACHER’S BACKGROUND
10. What aspects of your personal or professional background contribute most to your teaching of ESL?
11. Why and how did you become an ESOL teacher?
12. What are your educational qualifications?
13. What is the length and nature of your teaching experiences, including ESL and other experiences?
14. Have you worked or travelled in other countries? If so, what language or cultural experiences do you remember? How did you cope with the language?
15. If you were learning another language from scratch, how would you like to do it?
16. Do you speak any other languages?
17. Have you studied or had contact with any other languages?
18. Tell me about how you learned it/them.

TEACHER’S LANGUAGE BIOGRAPHY
19. Please tell me about your language(s):
- First language acquired,
- Dominant language (one in which feels competent in widest range of domains).

For each other language:
- Age acquired,
- Where acquired,
- How acquired,
- Level of proficiency,
- Level of activity,
- Level of personal attachment (affiliation).
FOR TEACHERS WITH ANY SECOND LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE
20. Does your L2 experience contribute to your teaching in any way? If so, how?

FOR TEACHERS WITH SUBSTANTIAL L2 PROFICIENCY
21. Have you done any bilingual teaching (of LOTE or English)?
   What are the advantages/disadvantages of using a bilingual approach?
22. Are there any benefits from your L2 experience for teaching multilingual classes even when you can’t teach bilingually?

END (FOR ALL TEACHERS)
23. What are the most important qualities for an ESL teacher to have?