

FAIRY TALES AS METAPHORICAL REFLECTIVE NARRATIVES IN EFL TEACHER TRAINING

Licia Masoni

(University of Bologna, Italy)

Abstract

The pedagogical use of English in teaching prospective primary school teachers can be considered a form of ESP because it has to be specifically tailored to their future professional needs. This article describes a reflective writing exercise carried out in English by a group of Italian fourth-year trainee teachers (enrolled on a five-year university course in nursery and primary education), in the context of a series of workshops on the uses of narrative in the EFL primary classroom. In particular, students on this course were required to work with the language and metaphors of classic and modern children's literature and fairy tales.

As well as being of use for future teaching practice, this specific linguistic and narrative knowledge can be of assistance to prospective teachers during their training, to support them in the negotiation of multiple learner/teacher identities and in beginning to visualize themselves as (effective) future EFL teachers. To this end, students were asked to write an original fairy tale inspired by their language learning history, as a means of reflection and transformation.

This exercise has implications for research on the use of reflective writing in EFL teacher training, with regards to both investment in classroom practice and learners' autonomy in the evaluation and improvement of their language learning process.

1. Introduction: context and aims

I shall begin by describing the language learning context and classroom practice in which the students who participated in this study carried out their writing exercise.

As future novice teachers, they will compulsorily have to teach English, among other subjects, as part of the national curriculum. However, many of them are not inclined to teach it, often because they were drawn to the teaching profession in the pursuit of passions and interests that hardly ever encompass English and because they feel linguistically ill-equipped to teach it. The idea of having to teach something in which they do not feel proficient causes feelings of uneasiness towards the language, and also threatens the image of effective teachers they are building in their L1. Besides, during teaching placements, students realize that the work of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) is very much under scrutiny nowadays, due to their being often negatively compared to the NST model (still a dominant view despite research) by parents who

have a growing knowledge of the language, and also to the “commercial importance” of English (Wilson 2013: 299), a good knowledge of which is considered essential by many parents in order to enhance their children’s future employment prospects. These external pressures might cause trainee teachers to resist exploring new methods, or worse, reproduce old teaching models that they themselves might have suffered as children.

Indeed, over time, the students made it apparent that their lack of self-esteem was often linked to negative past experiences as learners, which they felt had damaged their relationship with the language and their ability to learn it effectively. Although linguistic preparation was factually weak in some cases, it did not entirely account for the often fraught relationship with the English language voiced by many students. Past memories and conceptions appeared to have a strong influence on how much learners were willing to invest in classroom practice. In this connection, Peirce (1995: 9) underlines the importance of considering “the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language” when trying to make sense of “their sometimes-ambivalent desire to learn and practice it”.

Ambivalent feelings were also heightened by a shift in perspective brought about by the workshops. In their fourth year, English classes are no longer geared towards students as language learners, but rather as future teachers. The workshops, which focused on using children’s literature as a primary teaching tool with young learners, forced the students to face the actual prospect of being EFL teachers. The shift from them as language learners to the child as learner marked the beginning of the process of crafting their EFL teacher identity, thus raising issues connected with their perceived linguistic weaknesses. Insecurity sometimes caused students to resist participating in the language practices of the classroom, in the belief that they might be unable to teach through stories or even that sticking to textbooks only would be preferable. Indeed, Horwitz (1996: 366) reports that “anxious teachers may tend toward linguistic interactions that are predictable and more easily controlled”. This was especially relevant in our case, as the students were doing their placements in local schools and observing many other teaching styles. Importantly, there appeared to be a discrepancy between how they judged good practice in teacher training and their elaboration of teaching material in class. These beliefs have considerable implications in terms of conceptualizations of good and bad teachers, and therefore of good and bad foreign language teaching practices (Floris 2013; Woods 1996).

On the one hand, they criticized in-service teachers’ excessive use of writing and grammar (and they voiced their preference for student-centred activities), but on the other, during EFL workshops, they often revealed a tendency to rely themselves on written work and guided activities, when designing hypothetical activities for the primary EFL classroom. This is one aspect where the difference between their L1 teacher identity and their FL teacher identity was apparent.

Insecurity in terms of linguistic skills, past negative experiences and the identity shift forced upon them by the workshops created mixed feelings that need to be taken into account if we wish them to experiment with a more creative and rewarding kind of language teaching, which is often the reason that drew them to teaching in the first place.

As Peirce (2013: 1) suggests, we should strive to “make a meaningful connection between a learner’s desire and commitment to learn a language, and her or his complex

and changing identity". The motivation for the exercise described in this article stems from the will to assist students in the formation of a new identity as an EFL teacher, while tackling old images of themselves that could get in the way of this process. Indeed, from an external point of view, the students on the course would be regarded as extremely successful learners, as they had made it all the way to university and were about to graduate from a demanding course.

Empowering them as learners and future teachers also meant giving them (linguistic) evidence that they could be successful (specific) language users, thus dissipating some of their fears. To this end, we opted for guided metaphorical writing because, as Nesmith (2011: 26) states, one of the first aims of reflective actions is to "question the beliefs and assumptions" that prospective teachers might have "unconsciously formulated during their early formative years", and also to avoid the possibility that they might replicate ineffective, if not damaging, teaching styles. The students were asked to cast their experience of learning the FL in the form of a fairy tale (as will be explained in detail below), focusing on the idea of a symbolic journey, overcoming obstacles and implementing effective coping strategies. The aim was to help prospective teachers gain a more positive and agentic outlook on their power as learners and begin to build a vision of themselves as effective teachers. At the same time, it was hoped that writing a metaphorical student-centred narrative would promote identification with their future pupils, acting on one of the strengths that characterizes non-native teachers according to research: i.e. the ability to identify with their students' difficulties in learning this language in a school setting (Kramsch 1997).

Significantly, the exercise was carried out in English, in order to foster a positive reconsideration of their abilities, as the students realized they had acquired specific linguistic and narrative knowledge that would be of use in their future job. The students had become familiar with the language of stories during the workshops and were therefore deemed linguistically equipped to handle the genre in English. It was felt that a writing task which entailed a pleasant goal could grant them a satisfying writing experience in the FL that could boost their confidence as EFL users in their specific field. Affect and classroom atmosphere deeply influence learners' perceptions of their own performances (Arnold 1999): to this end, the fairy tale was preferred to other genres, such as memoirs, to help gauge the impact that positive and negative emotions towards EFL had had on the prospective teachers, while granting them the safe distance and disguise that metaphorical writing allows.

2. Literature review: reflective narrative

Research on EFL/ESL learning and literature on teacher training makes ample use of reflective narratives to explore beliefs, personal strategies and perceptions of learning and teaching.

A growing body of research in FL studies makes use of reflective writing, especially autobiographies, to explore students' perceptions of the foreign language learning process. Tse (2000: 74) states that "[r]etrospective autobiographies are useful in understanding the often complex relationships among affective and instructional factors at work in classrooms as they develop over time, told from the perspective of the learner".

Literature on motivation and engagement in FL and SL acquisition has been supporting the need to encourage students to build a vision of themselves as successful language users, and reflective narratives play a prominent role in this (narrative) construction of identity (Dörnyei and Kubanyiova 2013). Henry *et al.* (2015: 329) have employed reflective narratives to measure the varying intensity of what they have named “directed motivational currents” in language learning, that is, “periods of intense and enduring motivation in pursuit of a particular goal or vision”, for which learning a language is highly instrumental.

Also, research on teaching practice and teacher training has been increasingly and consistently using reflective narratives to “engage teachers’ sense-making processes in their learning and teaching experiences” (Johnson and Golombek 2011: 486-487), seeking, for example, to find out what “preservice teachers’ stories reveal about their own learning and their beliefs about the roles and responsibility of teachers” (Binks *et al.* 2009: 143).

Reflection, seen as the “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it” (Dewey 1933: 6), is deemed fundamental in bringing about autonomy and transformation in teaching practice. Memoirs, free reflection and guided reflections have been employed in various ways.

Of particular interest in this context is the use of metaphor and simile as a means of reflective writing with trainee teachers. As Goldstein (2005: 7) states, “one of our tasks as teacher educators is to create educational contexts and opportunities that support and sustain our students as they navigate these difficult times. One successful strategy toward this end is the use of metaphor”. Metaphor in teacher education is seen as a symbolic way of thinking about teaching that can sustain the morale of teachers over time, a way “to engage preservice students in an examination of their conceptions of teaching” (Bullough 1991: 43), and a source of “evidences of prospective and practicing teachers’ reasoning about teaching, learning, and schooling” (Saban 2006: 299).

For these reasons, there is growing consensus supporting the “inclusion of various educational metaphors in teacher education programs because of their functional benefits” (*ibid.*). Trainee teachers are asked to start their reflections from frames such as “*A teacher is like... because...*”, meant to prompt/catalyse metaphors of the teacher’s role that “seem to provide a powerful cognitive tool in gaining insight into prospective teachers’ professional thinking” (Saban *et al.* 2007: 123). Lin *et al.* (2012: 183) asked trainee teachers to “provide metaphors of how they conceptualise themselves as EFL teachers”. More and more pervasively the construction of metaphors is promoted with a view to comparing individual teachers’ beliefs with general beliefs on their teaching area. Storytelling, as a transformative and learning tool, is recognized as a vital part of teacher education and adult learning¹.

One particular use of storytelling in connection with reflective narratives in teacher training consists in the employment of the “hero’s journey” metaphor (Campbell 1949).

¹ See, for example, European projects such as ‘Sheherazade: 1001 stories for adult learning’, which promotes the “use of storytelling techniques as an educational strategy and a pedagogical tool”, as well as a way “to improve language skills” (<http://www.sheherazade.eu>); and also issue XV of *Fictions. Studi sulla narritività*, 2016, entitled “Stories for Learning: Storytelling and Didactics”.

In more than one instance, teachers were asked to adopt similar prefabricated metaphors to either write their stories, or to reframe and interpret autobiographical accounts of their teaching experience (Goldstein 2005; Binks *et al.* 2009). Goldstein, in particular, asked teachers to re-write their personal teaching experience following the metaphorical frame of *Star Wars*, thus putting forward the idea of the coping hero.

These experiments are in line with studies that have been applying principles of positive psychology to SLA (Gregersen 2016), emphasizing the importance of helping learners focus on the positive strategies they can employ on their learning path. This use of reflective narratives is, in its turn, influenced by research on narrative identity (McAdams and McLean 2013) – which studies the ways “individuals employ narratives to develop and sustain a sense of personal unity and purpose from diverse experiences across the lifespan” (Singer 2004: 437): in other words, narratives help the individual negotiate multiple personal identities that might make the language learning process a difficult and intermittent ordeal.

3. Literature review: instructed writing

Genre-based instructed writing has been proved to enhance students’ writing skills in a foreign language. The structure of a fairy tale, built upon the idea of action and almost “organized as the sequence of steps that make up a procedure” (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014: 42) provides important writing support and the right amount of constraint that can facilitate writing in a foreign language (Robinson 2016). Cheng (2008: 167) found that “explicit knowledge of genre sharpens students’ awareness regarding the content, organization and language use to generate the target genre”. For this reason, attention was paid to describing in detail the structure of a fairy tale to the students, prior to the exercise, as is explained later in this article. The choice of a specific metaphor was prompted by the need to provide students with linguistic support: because “the process of developing metaphors might [...] appeal only to the more linguistically inclined student teacher” (Grimmet and MacKinnon as cited in Goldstein 2005: 9). Indeed, in the case of trainee teachers writing in a language they did not feel comfortable with, taking into account a possible linguistic burden was essential.

As has already been mentioned, the exercise was carried out at the end of a series of workshops on the use of narrative in the EFL primary classroom. During this time, students were exposed to a great deal of authentic classic and modern children’s picture-books and encouraged to see them as future teaching tools (Sisti 2016; Tatsuki 2015; Masoni 2017; Fitzgibbon and Wilhelm 1998), as well as a present learning resource for them. Children’s books are recognized as a most effective instrument of language learning for adults (Ho 2000), and this is even more relevant for future primary teachers who can learn valuable specialized language (Masoni 2018).

The workshops provided linguistic support through detailed translations and discussions on language use. In particular, attention was drawn to discourse markers, opening and closing formulae, the use of repetition, important word strings and prefabricated phrases which could assist them and their future pupils in their learning process and also provide good writing support. Various types of narrative structures appearing in children’s literature were analysed during the workshops, and students quickly became able to identify the most important features of all genres.

4. Methodology: participants and data collection

One hundred and sixty students, divided into four groups, were enrolled in the workshops, each comprising four meetings of four hours each, for a total of sixteen hours. Attendance floated between 90 and 95%, but all participants attended at least twelve of the sixteen hours. The second half of the last meetings was devoted to the writing of their original fairy tale and 93 texts were collected. At the end of the workshops, the students were asked to fill in an online questionnaire, in Italian, on their experience in class, half of which aimed to assess their fairy tale writing process. This part consisted of 15 statements (see Table 1 below for a selection of relevant items) with which the students had to declare their level of agreement, rating each on a scale of five choices (not at all/a little/quite/very/totally), and also a section for free comments. The discussion that follows conflates “quite”, “very”, and “totally” into one positive category, contrasting with “a little” and “not at all” on the negative front. Chronbach’s α (0.91) indicated high internal consistency.

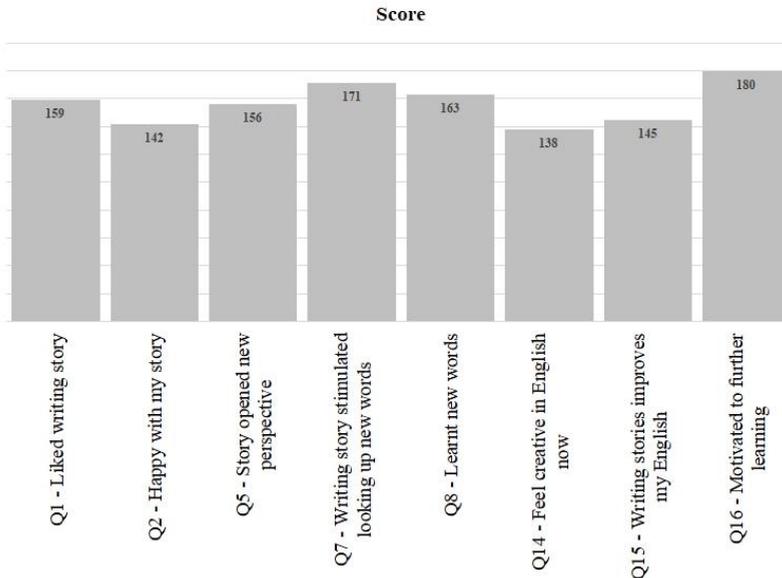


Table 1. Fairy tale writing experience

5. Before the writing exercise: the personal narrative²

Prior to writing the fairy tale, students were asked to discuss in pairs their experience of learning English from the day they first encountered the language to the present moment. This was an oral exercise, which most students carried out in Italian.

² All of the quotes from here onwards are in the original English produced by the students, unless otherwise stated.

Some of them, however, decided to follow up by writing their experiences in English. The resulting texts were very brief, amounting to less than 100 words in every case. In them, the vast majority of students rated their past experiences as negative. Many of them had a fairly good experience in primary school, but then: "During the middle school things changed: the teacher was focussed on grammar, just grammar. Lessons were boring, nothing was active, we were passive", as one student wrote. Overall, the students reported feeling "depressed" after this conversation, possibly because they had simply repeated a well-rehearsed story, told many times before, a sort of social narrative that somehow explained and justified their difficult relationship with the language. These narratives also revealed a certain reticence to engage with the transformative process of learning a language, as well as the need to "find themselves vindicated in their monolingual self" (Kramersch 2009: 5).

This reflection did not challenge existing paradigms: on the contrary it reinforced them. A shift in prospective was needed, and this could be provided by employing a different narrative genre, one that could turn them into active protagonists, no matter how much they had to struggle, thus bringing a sense of agency into their stories.

6. Assignment and writing support

The assignment consisted in re-writing their experience of learning English, from childhood to the present, through the metaphorical structure of a fairy tale.

The students were given a basic narrative structure loosely based on Vladimir Propp's (1968) functions, but reduced to only five moments: 1 initial equilibrium followed by sudden loss/absence; 2 hero/heroine is tested and he/she is granted magic gifts; 3 journey into a forest where difficult tasks are performed; 4 encounter with a magic helper, 5 final victory/solution. The structure was explained and discussed at length. What follows is a summary of what was said in class (all the explanations were given in English).

Fairy tales start with a moment of equilibrium, which is suddenly shattered by some event that forces the hero/heroine to leave his/her comfort zone, and start a journey during which he/she will find a solution to the problem and will also go through a process of personal maturation. The hero will have to cross a real or metaphorical forest, and here face and perform three difficult tasks, with the help of a magic helper. Magic helpers allow the hero to do a bit of the journey she/he would not be able to do by him/herself, such as crossing a wide river or climbing a tall mountain. Magic is a metaphor of the hero's inner strength and ability to cope with new challenging situations, during which the hero assembles a sort of tool kit that enables him/her to overcome every obstacle. The hero/heroine will experience failure before he/she can succeed and solve the initial problem, or win over his/her antagonist, thus establishing a new kind of equilibrium.

This particular structure, used by the author in various different creative writing contexts (Ruini *et al.* 2014, Ruini *et al.* 2017), provides a solid constraint that enables students to write a story in a short space of time, while at the same time allowing for creative freedom.

Attention was also drawn to the main characteristics of oral fairy tales, including the frequent use of hyperbole and metaphor (bad characters are not just bad: they are

dragons, ogres, trolls, etc.). Students were told to make ample use of hyperbole and metaphor and were left free to decide whether they wanted to set the story in the real world or in an imaginary one.

Importantly, they were asked to visualize the hero/heroine as an “overcomer”, as storyteller and therapist Jane Muncy explained to folklorist Carl Lindahl (2004). It was her notion of overcomer that was taken as a guide for describing the hero to the students. She describes the hero as a “coping person – and that’s the way to be – a coping person has a tool kit, and when they come to an obstacle on their road, they will take out something from the tool kit and use it to chop through, go over, walk around, dig under the obstacle, and get to the other side” (Lindahl 2004: 288). The students were asked to concentrate on the idea of overcoming, and ‘getting to the other side’, and also on the strategies they had employed on the way.

7. The students’ fairy tales: metaphors of learning and being taught

The students engaged in the activity with manifest pleasure. Many wrote well beyond the end of the allotted time. The resulting stories were compelling, both in terms of the students’ ability to handle narrative structure and language and in terms of the themes that emerged in connection with the experience of learning English. Unlike the previously collected personal narratives, these texts varied in length from a minimum of 132 words to a maximum of 437, with the majority being above 300 words.

What follows is a summary of the stories, distilled from 68 of the 93 examples collected at the end of the workshops³.

Forty-four of the 68 stories centred around the experience of learning English in some kind of school setting, although not always a realistic school. Twenty-four of these follow the structure of school grades, whereby at each grade the protagonist had to face a difficult task, usually represented by the difficulty of coping with a new teacher and new methods. Twenty-four stories do not mention English at all, but 15 of them are nevertheless centred around language learning, although often imaginary languages, as will be detailed below.

In general, all the stories included loss, difficult tasks, magic helpers and final solutions. Some did not include the initial testing of the hero, but they are all clearly centred around coping and overcoming, to the point that one student entitled her story “One must not give up hope”.

The protagonists are shy little girls, donkeys in three cases, and “a rabbit called *Tontolino*” (from *tonto*, a word for “dumb” in Italian), which immediately speak of how students felt or were made to feel in class. Other heroes are a good elf, two good gnomes, a mermaid, two butterflies, a zebra, a little ladybird, and many (initially) happy little children.

Most stories open with an idyllic situation, either the protagonists are happily living in their monolingual world, where everyone speaks “amazing Italian” and then someone comes along who forces them to speak “terrible English”, or the idyllic situation continues throughout primary school where they had angelic teachers, “an incredibly

³ The remaining 25 stories were realistic accounts of the students’ learning experiences and did not contain any element that could define them as fairy tales.

beautiful fairy entered in the classroom, she was quite tall, blonde and she has blue eyes and she was always sweet and kind". The blonde and goodhearted English teacher appears in ten descriptions and very much resembles the stereotypical descriptions of positive characters in literary fairy tales, especially when compared with the descriptions of terrible teachers that shatter the protagonist's world when they land in middle school or high school. The bad English teachers are bears, dragons, ogres, "a giant monstrous hippopotamus", a "bearenglish", "a three-headed monster", "a bad gnome" or a "terrifying snake" with "black hair and black eyes", or a Gruffalo, the imaginary monster in one of the picture books read in class. All of these 'horrible' teachers had one main trait in common: they all used to make children cry.

"She looked like a witch. She looked grotesque and repugnant, her hair was straw and she had feline eyes. She had a cob nose and her voice was raspy": the threatening quality of these teachers is further communicated by the fact that the protagonists of these stories are vulnerable creatures such as a "shy little girl", or a "little curious, full of life butterfly" whose meeting with the new teacher takes away their happiness – "you were so happy and now, the light has left the dark inside you"⁴ – either because they have to "[fight] against words and verbs", forced to learn without enjoyment "the horrible grammar", or in more than one case, exposed in front of their friends: "she made a few mistakes and the gnome made fun of her in front of her classmates", and again, "everybody understood that she knew any words of English, they started to laugh and joke of her". Exposure often results in the inability to utter any more words. "If you don't want to speak my language, you won't speak at all!, said the lion, and he stole the Italian words". The motif of being speechless, unable to communicate and to understand others who speak a different language appears in 11 of the 68 stories and, indeed, it is an extremely popular motif in traditional narrative.

Interestingly, the metaphorical ugliness and cruelty of the bad teachers is often just an initial cover, which seems to symbolize the fear instilled (in the children) by the Other who speaks a different language. Some protagonists confront their fears directly by deciding to get to know their teachers better, thus ending up having afternoon teas with them and discovering that "she wasn't bad, she was only alone". At times, the bad teacher is someone who needs to be touched by the beauty of the world of children in order to overcome an emotional block: "Miss Spelling was so impressed from all that energy and devotion, suddenly a tear came to her eyes and that tear soak the book's pages."

The difficult tasks the protagonists have to overcome vary from having to cross "the dark deep wood of grammar" (which echoes "the deep dark wood" in *The Gruffalo* by Julia Donaldson, one of the books used during the workshops), to pronouncing and spelling key words, such as "children and chips", an ogre's favourite words (reminiscent of the dragon's hoped for meal with "witch and chips" in *Room on the Broom* by Julia Donaldson). The books read in class obviously contributed to the imagery of their stories.

Helpers are usually family members who encourage protagonists not to give up, magic creatures, magic animals, such as butterflies and, at times, the teachers themselves who give additional lessons in the afternoon to help pupils take the extra leap. In general, they help protagonists gain self-confidence – "he gave to him a bottle with a potion and two words written on the top: Self confidence" – and knock down affective

⁴ Spelling and punctuation of all the quotes from the students' fairy tales reflect the originals.

filters erected by dreadful linguistic initiations: in one story a girl has to drink from three bottles – labelled “perseverance”, “will power”, and “passion” – in order to overcome the three difficult tasks. The theme of developing inner qualities that will help overcome difficulties, i.e. the “tool kit” Jane Muncy speaks of (Lindahl 2004), is very well developed in each tale.

Turning points are meetings with sympathetic native speakers, Erasmus trips, trips abroad, or other sources of learning. Motivation is provided by the inner need not to give up, by the will to see other places and meet other people, or by the dream of attending Hogwarts: “he admitted that he could not go to Hogwarts because he hadn’t B2 level”! And indeed, this protagonist goes on to do everything within his power to achieve the level deemed necessary to attend Hogwarts.

In the end, they are all successful, they manage to find the willpower and the hope to carry on and triumph over the antagonists – for example, pronouncing 100 words in English in order to kill the clones of a horrible English teacher. Often, the initial hatred for the language turns into love and protagonists carry on with confidence on their road to proficiency: “She is convinced that one day she will do it, but she still needs time, a lot of effort and even a little luck.”

Many of the stories that do not mention English, and are not set in a school, are nonetheless centred around the need to learn a different code, often a magic language, an animal language, such as “Jellyfishian”, or the “too-who” of owls, or, in more than one case, a “fairy speech”. Interestingly, these stories refer to language learning as a means to an end, rather than as a dreaded or loved school subject. These stories convey in powerful ways the urgency of learning the code of others in order to survive and how this can be achieved only through painful and laborious work, on one occasion “a hell made of blood, tears, and sweat”. The feeling of being alone and at odds with the new situation is very clearly stated in almost all of them: “there he was, in the new world, speechless and frightened and nowhere to go”. This boy will then meet an old woman helper who speaks a mysterious language and his only chance of survival is to learn to speak her language. What stands out is that learning can only be achieved through proximity to people who speak that language. These stories speak of shocking but full immersions. They do not narrate the story of learning a foreign language in one’s country; rather, they speak of being catapulted into the world of Others. In a sense, they are stories of second language learning, rather than foreign language learning, and they resemble the stories of immigrants who find themselves at a loss with a new culture and a new language at the same time. These texts put the stress on the ability of the protagonists to see opportunities for change where no one else might see them; for example, jumping aboard big ships, leaving for a trip knowing just a few words of the local language, putting oneself in apparently hostile but eventually rewarding situations.

When learning a language was not mentioned at all, the stories still told of apparently impossible ordeals, such as “a black and white rabbit that wanted to become very very tall”, or being taught “the power of magic”, and they displayed very determined protagonists. In all of these cases, the writer stresses the difficulty of the process and the importance of activating personal resources and responses.

These stories reveal powerful information on how students see themselves as learners, what learning means to them, what it means to teach in effective ways and the role this language played and plays in their lives: “her mother told her that in order to

become a perfect adult she needed to study English". Indeed, without hyperbole, this is still the message many children receive nowadays.

8. Implications for EFL teaching and learning

It was hoped that the structure of a fairy tale would challenge the students' perspective on their learning path: unlike personal narratives, which can rely on abstract thinking, the fairy tale is concrete, and it forces us to turn our feelings into concrete events and situations that symbolize them. Concrete thinking can bring about change, and indeed 87% of them stated that re-writing their experience through a fairy tale helped them see their path of learning from a different point of view. In one of the free comments a student remarked that "writing a fairy tale on my learning path helped me figure out that the most difficult obstacles can be overcome with unexpected results". The resulting stories are positive accounts of coping, resilience and overcoming. In line with exercises in positive psychology (Gregersen 2016) which are being applied to SLA, this particular creative writing exercise helped students concentrate on the inner resources they had been able to activate in order to continue their path of learning English and even envisage becoming teachers of English themselves, despite the obstacles they had encountered on the way. Indeed, the fairy tale writing exercise was also meant to help students realize how they had managed to preserve a "sense of personal unity and purpose" (Singer 2004: 437) as learners, despite the often broken and intermittent quality of the foreign language instruction they had received.

Interestingly, most students stated they had an audience of children in mind as they were writing and, possibly for this reason, they felt more compelled to linger on the importance of perseverance, resilience and hope. These are fundamental qualities for their future attitude towards teaching: in particular, Hiver (2016: 169) describes how hope helps novice L2 teachers "overcome the demands of their novice year". There is a sense of agency in these narratives that is very important in life narratives in general. According to studies in narrative identity (McAdams and McLean 2013: 234), agency is "the degree to which protagonists are able to effect change in their own lives or influence others in their environment, often through demonstrations of self-mastery, empowerment, achievement, or status. Highly agentic stories privilege accomplishment and the ability to control one's fate": indeed, this is what happens in the majority of the fairy tales analysed. Fairy tales are sustained by and organized around the actions of a hero who travels and connects worlds, people and situations. Agency is what builds the plot. For this reason, unlike a language memoir, fairy tales are an extremely valid tool to help students organize their personal narrative in ways that bring agency to the forefront of what they write. McAdams and McLean (*ibid.*: 233) observe that "narrators who [...] construct life stories that feature themes of personal agency and exploration tend to enjoy higher levels of mental health, well-being, and maturity".

Another important feature that stands out in the students' stories is the idea of meaning-making, defined as the "degree to which the protagonist learns something or glean a message from an event" (*ibid.*: 234). It seems important to provide students who are on the verge of becoming teachers of a language they often struggled to attain with an opportunity to use their past experience to construct new positive meaning and paint a vision, an image of themselves as positive alternatives to some of the teachers

they did not like, or as rightful heirs of those who had inspired them. Indeed, some of the stories ended with the protagonists taking the bad teacher's place and establishing themselves as "The new king! The new Teacher!".

Very importantly, with regard to literature on trainee teachers' beliefs and use of metaphors in teacher training, these narratives paint clear images of good teachers. The nature of the fairy tale forces one to make clear-cut demarcations between negative and positive, and this caused a series of important elements to emerge with a clarity that the previous biographical narratives had not provided. Indeed, as Johnson and Golombek (2011: 504) remark, the "transformative power of narrative lies in its ability to ignite cognitive processes that can foster teacher professional development". The cognitive process ignited by these reflective fairy tales activated their ability to focus on the essential qualities of the good EFL teacher.

The good teacher is kind, engaging, understanding, willing to consider each child as an individual, able to teach through play and enjoyable activities, and he/she never exposes children or confronts them with their shyness or inability to utter words. These portraits describe first of all a good teacher in pedagogical and emotional terms: language learning seems to be the result of this considerate attitude. Interestingly, only a few stories mention teaching methods (usually based on play and leaving children free to be) as marks of a good teacher: rather, the vast majority describe the emotional qualities of a good teacher, as if to suggest that the good teacher is one who does not erect affective barriers. This is in line with what Lin *et al.* (2012: 187) report in their analysis of EFL teaching metaphors among pre-service teachers, whereby "a large number of participants perceived language teaching as a form of nurturing and providing support that promotes student growth and development". This quality is also most important in terms of the learning process.

Interestingly, there is no mention of language proficiency (the perceived lack of which made the students feel inept for EFL teaching) in portraits of good teachers; rather, the other mark of a good teacher appears to be love for one's subject. Many texts describe bad teachers as showing no signs of love for the English language: "She hated English, because the teacher hated English himself". So, when the magic helper asks a young girl what she would like to do with the magic powder she is gifted with, she replies: "I would make the teacher happy, because I want to learn English with a smile". As young adults wishing to become teachers, students seem particularly aware of the need to love one's subject in order to teach it effectively. Teachers who love their subject also provide more occasions for meaningful interaction and therefore, for language learning (Kramsch and Vork Steffensen 2008). Passion for one's subject constitutes a motivation to continue language practice, which will eventually improve proficiency: these stories seem to hint at passion as being the only possible route to proficiency. It is hoped that this kind of exercise might help them reconsider their relationship with the language and improve it in view of their future role.

Through fairy tale writing, the students were able to reflect on the ideal language teacher from the point of view of her/his pupils. They were not influenced by their fear of the English language, which at times, leads them to choose rigidly structured activities they would not have enjoyed as young learners (and which they often criticize in the practice of teachers they shadow during placements). In line with other applications of metaphors, this exercise appeared to help "student teachers maintain their idealism

as they confront the realities of classroom teaching” (Bullough 1991: 43). Indeed, these ideal teachers reflect the students’ general views and “beliefs about teaching practice, representing philosophical orientation to knowledge, learning and the role and responsibility of being an EFL teacher” (Lin *et al.* 2012: 194). Most of all they reflect the idea of teaching that led them to choose this professional life in the first place. These narratives contain an element of professional idealization that is extremely important in sustaining teachers in their future.

The assignment of a narrative task at the end of the workshops was partly designed also to help students look back and reflect critically on the material analysed in class, through the filter of their experience as young learners; it also aimed to encourage them to use the image of the kind of teacher they would like to be as their guiding principle for selecting classroom material and shaping their future English teaching practice. In other words, it is hoped they will be guided by the necessity to avoid affective filters at all costs in their future work and to establish an emotionally conducive atmosphere in the classroom.

9. The language angle

Use of creative writing in EFL clearly increases students’ will to engage with the task (Robinson 2016), and the students particularly welcomed the opportunity: 98% agreed that there isn’t often a chance to express oneself creatively during university studies, and 88% enjoyed writing the fairy tale.

Significantly, by further merging metaphorical creative writing with reflective writing, the English language momentarily ceased to be a dreaded subject (as one student wrote: “Writing a fairy tale allows you to eliminate all external pressures. Grammar and spelling are no longer the main focus”⁵) and became a powerful means of expression, which provided the students with a new voice to articulate ideas they had never been asked to share before, not even in their L1.

Some students took the chance to work motifs from their own readings and narrative knowledge into the stories. One story presented motifs that were similar to those in *Oliver Twist*, another had clear references to the series *Once Upon a Time*, and one very much echoed *Alice in Wonderland*, especially in the use of magic potions contained in bottles labelled “Drink me”. Some students appeared to access all their narrative knowledge in designing the metaphorical worlds in which they set their experience of learning, thus telling their stories with an even more personal and original voice.

These students had mixed levels of proficiency, ranging from A1 to B2+, but all the stories, despite some problems of form (i.e. grammar and syntax), presented clear structures and a clear attempt to refine language. Many students engaged in word play, word invention and rhyming: the kind of linguistic experimentation usually deemed possible only for proficient language users. There was also a clear tendency to employ a more prefabricated approach to language with the frequent use of word strings in parts that are repeated, such as “come and see”, “what’s the matter?”, “don’t you worry/ don’t you cry”, “you go ahead...”, and opening formulas such as “Once there was”, and “Once

⁵ My translation.

upon a time”, all of which come from books read in class. Use of prefabricated language denotes the ability to select native-like expressions and the will to experiment with them (Wray 2008).

According to the questionnaire, 68 percent of the students were satisfied with the linguistic quality of the story and, when compared with other less creative pieces of writing the students produced during the workshops and over the previous years, this appears to be the most elaborate. 16 students reported feeling empowered by the activity in linguistic terms – “It gave me more confidence in my abilities” (my translation)– and also feeling motivated to carry on studying English and improving their skills.

The need to tell a story, in other words, to make a story worth listening to, certainly provided strong motivation for students to hone their language with a view to producing a story that could be understood and enjoyed (“I wanted those who would read it to enjoy it too” (my translation), one student wrote in her comments). 84 percent of the students felt the activity motivated them to look for new words, 85 percent felt they learned new words: 47 students reported learning from 1 to 20 words, with 13 students learning between 10 and 20, and only the remaining 34 below 10.

66 percent of them said they felt autonomous, when it came to looking for words during the writing process. Indeed, the students hardly ever asked for the tutor’s help, and when they did, it was just to choose amongst options they had already selected autonomously.

Their motivation to refine language was partly due to the fact that many of them felt they were writing for children, despite this not being a requirement at the beginning. This acted on their writing in two ways: on the one hand it eased the pressure on them, as they did not feel judged in any way; on the other it inspired them to look for clarity of images and words, and it increased their motivation to find appropriate vocabulary. Interestingly, one student remarked that this search was perceived as giving particularly useful results:

the words and structures one looks up are all aimed at communicating to children, because one imagines to be writing for them, and for this reason the new things one learns are going to be particularly useful for a future teacher (my translation).

Not only did the students look up new words in online dictionaries, they also resorted to many of the words and expressions analysed and mentioned during the workshops. In general, they kept detailed notes of lessons, and they consulted them actively during the writing. What stands out is the frequent and natural use of features we covered during the workshops: their stories reveal a taste for accumulation of adjectives (“nasty husky voice”) and onomatopoeic sounds, often coming from books read in class (“too-whoa”); typical fairy tale language mentioned during the lessons (“They walked and walked and walked till...”, “There she found...”) and found in books read together; use of rhymes, frequent repetitions; and the symmetry of actions typical of pattern stories analysed in class. What stands out is the students’ ability to work many of the high frequency words that appear in children’s books into their narratives: words such as “hairy”, “scary”, “frightened”, “cry”, “huge”, “giant”, “angry”, “grumpy”, “grumble”, “tickle”, “hungry”, “tiny”, “happy”, “wood”, “forest”, “fairy” appear more than once in

several stories and reveal the students' ability to select language that belongs to the world of children.

Students evidently made good use of classroom notes and indeed 60% reported having employed words learned during the workshops. In this sense, the writing task provided the students with a meaningful occasion to experiment with what they had acquired not long before. Indeed, 96% reported they had learned new words from books; 98% declared they had learned new expressions; and the fairy tales bear clear traces of the language learned in class.

Some stories stand out for their use of elaborate forms, such as "it was in bad need of a cabin boy", others for the complexity and originality of their plot. What is striking is that, despite some problems with grammar and vocabulary, they all managed to produce coherent and engaging narratives. Interestingly, the task subverted many expectations, as 72% had not thought they would be able to write a fairy tale in English, and 75% of the students declared that their level of English had (unexpectedly) improved during creative writing.

In general, even in less elaborate narratives, results suggest that attempts were made by the students to move beyond certain stages of interlanguage and acquire more natural sounding turns of phrase, as shown by the frequent use of phrasal verbs and attention to collocations.

10. Conclusions

At the end of the workshops, 98% students felt motivated to continue their path of learning English. Teacher training is a multi-layered experience, where multiple identities are at play at the same time. The students before us are at the same time adult learners (carrying their individual histories of learning and memories of being taught at different stages of their lives) and aspiring teachers: but while their identity as L1 teachers appears rather well defined through past conceptualizations and university theory, they are just now embarking on crafting an EFL teacher identity that is respectful of their philosophical views of teaching. A structured metaphorical approach to reflecting on the relationship between EFL learners and teachers – in this case a fairy tale which forces students to focus on the idea of overcoming obstacles – can help students see how their multiple identities as learners, future teachers and present observers of other teachers' work, can act together to turn them into successful and nurturing EFL teachers.

As far as language use is concerned, fairy tale writing, for this particular class of students, appears to provide the kind of compelling input that can lead students to enhanced and unexpected results (Krashen *et al.* 2017: 3), while allowing them to have a more realistic and concrete representation of the breath of their actual knowledge and the breadth of their linguistic skills.

Metaphorical narrative approaches to the learner's reflection on language learning in teacher training could establish a new voice in the need to understand the language learning process, one that is able to transcend the economic crisis discourse and model the narrative of bold learners who jump at chances to develop new language identities, despite the difficulties this entails. If students were regularly encouraged to tell their stories of learning English as a foreign language through structures that promote agen-

cy, and they also were equipped with the language and metaphorical imagery to do so, they would be prone to use their knowledge to weave and enact new positive narratives of learning in front of the children they will teach.

References

- Arnold J. 1999. *Affect in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Binks E., D.L. Smith, L.J. Smith and R. Malatesha Joshi 2009. Tell Me as Story: A Reflection strategy for preservice teachers. *Teachers Education Quarterly* 36/4: 141-156.
- Bullough Jr, R.V. 1991. Exploring personal teaching metaphors in preservice teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education* 42/1: 43-51.
- Campbell J. 1949. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton, NY: Princeton University.
- Cheng F.W. 2008. Scaffolding language, scaffolding writing: A genre approach to teaching narrative writing. *The Asian EFL Journal*, 10/2: 167-191.
- Dewey J. 1933. *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relations of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process* (2nd revised edition). Chicago: D.C. Heath.
- Dörnyei Z. and M. Kubanyiova 2013. *Motivating Learners, Motivating Teachers: Building Vision in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fitzgibbon H.B. and K.H. Wilhelm 1998. Storytelling in ESL/EFL classrooms. *TESL Reporter* 31/2: 21-31.
- Floris F.D. 2013. Exploring teachers' beliefs on the teaching of English in English language courses in Indonesia. *Philippine ESL Journal* 11: 4-24.
- Goldstein L.S. 2005. Becoming a teacher as a hero's journey: using metaphor in preservice teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly* 32/1: 7-24.
- Gregersen T. 2016. Positive psychology exercises build social capital for language learners: preliminary evidence. In P.D. Macintyre, T. Gregersen and S. Mercer (eds), *Positive Psychology in SLA*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters: 147-167.
- Grimmett P.P. and A.M. MacKinnon 1992. Craft knowledge and the education of teachers. In G. Grant (ed.), *Review of Research in Education* vol. 18. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association: 385-456.
- Halliday M.A. and K. Matthiessen 2014. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Routledge.
- Henry A., S. Davydenko and Z. Dorney 2015. The anatomy of directed motivational currents: exploring intense and enduring periods of L2 motivation. *The Modern Language Journal* 99/2: 329-345.
- Hiver P. 2016. The triumph over experience: hope and hardiness in novice L2 teachers. In P.D. Macintyre, T. Gregersen and S. Mercer (eds), *Positive Psychology in SLA*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters: 168-192.
- Ho L. 2000. Children's literature in adult education. *Children's literature in Education* 31/4: 259-271.
- Horwitz E.K. 1996. Even teachers get the blues: recognizing and alleviating language teachers' feelings of foreign language anxiety. *Foreign Language Annals* 29/3: 365-372.
- Johnson K.E. and P.R. Golombek 2011. The transformative power of narrative in second language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly* 45/3: 486-509.
- Kramersch C. 1997. Guest column: the privilege of the non-native speaker. *Publications of the Modern language Association of America*: 359-369.
- Kramersch C. 2009. *The Multilingual Subject*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Kramersch C. and S. Vork Steffensen 2008. Ecological perspectives on second language acquisition and socialization. *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, 2595-2606.
- Krashen S.D., S.Y. Lee and C. Lao 2017. *Comprehensible and Compelling: The Causes and Effects of Free Voluntary Reading*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.
- Lin W.C., P.P. Shein and S.C. Yang 2012. Exploring personal EFL teaching metaphors in pre-service teacher education. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 11/1: 183-199.
- Lindahl C. 2004. *American Folktales: From the Collections of the Library of Congress*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Masoni L. 2017. Picture books e uso narrativo della lingua inglese. *LEND* 1: 49-58.
- Masoni L. 2018. *The role of authentic children's literature in primary EFL teacher training*. In: *Proceedings of the 11th International Conference on Innovation in Language Learning*, Florence, Italy. Florence: Filodiritto Editore: 216-218.
- McAdams D. and K. McLean 2013. Narrative identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22/3: 233-238.
- Nesmith S.M. 2011. Powerful reflections result from quality questions: the influence of posed questions on elementary preservice teachers' field-based reflections. *Research in the Schools* 18/2: 26-39.
- Peirce B.N. 1995. Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL quarterly* 29/1: 9-31.
- Peirce B.N. 2013. Investment and identity in language learning. At <http://blog.tesol.org/investment-identity-and-language-learning/>.
- Propp V. 1968. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Robinson I. 2016. Corpus linguistics and creativity: storytelling for university students. *ESP Across Cultures* 13: 127-141.
- Ruini C., L. Masoni, F. Ottolini and S. Ferrari 2014. Positive narrative group psychotherapy: the use of traditional fairy tales to enhance psychological well-being and growth. *Psychology of Well-being* 4: 13-21.
- Ruini C., F. Vescovelli, V. Carpi and L. Masoni 2017. Exploring psychological well-being and positive emotions in school children using a narrative approach. *The Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 17: 1-9.
- Saban A. 2006. Functions of metaphor in teaching and teacher education: a review essay. *Teaching Education* 17/4: 299-315.
- Saban A., B.N. Kocbeker and A. Saban 2007. Prospective teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning revealed through metaphor analysis. *Learning and Instruction* 17/2: 123-139.
- Singer J.A. 2004. Narrative identity and meaning making across the adult lifespan: an introduction. *Journal of Personality* 72/3: 437-460.
- Sisti F. 2016. Narrative thinking and storytelling for primary and early FL/SL education. *Fictions* XV: 53-66.
- Tatsuki D. 2015. Storytelling and literary texts in ELT: future directions. *Storytelling: Repositioning Literary Texts in Language Teaching*. *Annals of Foreign Studies* 90: 145-156.
- Tse L. 2000. Student perceptions of foreign language study: a qualitative analysis of foreign language autobiographies. *The Modern Language Journal* 84/1: 69-84.
- Wilson R. 2013. Another language is another soul. *Language and Intercultural Communication* 13/3: 298-309.

- Woods D. 1996. *Teacher Cognition in Language Teaching: Beliefs, Decision-making and Classroom Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wray A. 2008. The puzzle of language learning: From child's play to 'linguaphobia'. *Language Teaching* 41/2: 253-271.