

# Narrating a Novice Language Teacher Identity: What's at Stake when Telling Stories of Struggle?

Kristina B. Lewis

*University of Pennsylvania*

Within language teacher education (LTE), telling stories about their teaching allows novice teachers to make sense of their experiences, explore problems and pedagogical strategies, and develop coherent identities as skilled language teachers. The stakes are high, though, when we ask—or require—novice teachers to talk about moments of challenge, or even failure, in front of their peers and evaluators. In this paper, I examine two stories told by one novice teacher—about the same teaching event, but framing this first as a success and then as a challenge—within an LTE course discussion to demonstrate how she works to position herself as a competent teacher even as her unfolding narrative seems to threaten this identity. By analyzing not only the content of her stories, but also the context and enactment of their telling—and by highlighting the LTE course instructor's role as a co-narrator—I argue for the importance of understanding and supporting the complex work novice teachers engage in when they narrate their practice, particularly when focusing on moments of struggle.

**S**urely we all recognize the double bind faced by a job seeker when an interviewer poses the classic question, “What is your greatest weakness?” The internet is rife with suggestions for how to highlight your positive traits in response to this question and memes that reveal what applicants might wish they could say. Just as interviewees must be careful to dance around weaknesses that tell too much (for fear of losing the job opportunity), so too are novice teachers challenged by the common request in language teacher education (LTE) to talk about challenging moments in their teaching. When we ask novice teachers to talk about their struggles, we may aim to help them reflect on, make sense of, and learn from these experiences. At the same time, however, to do so requires that they engage in a complex and identity-threatening task: to talk about moments that may expose them as unskilled and incompetent—and often, to do so in front of their peers and eventual evaluators.

In this paper, I present and analyze two stories told by Esther,<sup>1</sup> a novice teacher, within an LTE course. Esther's stories both describe a single workshop she planned and co-taught with a classmate, but while her first story presents this as a pedagogical success, her second slowly reveals problems, which resulted directly from her lack of knowledge and teaching experience. Through a close examination of both the content and context of Esther's stories, I highlight what is at stake for novice teachers when we as teacher educators call on them to share moments of

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

struggle and weakness—and what a great responsibility we have to support them in this work.

### The Value of Narratives for Understanding Novice Language Teacher Experience

Narratives are ubiquitous within the work of language teaching and LTE. As language teachers, learners, and teacher educators, we use stories to “air, probe, and otherwise attempt to reconstruct and make sense of actual and possible life experiences” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 7). As we “*story* our lives,” we “construct, project, claim, negotiate, or resist various identities” (Vásquez, 2011, p. 543, emphasis in original). Because language teacher educators recognize the value of narrative sense-making, we often ask novice teachers to tell stories about their teaching experiences, whether in writing, one-on-one conferences, or as part of LTE course discussions. In doing so, we draw on what Johnson and Golombek (2011) categorize as the three primary functions for novice teachers when narrating their practice: as *externalization*, narration helps teachers become aware of and give voice to their understandings and beliefs; as *verbalization*, narration supports teachers as they begin to apply their developing conceptual knowledge about language teaching and learning to their pedagogical practice; and, as *systematic examination*, narration is the foundation for reflective practice and inquiry. Narratives, as both a process and product of sense-making, also offer us insights into how novice teachers are understanding and interpreting their learning and teaching experiences.

What, though, is at stake for novice teachers when we ask them to tell these stories? Perhaps especially when we draw on the common genres of *what went well?* and *what didn't go well?* we are asking them to trust us—and, in classroom discussions, their peers—with moments of uncertainty, struggle, or even failure. In telling stories about personal experiences, the storyteller's work is not simply to recount facts but to tell the story, and to describe their own actions and decisions in a way that demonstrates that they are a good person or, in the case of LTE, a good teacher. This *looking good* principle, as Ochs and colleagues (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 47; Ochs, Smith, & Taylor, 1989, p. 244) have described it, is not a superficial anxiety, but rather a fundamental aspect of all personal narration, which must also be at play whenever we ask—or require—novice teachers to narrate and reflect openly on experiences they have found challenging, frustrating, or confusing.

My analysis of Esther's stories is situated in the tradition of narrative analysis—what Pavlenko (2002) describes as “narrative study” (p. 213)—that focuses on the sort of stories we tell every day and how these are enacted interactionally, with a consideration of context, interlocutors, and the performative nature of narration. In examining the emergent, extemporaneous stories that are constructed as novice teachers discuss recent teaching experiences within an LTE course, my focus is on what Bamberg (2004) and Georgakopoulou (2006, 2007a, 2007b) have referred to as “small stories,” the brief tales recounted in the midst of other conversation, often “immediately reworked slices of life” that gain meaning as they are told (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 126). My analysis draws on concepts developed in Ochs and Capps's (2001) dimensions of narrativity and Wortham's (2001) discussion of narratives-in-action.

Ochs and Capps (2001), in an argument for the value of noticing the meaning conveyed in “ordinary social exchanges” (p. 2), offer a framework of five narrative

“dimensions” (pp. 19–20), which are often dynamic and fluid in small story interactional narratives. *Tellership* refers to the vocal and non-vocal involvement of interlocutors in the act of narrating. The rhetorical effectiveness of a narrative and its significance for narrator(s) and listener(s) denote its *tellability*. Personal narratives may also be more or less *embedded* in the flow of conversation. *Linearity* relates to the sense in which a narrative is structured to show chronological and cause-effect relationships. A central tension for narrators is the way that the desire to make sense of experience in ordered and linear ways plays against the tendency to question and explore multiple interpretations. Finally, and of particular importance to this paper, narratives have the capacity to reveal a great deal about a narrator’s *moral stance*, their perspective on “what is good and valuable and how one ought to live in the world” (p. 45). This is where the looking good constraint comes into play, as narrators typically try to tell stories “in a way that portrays themselves in the most complimentary light” (Ochs et al., 1989, p. 244). In the stories most often told within LTE courses, a narrator’s moral stance may be fluid and open to challenge as they work out meaning in the act of narrating itself—or when the questions and participation of co-tellers bring to light details that cast the narrator in a less than desirable light (Ochs & Capps, 2001).

Drawing on Wortham’s (2001) Bakhtinian concept of *dialogic discourse* allows for a close examination of how narratives are enacted in interaction. Focusing on *how* narratives are accomplished discursively requires seeing the *narrated event* (what happens in the story) and the *narrating event* (the telling of the story) as two distinct interactions (p. 19); likewise, a distinction must be recognized between the narrator as *character* in the narrated event and as *storyteller* in the narrating event (p. 13). In telling a story of personal experience, the narrator’s work is that of positioning oneself in relation to characters (including, within autobiographical tales, an earlier version of oneself) within the narrated event, as well as in relation to interlocutors within the narrating event. Parallelism between the narrated and narrating events—wherein the narrator-as-character and -as-storyteller inhabit similar interactional stances/voices—can lend stability and coherence to the narrator’s discursively produced identity.

Though research on language teaching and LTE has recently undergone a narrative turn (Barkhuizen, 2016; Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014), narratives have long played a role in teacher sense-making. This is perhaps most evident in the strands of reflective practice (Farrell, 2015, 2016) and teacher inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009), which have their roots in the reflective practices advocated by Dewey (1910), Schön (1983), and Zeichner and Liston (1996). Likewise, the interest in understanding how novice language teachers narrate and make sense of their experiences is not new. Within the realm of LTE, novice teachers’ narrative reflection in journals, action research or inquiry reports, and language/literacy autobiographies has received much attention (see, for example, Canagarajah, 2015; Johnson & Golombek, 2011). Novice teachers’ small stories told in oral form have been examined within the context of post-observation supervisory conversations (e.g., Vásquez, 2007, 2009), inquiry-based book clubs (e.g., Kooy, 2006), and language and literacy classrooms (e.g., Ives & Juzwik, 2015; Juzwik & Ives, 2010). The role that narratives play over time in positioning novice language teachers and teacher educators within LTE coursework has also been explored (e.g., Richmond, Juzwik, & Steele, 2011; Rogers, Marshall, & Tyson, 2006; Taylor, 2017).

In this paper, I add to this body of work by looking closely at how one novice language teacher's narratives are enacted within an LTE course discussion. I examine how Esther's stories—and within them, her identity as a competent or struggling novice teacher—are framed by the discussion prompt and produced with the instructor's support and co-tellership. I specifically highlight the ways that her story, its telling, and her ability to coherently present herself as a competent and knowledgeable teacher shift as she first narrates the event as a success and then as a challenge. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate the importance of analyzing not only the *content* of novice teachers' stories, but also the *context* and *performance* of their telling—and the role that we as language teacher educators play in cultivating an environment for novice teachers to make sense of even the most challenging experiences.

### The Context for Esther's Stories

#### The LTE Course

The data presented in this paper are drawn from a semester-long exploration of classroom discourse (Rymes, 2016) in a graduate-level course, Teaching Second Language Writing, which is an elective for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) master's students at a North American university. Dr. Palmer, an experienced language teacher and language teacher educator, has structured the course to include a service-learning project working with K–12 emergent multilingual learners<sup>2</sup> at a community organization (henceforth, Service-Learning Site). In Fall 2016, the course met for two hours weekly; with permission from Dr. Palmer and the consent of all course participants, I both recorded (video and audio) and attended as a participant-observer.

Course meetings involved a mix of whole-class discussions, pair and small group activities, and individual reflection and writing activities. The course was primarily conducted in English, though small group discussions and "border talk" (Rymes, 2016, p. 61) often occurred in a mix of English and Chinese, depending on interlocutors.<sup>3</sup> In addition to providing homework support throughout the semester, students were required to design and lead a three-part workshop series at Service-Learning Site. According to the assignment description, they were responsible for "researching [their assigned] genre and developing a set of lesson plans that are firmly grounded in the principles and techniques to L2 [second language] writing instruction." The workshop topics that Dr. Palmer assigned were based on state and local curriculum requirements and the needs of learners at Service-Learning Site. Dr. Palmer encouraged students to plan activities that drew on learners' diverse communicative repertoires (Rymes, 2013), including their home language, and to see these workshops as supplementing what learners would have already covered in school. Reflecting their experience as international students, most students were unfamiliar with the state and local curricula; while these aspects were discussed briefly within the course, Dr. Palmer also encouraged

<sup>2</sup> For clarity in distinguishing TESOL students from the K–12 learners they worked with, I will refer to the former as "students" or "novice teachers" and the latter as "learners" throughout this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Similar to the demographics of the TESOL program itself, the Fall 2016 section of this course had twenty students: 17 from China, 1 from Taiwan, 1 from Thailand, 1 from the United States.

students to consult curricular guidelines available online and to talk to learners about what they were studying at school. After completing the workshop series, each pair was required to submit a written report describing their planning and implementation and reflecting on the overall experience.

### Esther's Narratives

The narratives I analyze in this paper occurred near the start of Class 8, at which point four groups had taught the first two of their three-part workshop series.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Palmer asked students from these groups to talk about both positive and negative aspects of their workshops so far, which she referred to as “roses” and “thorns” (see Excerpt 1). In part because the stories students told in response to this prompt were unplanned (in that students did not know in advance that they would be asked to talk about this, and no planning time was given) and required (though only from students in the four specified groups), these stories were enacted in the moment of the class and worked out with and in response to the reactions of both peers and Dr. Palmer. Esther narrated the first two stories in this sequence about the workshops on writing high school application essays<sup>5</sup> she and Mei were facilitating for 8th graders. Like the majority of their classmates, Esther and Mei were Chinese international students in their early twenties, who entered this course with little teaching experience and even less experience with K–12 education in the United States and the local school district.

I chose to focus on Esther's stories not because they necessarily represent those told by other students or at other points in this course. Rather, in part because of a clear contrast in how Esther narrates a single teaching experience as more and less successful, this pair of stories caught my attention as an example of the complex work novice language teachers engage in when telling stories about their teaching practice—particularly those that threaten to reveal them as incompetent or unskilled—in front of their peers and within the LTE context. In the following sections, I will first introduce the context for Esther's stories, a whole-class discussion led by Dr. Palmer. I will then present and discuss each of Esther's stories, which occurred consecutively in the interaction, focusing particular attention on her moral stance and the parallelism that emerges between her narratives and their telling.

### Setting the Stage: A Discussion of Roses and Thorns

After introducing the topic for Class 8 as “course design syllabi, lesson plans, activities and just planning more generally,” Dr. Palmer opens a discussion about students' workshops at Service-Learning Site (Excerpt 1). She frames this as a request to learn “a little” about the workshops and as a topic that the whole class (“we... all”) would be interested in (lines 1–2). After introducing the topic of the discussion, Dr. Palmer clarifies with students which groups have already started their workshops, listing these on the board. Dr. Palmer then reintroduces the discussion topic (lines 5–8), again framing it as a desire to “hear a little bit

<sup>4</sup> Due to space constraints at Service-Learning Site, workshops were taught on a staggered schedule beginning in week 6. The five other groups had not yet begun their workshops.

<sup>5</sup> Families in this urban school district have the option to enroll in neighborhood schools and/or apply for enrollment in schools across the district; high schools, in particular, tend to cater to special interests.

about how things are going" (lines 7–8) and as relevant to the whole class, now in relation to the other workshop series that will soon be starting (lines 5–6).

*Excerpt 1. Setting up the roses and thorns discussion*<sup>6</sup>

- 1 Dr. Palmer: And so, I was wondering if I could hear or we  
 2 could all hear a little about how those workshops  
 3 are going  
 4 ((Dr. Palmer and students discuss which workshops have  
 already started. Dr. Palmer writes on the board:  
     3-5 - **Memoir**  
     8th - **HS essay**  
     6-7 - **Comics**  
     9 - **presentations**))  
 5 Dr. Palmer: So:: let's: see, um, we have new workshops  
 6 starting next week,  
 7 So: I would love to hear a little bit about <how  
 8 things are going>  
 9 So could we take a few moments, and could you  
 10 tell us um-  
 11 Let's do it this way, let's have it  
 12 [((writes on board: **Roses**  
                                     **Thorns**))]  
 13 [Have you ever seen this?]  
 14 So [roses]  
 15 [((draws on board: line diagram of a flower))]  
 16 °cause I'm not that much of an artist°  
 17 Students: ((quiet laughter))  
 18 Dr. Palmer: are the things that are going really well, and  
 19 thorns are the prickly parts that, that are a  
 20 little tougher, things that maybe aren't going  
 21 as well  
 22 So I would love for each group to tell us at  
 23 least one rose, one thing that's going really  
 24 well, and maybe one thorn, one problem area  
 25 And the reason I'm asking for this. Is I wanta  
 26 get a sense of what's happening but I also want  
 27 to remind you that we are a. community. Right?  
 28 We're a community of practice. We're working  
 29 together. To think about supporting literacy. At  
 30 Service-Learning Site and there's a lot that we  
 31 can learn from one another. In terms of.  
 32 Our teaching, what we know about the kids,  
 33 structuring the workshop, just little (.)

<sup>6</sup> For transcription conventions, see Appendix.



34                   logistical issues around space=it's not a very  
 35                   big space.  
 36                   Um (.) so, is there any group that would like to  
 37                   go first and share with us=  
 38                   =let's start on the positive, share with us at  
 39                   least a ro:se. At least one rose  
 40                   (4.0)

Dr. Palmer gives specific parameters for the discussion, writing (and drawing) on the board to title the two relevant topics: roses and thorns (lines 12–15). Roses function metaphorically here as “the things that are going really well” (line 18) in the workshops, that is, students’ successes in their work as novice language teachers. Similarly, thorns stand for “the prickly parts... that are a little tougher, things that maybe aren’t going as well” (lines 19–21); these are the “problem area[s]” (line 24) students have faced in their teaching. This two-part focus mirrors the reflection component of the report students will eventually need to write about the workshops (which asks them to discuss, among other things, “what worked” and “what needed to be modified” [Assignment Description]), as well as discussions of teaching practice that happen in other courses across the TESOL program. Notice, though, that Dr. Palmer’s phrasing does not locate the responsibility for these “things” that “are (not) going” on in the workshops. She does not specifically ask students to describe something *they*, as teachers, have done well or not well, though they may easily interpret it as this. At the same time, the framing of this activity as a chance for other students to gain useful information for planning and implementing their own workshop series suggests that whatever issues have come up so far could be mitigated in some way by those who will hear about them now (and are thus aspects that could be under the teacher’s control).

After setting the parameters for students’ contributions, Dr. Palmer returns to offering a rationale for this discussion, describing a two-fold reason for requesting this information. First, as the course instructor, she wants to “get a sense of what’s happening” at Service-Learning Site and in their projects. As their instructor, she will eventually assign a grade for these workshops, but she also has the authority to contact leaders at Service-Learning Site if she has concerns about students’ experiences there; in this request for information about the workshops, both factors may be at play, although for grade-conscious graduate students, the first may be most salient. Second, Dr. Palmer draws on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of *communities of practice* (lines 27–28), a term that is likely familiar to these students at this stage of their coursework, to emphasize a collaborative interest in “supporting literacy” for learners at Service-Learning Site (lines 28–30). First-person plural pronouns and a demonstrated familiarity with the challenges of teaching in the cramped space of Service-Learning Site (lines 34–35) help Dr. Palmer’s attempt to align herself with students—as language teachers who are knowledgeable about teaching and learners (lines 32–33) and as all legitimate participants in this shared work of language teaching.

Dr. Palmer’s request seems somewhat informal; she asks to hear “a little bit” (line 7), jokes about her own drawing skills (line 16), and says that she “would

love” to “maybe” hear from groups on these topics (lines 22–24). Even so, as the course instructor, Dr. Palmer wields a great deal of control and authority over the interactional context (Rymes, 2016). This is evident when the footing (Goffman, 1981) shifts, as Dr. Palmer acts in her role as an instructor to ask for volunteers to tell the whole class about “at least a rose” (lines 36–39). She does so without offering planning time or a chance for co-teachers, who were mostly not seated together, to discuss who will talk or what they will say. It is in response to this request that Esther volunteers, after a brief silence (line 40), to tell the first story.

### Esther’s First Story: A Rosy Telling of a Rosy Tale

Esther, seated in the middle of the room, leans forward as Dr. Palmer makes a second request for a volunteer (Excerpt 2, line 41), likely making eye contact to indicate her willingness to volunteer<sup>7</sup> and then stating this (line 43) as Dr. Palmer calls on her (line 42).

#### *Excerpt 2. Esther’s rose story*

- 41 Dr. Palmer: °Anybody wanna start°  
 42 Yes, [thank you Esther  
 43 Esther: [I’ll go u- I’ll go first  
 44 Dr. Palmer: O[kay.  
 45 Esther: [I think the roses for last workshop is the  
 46 activity design (highly) active- like highly  
 47 motivated the students.  
 48 Uh, the activity was about (like having) students  
 49 to put different words (of) the transition words  
 50 into different categories.  
 51 We (gave them) a lecture first. Then we had  
 52 them—we had them do the activity later.  
 53 A:nd because the- >there were- at first there  
 54 were< only †two students (there), so those two  
 55 students (um) worked together.  
 56 But we (like) planned different versions of those  
 57 activities, like three versions. One is the work  
 58 individually, uh, with two different materials.  
 59 One is like matching?  
 60 Dr. Palmer: °mhm°  
 61 Esther: One is like uh choose the word from the word  
 62 banks and one is like work together (with the  
 63 large) papers.  
 64 And u- the third one works pretty good, and it  
 65 saved some times as well because we also planned  
 66 more than we can do, <actually>.

<sup>7</sup> Esther’s back is to the camera in Class 8; her chosen seat for this class at the middle of the long seminar table meant that she was often out of Dr. Palmer’s direct sight from the front of the classroom.



- 67 (1.0)  
 68 Dr. Palmer: So, you found that the activity in which the  
 69 students were working with large papers  
 70 Esther: Yea::h.  
 71 Dr. Palmer: and (bringin-) categorizing transition words.  
 72 And which one of the workshops were you?  
 73 Esther: Um, the eighth?  
 74 Dr. Palmer: The eighth grade?  
 75 Esther: Yeah, [yeah  
 76 Dr. Palmer: [Okay, for the high school essay.  
 77 Excellent.

Esther's description of the "roses" for the second workshop she and Mei had led the previous week emerges as a narrative focused on the activities they had designed, how they modified their plan in response to low attendance (lines 53–55), and her perception of the success of these activities. Esther launches into the narrative quickly and confidently, not even waiting for Dr. Palmer's confirmation of her turn (line 44), and she holds the floor for multiple turns. She has volunteered to tell the first rose story, and she now does so without hesitation.

As the first response to Dr. Palmer's request for roses, Esther's narrative is highly tellable. She herself frames it as an example of roses (line 45) and foregrounds the reason for this: the "activity design... highly motivated the students" (lines 46–47); this statement, connected with the identification of the topic (categorizing transition words, lines 48–50), serves as what Labov and Waletzky (1967) refer to as the "orientation" section that precedes many highly structured narratives (p. 27). From line 51, Esther tells the story: she and Mei gave students a lecture (line 51), then moved into the activity stage (line 52). A complication arose here: Because only two learners attended the second workshop (line 54), Esther and Mei had to adapt their planned activities, ultimately letting these two work together (lines 54–55). At this point, the high tellability of Esther's narrative has also been evident in its rhetorical structure, in her ability to clearly communicate the events of the workshop to her listeners.

To explain why having the two learners work together is a deviation from their original plan, Esther needs to add details about what she and Mei had planned. She thus moves out of the storyline of the actual workshop to describe the three planned activities: an individual activity with two texts, a matching activity based on word banks, and a collaborative task involving "large papers"<sup>8</sup> (lines 56–63). While Esther does not directly state this, given the order that she describes the activities, it also seems likely that she and Mei intended to implement all three, and in this order. Notice that Esther does not actually describe *how* she and Mei changed their plan, though her reference to saving time after having planned too much (lines 65–66) suggests that they did so by reducing the time for or cutting out altogether the first and/or second activities. Instead, she ends the narrative on a high note, focusing on the third activity as "work[ing] pretty good" and highlighting its perceived benefits (lines 64–66).

<sup>8</sup>This is likely a reference to flip chart paper with a sticky edge.

By restating this focus (lines 68–71) and eventually evaluating Esther's contribution as "excellent" (line 77), Dr. Palmer accepts the rose that Esther has offered: She and Mei planned and implemented at least one activity that engaged the learners in categorizing transition words. The relationship between transition words and the genre of the 8th grade workshop, writing high school application essays, is not directly addressed. This is likely the reason for Dr. Palmer's clarification of the workshop topic in lines 72–76, since "transition words" could in theory have been applicable to *any* of the workshop topics.

Esther's rose narrative thus unfolds smoothly. There is little co-tellership. Aside from constant eye contact and an occasional nod, Dr. Palmer's only involvement is to offer a response token (line 60; Wong & Waring, 2010, p. 90) to invite continuation after Esther's hesitation on the term "matching" (which likely sought confirmation that her listeners had some understanding of what a "matching" activity would entail; line 59) and then to summarize the point of the story (lines 68–71) after Esther's silence indicates that she is finished telling it (line 67). Esther's classmates listen attentively but silently, not even engaging in the sideways whispering that sometimes accompanies Dr. Palmer's talk. While the narrative is clearly embedded within the discussion activity, as an example per Dr. Palmer's request, the low co-tellership and Esther's extended turn sequence also leads it to be largely detached from the typical back-and-forth of classroom talk. Dr. Palmer's eventual evaluation (line 77) does, however, make it clear that this is not just a conversational narrative—it is, like all student talk within a classroom space, open to assessment by the instructor. This narrative also exhibits strong evidence of linearity in the cause-effect relationships Esther describes: Esther and Mei planned the activities → the activities went well; there were fewer attendees than expected → Esther and Mei changed their plan. This narrative is framed as a successful cause-effect tale from the start: Esther and Mei's (good) activity design was responsible for the students' (high) motivation.

In telling this narrative, and particularly in offering it as the first example of successful teaching, Esther displays a clear, coherent moral stance. In this story, Esther and Mei the characters function as exemplars of good teachers who are able to highly motivate their students. They do this not only through careful attention to activity design, but also through an ability to adapt to challenging external circumstances (low student attendance) while implementing their plan. Esther's use of indexical cues and evaluative language supports her development of this moral stance. By describing the three activities in detail (lines 56–63), she emphasizes the work that she and Mei put into planning them—and ultimately, it is a characteristic of the final activity (that it involved "large papers") rather than the (unstated) purpose of that activity that Dr. Palmer also reiterates in line 69. Throughout, Esther uses positive language to describe their work, starting from the explicit framing of this as a rose (thereby borrowing Dr. Palmer's earlier connotation of things "going really well;" line 18), and continuing in her description to talk about "(highly) active... highly motivated" students (lines 46–47) and an activity that "works pretty good" (line 64) and "saved some times" (line 65). One could even argue that "plan[ning] more than we can do" (lines 65–66) might be a positive attribute of (over-)prepared teachers! Through her use of these positive evaluations, we not only learn what traits Esther the storyteller views as good teaching but are also led to see Esther and Mei the characters as exemplars of these traits.

Stepping back from the narrative itself, there is also a high degree of parallelism between the narrated event (the workshop) and the narrating event (Esther's telling of this story in the LTE course). Esther and Mei the *characters* are successful language teachers, whose planning and adaption resulted in a successful workshop. (Whether this is precisely what happened in the workshop itself is not important here; as listeners/readers/analysts of the narrative, we know about the events and characters in Esther's story.) And in the telling of this story, Esther the narrator speaks confidently and fluidly, capturing her audience's attention and earning praise from Dr. Palmer (line 77). Through this parallel in position and stance between herself as a narrator and as a character, Esther is able to construct and maintain an identity as a capable and competent language teacher, surely an ideal result for any novice language teacher asked to talk about their teaching practice in front of an audience of peers and the LTE instructor who will evaluate their work.

### Esther's Second Story: A Thorny Telling of a Thorny Tale

In offering a rose, Esther has fulfilled Dr. Palmer's request—to “start on the positive” by telling “at least one rose” (lines 38–39). To some extent, though it is framed positively, her first story could also have functioned to fulfill the thorn slot; after all, the unexpectedly low attendance was probably “tough” and “prickly” (lines 19–20) for Esther and Mei to deal with. Invoking her authority as the course instructor, Dr. Palmer next requests to hear about the thorns of Esther and Mei's workshop series (Excerpt 3, line 80). Based on the “last [speaker] as next [speaker] bias” described by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974, p. 712), Esther's position as the previous speaker makes her the likely respondent even though Mei could also have taken the floor here. Indeed, Dr. Palmer gestures in Esther's direction (line 81), and it is Esther who quickly launches into a second narrative (line 83).

#### Excerpt 3. Esther's thorn story

78 Dr. Palmer: U::m.  
79 (1.2)  
80 [Thorns?] On the high school essay?  
81 [(gestures toward Esther)]  
82 Any[things?]  
83 Esther: [Uh, the] materials.  
84 Dr. Palmer: Mater[ials].  
85 Esther: [(Yeah.)] Students- we know we want to  
86 choose an essay? Like the the samples?  
87 [The] good samples for the students. And the  
88 Dr. Palmer: [°mhm°]  
89 Esther: resources we can find on the internet. Is pretty  
90 like? (.) Nothing.  
91 Dr. Palmer: <Yeah, [there's not (a lot)].>  
92 Esther: [(like for the-)]  
93 And, we like (.) like (.) like googled a lot but

- 94 [nothing].
- 95 Dr. Palmer: [mhm]
- 96 Esther: And we googled the Chinese website. Which called
- 97 bai.du. [((laughs))]
- 98 Students: [((laughs))]
- 99 Dr. Palmer: [((laughs))]
- 100 Esther: Yeah, it works a little bit, but it's not
- 101 appropriate.
- 102 Dr. Palmer: [°O:h°]
- 103 Esther: [And] the words like the transition words. I
- 104 find a lot of resources but I'm not sure if
- 105 that matches what they have learned.=
- 106 [I don't] know whether they've learned
- 107 Dr. Palmer: [°mhm°]
- 108 Esther: these words
- 109 Dr. Palmer: mhm
- 110 Esther: already? So I did a lot of matching. [Like.]
- 111 Dr. Palmer: [mhm]
- 112 Esther: Is this too hard for them?
- 113 Dr. Palmer: mhm
- 114 Esther: But it turns out, the essay we choose is a
- 115 little ↓difficult for them.
- 116 We literally has to translate every phrase,
- 117 every sentences. And the students' ↑proficiency?
- 118 Dr. Palmer: mhm
- 119 Esther: is not ↓like as ↑high as we think?
- 120 Dr. Palmer: mhm
- 121 (0.6)
- 122 Dr. Palmer: So that you we- you had some learners who were
- 123 struggling with understanding the [sample] text.
- 124 Esther: [ye:ah]
- 125 Dr. Palmer: And so it caused you to rethink [maybe] some of
- 126 Esther: [yea:h]
- 127 Dr. Palmer: your materials, and how you structured those
- 128 materials for them.
- 129 Esther: (°mhm°) and that's the reason we go for the
- 130 third version of the activity=we don't have
- 131 enough time [to do]
- 132 Dr. Palmer: [°mm°]
- 133 Esther: (°the individual [stuff]°)
- 134 Dr. Palmer: [mhm]
- 135 Okay, good. That's good to know.

In this second narrative, Esther retells the story of the second workshop,<sup>9</sup> casting it now as every bit the prickly thorn. She again offers an orientation statement (Labov & Waletzky, 1967), albeit a less developed one, defining the thorn as “materials” (line 83) but not immediately stating what was problematic about the materials. This narrative starts earlier than the previous one, not within the workshop itself, but instead in Esther and Mei’s attempts to plan for it. The complication arises when their intention to incorporate a “good” sample essay (which would seem to be a necessary component of a workshop series dedicated to writing high school application essays) was apparently foiled by the lack of resources available online (lines 85–94). This problem persisted despite their extensive efforts, which utilized not only Google (line 93) but also Baidu<sup>10</sup> (line 97), an admission that draws laughter from students and instructor alike. This shared moment of laughter (lines 97–99) could point to alignment with and recognition of the frustration that led Esther and Mei to Baidu as, seemingly, a last resort; it could also signal surprise at the naming of a Chinese search engine within an interactional context (whole-class discussions involving non-Chinese-speaking participants) that normally only involved English. Although Esther doesn’t explain how exactly, she and Mei did eventually choose materials, namely an “essay” / “sample text” (lines 114, 123) and materials related to transition words (line 103). A new problem arises, however, when they realize that these materials are “not appropriate” for the learners (lines 100–101), both because Esther is not certain that they match what has already been covered in school (lines 104–110) and because they end up being too challenging for the learners’ language proficiency level (lines 114–119).

In describing these challenges, Esther surfaces a deeper issue: her (and Mei’s) limited experience as language teachers and with the state curriculum. It is not simply that resources are hard to find on the internet (a challenge that Dr. Palmer acknowledges, line 91), but that despite their efforts, Esther and Mei are unable to find and identify “appropriate” ones (lines 100–101). Similarly, materials related to transition words are abundant (lines 103–104), but a lack of familiarity with the state curriculum standards and 8th grade assignments means that Esther and Mei cannot determine what will be relevant or “whether they’ve learned these words already” (lines 106–110). Finally, the sample essay they choose does not seem to be inherently flawed; its problems stem instead from an overestimation by Esther and Mei of the learners’ language proficiency (lines 114–119) in spite of their best efforts to account for this (lines 110–112).

The mismatch between learners’ abilities and the materials that Esther and Mei have prepared ultimately leads to problems during the workshop, and while they go to great lengths to support learners—by “translating” (line 115; or, more likely, paraphrasing, since neither Esther nor Mei speaks the home language of learners at Service-Learning Site)—this takes more time than planned. Here we gain additional insight into why Esther and Mei were short on time in the workshop; it is not simply that they planned too many activities (lines 65–66), but also that what they planned took longer because it was so challenging for the learners. At the end of Esther’s second story, and only after Dr. Palmer has

<sup>9</sup> Esther’s reference in line 129 to “the third version of the activity” makes it clear that this narrative describes the same events as the first one (Excerpt 2) by indexing the collaborative activity with “large papers” that she described in lines 62–63.

<sup>10</sup> Baidu is a Chinese search engine, similar to Google and accessible internationally.





The uncovering of new complications as the story progresses (e.g., that even once Esther and Mei chose a sample essay, it was too challenging) also disrupts the linearity of the tale. It is in the moral stance of this narrative, however, that the story is messiest—and this relates directly to the challenging position Esther is in as she tells this story: Like the job applicant asked to describe their biggest weakness, she is revealing her struggles (and those of her co-teacher, Mei) in front of her peers and Dr. Palmer. Just as in the first narrative, Esther the storyteller at first seems to position herself and Mei the characters as competent language teachers by naming the thorn as an external reality: lack of materials. As the complications pile up, Esther still highlights the ways in which she and Mei tried to be good language teachers: They wanted to include a “good” sample text (line 87), they engaged in an exhaustive search for useful materials (lines 93–97), they thought about learners’ proficiency levels (lines 110–112), and they provided line-by-line support during the workshop itself (lines 116–117). Even with all of these efforts, however, Esther and Mei’s lack of knowledge about the local school system and state curriculum requirements (a lack that derives in part from their own experience as international students) emerges as a deep and difficult-to-overcome challenge. As much as they tried, it appears that they still fell short of Esther’s expectations of good language teaching—hence Esther’s low voice as she offers her final confession, that these problems got in the way of them giving learners an opportunity to try out their new writing/literacy skills in an individual task (line 132). In addition, this second narrative complicates the first one by casting it in a new light. One is left to wonder, if the materials were so difficult as to require assistance with “every phrase, every sentence” (lines 116–117), could activity design really have compensated enough to “highly motivate” the learners (lines 46–47)? Esther’s moral stance in this second narrative emerges as “*indeterminate and unstable*” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 50, emphasis in original) as her own self-doubts lead to its unravelling (pp. 50–51) and the eventual disclosure of these details violates the looking good principle.

Turning to the relationship between the narrated event (the workshop) and the narrating event (Esther’s telling of this second narrative), there is again a high degree of parallelism. Esther and Mei the characters appear uncertain and lost, well-intentioned but unable to quite compensate for their lack of knowledge and experience. Similarly, Esther the storyteller speaks hesitantly and uncertainly, relying on others’ encouragement to keep her story moving. Although not explicitly named, Esther’s experience as an international student unfamiliar with U.S. schools also emerges as relevant in both events. In the story, her and Mei’s lack of familiarity with U.S. schools and the state curriculum inhibit their ability to locate and choose appropriate materials. In the narration, her reference to Baidu, a Chinese search engine, even though it elicits laughter from both Chinese and non-Chinese course participants, also indexes her identity as a Chinese international student and non-native English-speaking teacher (NNEST). Further, because Baidu is positioned in the narrative as failing to help her find appropriate materials, Esther’s reliance on it could be seen as problematic for both her language teaching and TESOL student roles. By positioning herself as uncertain and not-knowing in both the narrative and its telling—and by linking these characteristics to her status as an international student and NNEST—the identity Esther accidentally constructs for herself is one that emphasizes the

shortcomings of her identity as a *novice* language teacher, whose competence and knowledge is not yet fully developed.

At the end of telling this second story, Esther is in a vulnerable position. By revealing the ways that she and Mei struggled (and ultimately seem to have failed) to find appropriate materials, she has set the stage for her audience of peers and instructor to evaluate and critique the actions of Esther and Mei the characters, and thus by extension, Esther and Mei the novice teachers present in this course. Dr. Palmer's response, however, is to refocus attention on the external issue of "learners who were struggling with understanding the sample text" (lines 122–123) and on the "rethink[ing]" Esther and Mei did in response to this (lines 125–128). In doing so, Dr. Palmer both acknowledges the struggles they encountered and validates their attempts to deal with this situation as appropriate steps for teachers to take. As Dr. Palmer explained to me much later, upon reading a draft of this article, she saw—and attempted to help her students see as well—these stories and struggles as "unremarkable," as just a normal part of learning to teach, perhaps particularly in a community-based organization, and thus as a valuable lesson for all of the students to learn from (personal communication, February 7, 2018).

## Discussion

### Implications for Language Teacher Education

Having considered closely both of Esther's stories, it may be tempting to ask, which is true? If we instead focus on what these stories show us about Esther's developing ideas about what it means to be a (good) language teacher, both stories, even in their contradictions, help us understand how she is making sense of her experiences. What emerge are clear values that Esther holds: a commitment to careful planning and preparation, a focus on students and their needs, and a desire to motivate and engage students in diverse learning activities. In Esther's first narration of the workshop in a positive light, it seems that Esther and Mei have upheld these values, but when she is required to reframe it in light of challenges, it becomes clear that they struggled to fully embody them. This struggle emerges not only in the problems that Esther and Mei faced within the story, but also in the shifts in Esther's demeanor as she narrates it. The inherent tension here is one likely shared by most, if not all, novice teachers asked to narrate and reflect on their teaching within LTE contexts. Honesty about their struggles offers the chance to make sense of experiences, explore multiple and emergent interpretations, and reflect on their own learning and space for growth. At the same time, however, particularly when speaking (or writing) for an audience of peers and evaluators, there is still an inherent pressure to present themselves in the best possible light.

The stakes are clearly high for novice teachers when they tell stories like these about their struggles and challenges, but this is precisely where our responsibility as language teacher educators comes into play. In the telling of any personal narrative, the narrator's actions, decisions, and even emotional perceptions within the narrated event become open to challenge and evaluation by audience and co-tellers. A classic example of this occurs in the "father knows

best' dynamic" documented by Ochs and Taylor (1995), in which dinnertime conversations placed fathers most often in the position to act as "the ultimate purveyor and judge of other family members' actions, conditions, thoughts, and feelings" (p. 438). In Capps's (1999) analysis of the effects of this dynamic on the identity construction of a woman suffering from agoraphobia, her husband's responses to the fears she expressed through narratives caused her to further doubt her own rationality. Likewise, when parents reject the version of an event told by a child, they cast doubt on the authenticity of the child's memory (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 284). What all of these examples have in common—with each other and with our role as language teacher educators—is the power held by those in a position to evaluate someone else's stories. In how we respond to novice teachers' stories of struggle, we evaluate not simply the credibility of their story, but also the appropriateness of their actions and the validity of the challenges they have perceived. Given the authority we already hold in LTE courses—to evaluate through the assigning of grades, to advance a novice teacher's career through the writing (or not) of recommendation letters, to control who speaks, when, and what topic in course discussions—we must be attentive to the power we wield in the moments when we respond to novice teachers' stories. Through our reactions and evaluative comments, we can cast their decisions as moral failings, or, as Dr. Palmer so eloquently put it, as "unremarkable" bumps in the journey of learning to teach.<sup>11</sup>

The telling of a difficult story, particularly one that reveals flaws or failures on the part of the narrator, is an act of trust and intimacy. Just as a child may become reluctant to narrate their experiences if doing so positions them as "the frequent object of parental criticism" (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 274), so too may novice teachers learn to hedge their struggles and obscure their weaknesses if the responses they receive from us as language teacher educators emphasize only their shortcomings. Instead, we must embrace our status as co-tellers to support novice teachers as they work to make sense of their experiences, decisions, and in-the-moment reactions. Just as Dr. Palmer did in response to Esther's stories, we must also tread lightly as evaluators, being careful to treat novice teachers as thoughtful and intentional decision-makers. After all, even as Esther's thorn story reveals how much she and Mei struggled to find appropriate materials for students to use, it also shows us how important they knew this to be and how much they worked to try to do this well. In highlighting what they have done well even as we help them consider new strategies for the future, we can support novice teachers as they not only construct, but also live into, their identities as competent language teachers.

<sup>11</sup> I want to make it clear here that in calling Esther's story and the struggles it reveals "unremarkable," Dr. Palmer was in no way suggesting that she wanted Esther and her classmates to continue using inappropriate materials. In fact, what does not come up in Esther's narration of how she and Mei planned this workshop is an email exchange the previous week, initiated by Mei, in which she and Esther had asked for help, and to which Dr. Palmer had replied with a number of resources, including the high school application guidelines published by the school district. In addition, immediately following Class 8 (the course meeting in which Esther told these stories), Dr. Palmer met with Esther and Mei to talk more about the final workshop in their series, and in response to their continued request for help finding appropriate sample texts, she shared with them essays written by her own child and family friends (personal communication, February 7, 2018). Responding to these stories as "unremarkable" is thus not a refusal to see them as evidencing areas where novice teachers need support, but rather a choice to validate these struggles as a normal part of teaching.

## Implications for Research on Novice Teachers' Stories

Esther's identity and learning as a novice teacher emerge not only in the event that she narrates, but also in the acts of her narration and with the support of her instructor. By highlighting the parallels between these, my aim has been to draw attention to an aspect that is sometimes overlooked in research on the narratives of novice teachers: that the *context* of their telling—or writing—must be taken into account alongside the *content*. While we could have learned something about Esther as a novice teacher from simply reading the text of either of her stories, it is only by considering them in relation to one another and to the discussion as it was framed and co-constructed by Dr. Palmer, that we are able to gain such rich insights into the work Esther is doing in telling them. The location of these stories within an LTE course discussion—as opposed to an individual conference between Esther and Dr. Palmer or an informal airing of struggles among classmates after the course meeting—matters as well, as we must consider how Esther must work to uphold her identity and reputation in front of her (mostly silent within the transcripts) peers.

My analysis in this paper has focused on how Esther's identity as a novice teacher is constructed as she tells these stories, but it surfaces other questions for future consideration as well. How, we might ask, might the co-teacher dynamic (as occurred when Esther narrated not only for herself, but also for Mei) affect how novice teachers make sense of and narrate their practice? What interactional strategies, beyond the response tokens and limited evaluative remarks used by Dr. Palmer, do language teacher educators employ to support the problem-solving and identity work that novice teachers are doing in such narration? How might awareness of the looking good constraint affect how we tell and interpret stories of teaching practice?

### *Acknowledgements*

My thanks go first to the thoughtful and committed teachers I have referred to here as Dr. Palmer, Esther, and Mei and to all the members of the Teaching Second Language Writing course for allowing me to observe and participate in your community of practice. I appreciate Dr. Betsy Rymes and the members of the Fall 2016 Classroom Discourse Analysis course, who listened and thought with me as I first began to analyze these stories, and Dr. Anne Pomerantz, who first encouraged me to explore the power of narratives. I am grateful as well to Jay Jo, Aldo Anzures Tapia, an anonymous reviewer, and the WPEL editorial team for their insightful feedback. And, always, to my best friend and partner, Jonathan Stoltzfus, for supporting and encouraging me throughout this journey. While these stories remain Esther's, any fault in their re-telling and analysis here are mine alone.

*Kristina B. Lewis ([kblewi@gse.upenn.edu](mailto:kblewi@gse.upenn.edu)) is a PhD student in Educational Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania. A language teacher and language teacher educator, her research interests focus on novice teacher identity, classroom discourse, narratives of teaching and learning, multilingual writing, and intersections between these.*

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## Appendix

## Transcription Conventions

Based on Hepburn and Bolden (2013), Jefferson (2004), and Rymes (2016).

[word]	overlapping speech
((word))	non-speech action
( ) or (word)	unintelligible or uncertain transcription
::	prolongation of the preceding sound
=	latching (no break/gap)
.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
,	continuing intonation
↓	falling pitch
↑	rising pitch
(#. #)	a pause of the length in parentheses
(.)	a micro-pause (less than 0.2 seconds)
°word°	speech that is quieter than normal for the speaker or the surrounding speech
WORD	speech that is louder than normal for the speaker or the surrounding speech
<word>	speech that is slower than the surrounding speech
>word<	speech that is quicker than the surrounding speech
<u>word</u>	speech that is stressed
wo-	abrupt cut-off
<b>word</b>	text written on board