Investigating language teachers’ ideals in images and interviews

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Final Revisions

Two article have been added with details (author publications); one citation has been removed (not used in article).

Thank you and best wishes

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Language teachers; ideal teachers; Voice-Centred Relational Method (VCRM); visual methods;
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Introduction

Language teachers in the 21st century work under considerable pressure to adapt to changing external environments, not least amongst them rapid changes in our means and methods of communication. Even before teaching changed during the COVID19 crisis, online communication had brought virtual and actual communities ever closer. In this new world of communicating, language teachers play an important role as cultural mediators. The rapidly changing environment is a challenge to the teaching identity developed over time; an identity that has been acknowledged as fluid, developing and multifaceted in recent research (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019); it is constructed from external influences, such as the role expectations of teachers, and internal elements, such as aspirations, expectations and ideals. This article focuses on ideals and images of excellent teaching that can sustain teachers through times of change and difficulties.

To understand more about the ideals held by experienced language teachers, this study employs a novel complex, three-step method for analysing data: Data is collected from a drawing task (Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2018; Clark, 2011) and
reflective one-to-one interviews (Stickler & Shi, 2015; Gass & Mackey, 2013) and analysed using voice centred relational method (VCRM) (Brown & Gilligan, 1991). VCRM conserves the interviewees’ voice and includes the researcher as part of the process of analysis. The three steps of the method allow the co-constructing of a rich image, unearthing deeper, hidden ideals and accessing non-rational memories. This deep understanding is needed, not only to appreciate teachers who have endured in the profession, who have shown resilience, and who have acquired experience to master the change needed to integrate requirements of the 21st century teaching profession (ACTFL, 2017) but also to help novice and trainee teachers to develop ideals or “visions” (Hammerness, 2004) that prepare them for coming challenges in language teaching.

In this paper I argue that using a voice centred relational method (VCRM) to analyse one-to-one interviews reflecting on drawings created by language teachers has the potential to capture notions of ideal teachers and give voice to individual language teachers, thus providing useful insights into ideals of excellent teaching. To demonstrate this I describe how I have applied the VCRM method to the context of language teaching, drawing on two illustrative examples. I then reflect on the success and challenges of applying this method and consider implications for future research.

The changing lives of language teachers

Language teaching is a precarious profession. Language teachers share with all teachers their exposure to the stress factors of a highly regulated, highly visible and engaged profession (Avanzi et al., 2018). They suffer from burnout and loss of motivation like other teachers (Mercer, 2018; Tickle, 2018). In addition, they also work as mediators between two languages and two cultures; they often use a language that is not their first or even second language to communicate convincingly with their learners. They sometimes represent an outsider culture to a closed society, or their own heritage to a community of strangers. The psychological pressures on language teachers and their negative consequences have been amply described (Mercer, 2018). A recent theoretical focus on teacher agency (Miller, Kayi-Aydar, Varghese & Vitanova, 2018) has helped to highlight the complexity of teachers’
identities and choices, and suggested a variety of theoretical lenses and methodological perspectives to investigate these issues (e.g. Hiver & Whitehead, 2018).

Teachers’ career paths and their choices are influenced by their training, by the requirements of the institution(s) they work for, by government or professional guidelines and by pressure from colleagues, parents, and learners. These are all outside factors. Internal factors, such as their original reasons for choosing teaching as a career; their commitment to the profession, the institution and their learners; and their past experiences also play an important role (Lamb & Wedell, 2015). One aspect that straddles both external and internal influences on teacher careers are ideals: ideals of the “model teacher” proposed by national standards, teaching awards, and recognitions of excellence, and ideals connected to the “ideal teacher self” (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014), where memories of good teachers shape the way teaching is perceived (Davin, Chavoshan & Donato, 2018), where ambitions, aspirations and future career prospects can influence what one wants to achieve and how one balances dreams and realistic expectations.

Thus, the concept of ideals has potentially two sides: the ideal language teacher vs. the language teachers’ ideals (see below). Ideal language teachers can be interpreted as “Platonic ideals”, the basic and defining form of a concept that shapes how the reality or substance is shaped and perceived. These defining forms are susceptible to regulation and cultural influence. In a less essentialist way, ideal language teachers can also be defined as “prototypical” (Sternberg & Horvath, 1995), exemplifying what is good or central within the category of teachers. On the other hand, ideals as self-regulatory concepts and part of the inner workings of an individual are fragile constructs and hard to grasp but fundamental for the achievement of becoming a person (Rogers, 1961) and thus form an integral part of an individual’s identity. Ideals can change under the influence of theories and experience; they can be given up and abandoned or secretly pursued against resistance.

This study aims to tap into both sides of the ideals of language teachers and was undertaken in the understanding that the complex entity that is a language teacher’s professional identity – like their personal identity – is by no means fixed but rather constantly changing and developing, reacting to internal influences and external
pressures and expectations, such as the changing way of how we communicate (Hampel, 2019; Kessler, 2018; Lomicka and Lord, 2019) and the resulting demands for up-to-date language teaching methods (ACTFL, 2017; MLA, 2013; OECD, 2019).

**Ideal language teachers and language teacher ideals**

Teacher ideals or ideal teachers are culturally influenced. In Western educational practice and research, ideals can be associated with identity (Borg, 2003), agency (Miller et al., 2018), reflection (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010), or student expectations (Murphy, 2015). In a Chinese context, ideal teachers are called “Excellent teachers” and the concept relates to the institutional practice of awarding model teachers (Shi, 2018). In the largest study on excellent teachers of English to date, Wu (2005, in Shi, 2018) found that amongst elements such as subject and pedagogic knowledge, Chinese excellent teachers also shared views on language teaching and professional ethics. Ethics or morals of a teacher in China are traditionally traced back to Confucian ideals of teaching (Shi, 2006), emphasising the paternal quality and a relation to students. A Chinese excellent teacher is responsible, shows empathy, provides pastoral care, and spends large amounts of time out-of-class communicating with students (Shi, 2018).

Ideal standards for teaching can be described by collecting documentary evidence of model teachers. More in-depth analyses have attempted to link the inner motivation of teachers to their ideals, and often to their current and future practice (e.g. Davin et al., 2018). A bad experience, for example, of being taught in the past can lead to a counter-reaction and avoidance of similar teaching techniques (Moodie, 2016).

Looking at the practice of language teaching, ideals can be seen in a pragmatic way as an aid to sustain teachers’ motivation and strength (Peragine, 2020). In this case, the description of ideals remains at a surface level, covering mainly classroom behaviour. Looking at ideal teaching techniques leads to more complex investigations of teachers’ beliefs and attitudes. Brown (2009), in his attempt to match students’ and teachers’ ideas about language learning and teaching, finds that language teachers adhere to the established pedagogy of communicative language teaching. Although this gives some insights into what ideals may drive teachers,
Brown’s study does not approach the relevance of deep-held beliefs and is based solely on questionnaire data.

One facet of the construction of teacher identity is the development of a teaching identity during teacher training. Working with student teachers can provide some insights into factors that influence their ideals (e.g. Bennett, 2012; Korhonen & Törmä; 2016). Research on ideals of language teachers can take the perspective of an “ideal teaching self” (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Kubanyiova, 2009). “Ideal selves” in language learning are a concept derived by Dörnyei (2009) from the possible selves theory of Markus and Nurius (1986), who, in turn, refer back to Rogers’ person-centred psychotherapy (Rogers, 1961). In language learning, the ideal self can provide an internal drive for self-improvement (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). One of the main concepts used by Dörnyei and Kubanyiova in their 2014 book “Motivating learners, motivating teachers” (2014) is that of creating or “building vision” (also see, Hammerness, 2004), using methods such as guided imagery or writing tasks that are intended to help generate images of ideal language teacher selves. The authors acknowledge that there is as yet little empirical research on the “construction of language teachers’ selves in their teaching practice” (p.136). Despite strong theoretical acknowledgement of teacher identity as multifaceted, fluid and developing, empirical research still often uses conventional data collection methods such as questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations (e.g. Karimi & Mofidi, 2019; Miller & Gkonou, 2018). Hence, there is still a relative lack of rich descriptions of the ideals that experienced language teachers hold dear and how they influence their practice. New methods need to be used to dig deeper into teachers’ ideals, as described in the next section.

**Digging deep into teachers’ ideals**

As mentioned above, the personal ideals of teachers are closely linked to their identity. Direct methods, such as surveys and interviews can generate data about ideals (see Arnon & Reichel, 2007; Hammerness, 2001). These data, however, can be influenced by official standards, requirements and expectations. To research these ideals in depth different qualitative methods have been employed, prominently amongst them narrative interviews (e.g. Johnson & Watson, 2004) and visual
methods (e.g. Bennett, 2012; Nevgi & Löfström, 2014). Johnson and Watson identify interviews as co-constructed between the interviewer and the interviewee, as a “social practice” rather than a research instrument (Talmy, 2010). Their analysis dives deep into the changes in identity a student experiences during a teacher training programme. An example that shows how drawings can be used to elicit ideas about developing identities as teachers is Bennett’s study of music teachers in Australia (Bennett, 2012). Her use of drawings in a longitudinal study helped her to understand artists’ reluctance to take on teaching as a profession, and on the other hand, helped her students to develop an identity as future teachers of music and not only as musicians. However, like with Nevgi and Löfström (2014), who use visual methods to focus on the teaching identity of university lecturers, none of these three studies is specific to language teachers.

To access people’s emotions, a number of psychological and psychotherapeutic schools of thoughts have developed methods that utilize visuals and imagery, e.g. Gestalt Psychology (Zabransky, Wagner-Lukesch, Stemberger & Böhm, 2018) or Kathathym Imaginative Therapy. In language teaching, visualisation techniques have been used to motivate language learners within the framework of the ideal L2 self (Mackay, 2019). For research in applied linguistics a variety of visual methods have been developed, based on the understanding that meaning is not made only with words as established in Kress and van Leeuwen’s seminal book on “Reading images” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). As a data collection method drawings have been used to access people’s emotional memories and establish a narrative based not only on words (see Kalaja, Dufva & Alanen, 2013).

Visual methods can be traced back to research with children (see Clark, 2011; Kuhn, 2003) and learners (Aragão, 2011; Hautamäki; 2010). Ahn & West (2018), for example, investigate how children see a good language teacher. Their study involves the analysis of drawings and written narratives by South Korean school children. Similar to Millonig (2015), Ahn and West see the advantage of drawing for younger children who lack writing skills. Their results highlight the complexity of good language teacher identity. This perspective, the learners’ view, however, can only provide one aspect of this complex image.

Kalaja and Pitkänen-Huhta point out that visual methods also have great potential in language teaching research as they: “offer participants an alternative to verbal
means to express their experiences and feelings and to reflect on their language practices, identities and learning and teaching processes” (Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2018, p. 159). Further studies of language teaching and learning have used drawing tasks for data collection; for example to access primary school children’s ideas about English as a language for communication (Millonig, Stickler & Coleman, 2019); or to access visual representations of Latin texts in communicative language teaching settings where recourse to an English translation should be avoided (Lloyd, 2017). In addition to directly collecting data, visual methods have also been shown to provide valuable stimuli for interviews and discussions (Kalaja et al., 2013).

Still missing is a method that combines the benefits of different techniques and allows the voice of the teachers to be represented in a rich and democratising way. Thus, to help shift the power of defining teachers’ ideals in a personal way, this study has developed the three-step method, comprising drawings as a stimulus to engender deep reflection and emotional resonance, directly followed by reflective one-to-one interviews to verbalize these reflections, which are finally analysed using the VCRM method which preserves the teacher’s voice. Using methods aimed at accessing participants’ emotional responses comes with an implicit obligation to take care of the well-being of participants and the balance of power during research interactions and afterwards in data interpretation. It is important to encourage participants to voice their assent or dissent at different stages of the research, and to allow the voices to develop, acknowledging the labour of reflecting and co-constructing meaning in the one-to-one interviews. Although an analysis of the drawings themselves as artefacts is possible, the democratising goal of this research hinges on linking the three steps: stimulus, reflection, and interpretation.

Data collection steps: images and interviews

This section describes the two tools used for data collection: the elicitation of images produced by the participants in a drawing task and one-to-one interviews reflecting on the stimulus of the image.

The first step of the three-step method consists of individual drawings. For most adults who are not used to drawing or artistic expressions, the invitation to draw an
image following a specific instruction can help to rekindle memories of past experiences linked to one’s own schooling (see Millonig, 2015) and times when drawing a picture was a valid way of expressing one’s thoughts. The invitation to draw can focus the mind and create images that are not necessarily put on paper. Thus, memories are accessed in a different way and the ground is prepared for a meaningful interview based on the stimulus of the drawing. Ideals are formed under external influences; accessing a memory of early influences, e.g. the experience of being taught by an “ideal teacher”, can lead to deep reflection and thus to rich and meaningful data about one’s own ideals. The drawing task used in this study also allows interviewees time to think about the topic and prepares them for discussing their experiences but also their feelings about images of the ideal teacher. For teachers, in particular, this reminiscing may also trigger identification with their students and allow a shift of perspective from being a teacher in the classroom to being the recipient of teaching.

The second step is a reflective one-to-one interview. Drawings can activate deep memories; they can then act as stimulus for interviews that help to verbalize these ideas. This type of “stimulated recall” interviews have been used with different types of stimuli, for example video recordings (Gass & Mackey, 2013), eyetracking data (Stickler & Shi, 2015) or photographs (Wallace, 2015). Relying only on the researcher’s interpretation of the stimulus would miss out on the active participation of the interviewee and deny them the opportunity to reflect on meaning generated in the drawing task. Through the interview, research participants can explore and explain their intended meaning supported by gentle questioning, and expand on their reflection of ideals. Indeed, interviews are not passive tools (see Silverman, 2001; Talmy, 2010) but fundamentally dialogues. The role, position and influence of the researcher asking the questions must not be overlooked. As experienced language teacher I have conducted interviews with colleagues – such as the two examples presented in this paper - and thus established a basis for a dialogue of a shared understanding of language teaching.

Data analysis step: Voice-Centered Relational Method
The third step of the three-step method is the analysis of data using the VCRM. VCRM facilitates an understanding of teachers’ ideals by accessing their memories about past experiences through the drawing task and by exploring the ideals, past and present, through a dialogue. To bring these ideals to the fore, the analytical approach must allow for at least two voices: that of the interviewee and the researcher. This joint creation of a story acknowledges that ideals in teachers’ lives are not fixed or stable. They are also often jointly constructed with colleagues and fellow teachers.

Deeply personal stories came to light during the interviews when the teachers expressed what made them choose a career in languages, or when they showed their commitment to the culture they represent through language teaching and talked about ways of keeping going in the face of adversity. To allow these stories to be presented as closely as possible to their authors’ voice, the Voice Centred Relational Method (VCRM) (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch, 2003) was chosen for data analysis.

Gilligan and her colleagues refer to psychoanalytical methods, e.g. Freudian analysis, and Piaget as precursors of VCRM, but the most decisive influences come from feminist theory and feminist social psychology. VCRM is a careful multi-step analysis of interview data designed to highlight the personal perspectives (the “voices”) of participants as constructed in relation with the interviewer and/or researcher (Brown & Gilligan, 1991). An important feature of VCRM is that the representations are not all purely rational: through VCRM emotional and artistic elements find their way into academic articles. VCRM has been applied in different contexts, always emphasising the different, sometimes contradictory voices that make up a person’s inner self (Gilligan, 2015).

The VCRM method shares aims with other approaches, e.g. phenomenological analysis (Hives & Whitehead, 2018; Smith & Osborne, 2004), in trying to reveal the inner world and thoughts of individuals and their relationships to the social world they inhabit. The intention of giving voice to the ignored or underprivileged links the method not only to feminist theory but also to critical pedagogical approaches (Freire, 2018), and client-centred counselling or psychology (Rogers, 1961; 1983).
In practice, VCRM describes a series of steps – or “listening” in the method’s own terminology – that the researcher can follow to analyse and describe participant-generated data, for example interview transcripts (Gilligan et al., 2003; Woodcock, 2016). Rather than hiding behind a coding scheme or pre-defined thematic categories, the researcher engages continually with the data and presents her or his engagement as part of the findings.

In a first step, the content or “plot” of the interview is recorded, and the interview described from the researcher’s point of view. This step gives a brief introduction to the main points and allows on the one hand the researcher’s voice to set the scene and reveal her own reactions to the content. On the other hand it places the interviewee’s voice in its specific context. Not all interviews are the same, and there is no claim associated with VCRM to discover an essential truth about the participants.

The second ‘listening’ uses literary methods. Statements in the transcript referring to the interviewee in the first person are collected and re-arranged and interpreted by the researcher as an “I-poem” (for a detailed description and critique, see Edwards & Weller, 2012). The format of a poem allows the researcher more freedom in interpretation, guides away from the rational content of the interview text and can reveal emotional layers beneath the surface of the text. Emotions, whether expressed by the interviewee or the interviewer or interpreted by the researcher are important in VCRM. According to Edwards and Weller (2012), using the I-Poem method shifts the analytic ontology: from “gazing at” the participants’ contributions it allows to shift the perspective to “standing alongside” them in analysing and interpreting their meaning. Research questions like the search for ideals and their origins can best be answered by employing such a method of analysis that privileges the voice of the participants.

The third step of the VCRM analysis is a deliberate attempt to make different and contradicting voices visible (Woodcock, 2016). The text is re-read a number of times and different perspectives are highlighted in different colours. This search for the “contrapuntal voice” (in VCRM terminology) shows how stories are not linear and simple, and people cannot be reduced to one statement or voice.

To begin, we specify the voices we will listen for and determine what the markers of a particular contrapuntal voice are or, more simply, how we will know this voice when
we hear it. The text is then read through, listening for just one voice at a time, and the appearance or evidence of this voice is underlined in a color chosen to mark it. [...] The contrapuntal voices do not have to be in opposition to one another; they may be opposing or complementary in some way. Listening for at least two contrapuntal voices takes into account that a person expresses his or her experience in a multiplicity of voices or ways. (Gilligan et al., 2003, p. 165)

Emotions, feelings and deeper layers of thoughts are often hidden behind the main storyline and glimpses of different voices are highlighted by colour coding. The researcher uses the research questions and themes to guide the search for layers of meaning but is always respectful of the participants' own voice.

The fourth and final step of the VCRM method, is a synthesis of different voices concerning one person or rather a summary of all findings and interpretation of one interview. After reading the transcript at least four times (in the four steps), the findings are related back to the research question and a final analysis is provided.

This study

To exemplify the strength of this complex, three-step method, two examples from a larger pool of drawings and interviews were selected. The data collection procedure is described in this section, followed in the next by an in-depth analysis of the two examples.

In the current project, participants were provided with a selection of coloured pens and a sheet of paper with instructions (see Appendix A). They were asked to draw an image of an ideal language teacher, and given 10 to 20 minutes to complete the task. If asked, the researcher explained that drawing is intended to help participants focus and to access their deeper levels of understanding, switching from a more rational approach, describing verbally what an ideal teacher is, to focusing on images and memories of ideal teachers, allowing the emotional and “childlike” parts of the person to come to the fore in a simple drawing task.

After the drawing was completed, the interviewer asked the participant to describe and explain the “ideal teacher” pictured. Although some guiding questions had been prepared, the drawing task was sufficiently stimulating to bring out full and vivid descriptions and deliberations. Where additional stimulus was needed, questions
about elements of the drawing, clarification questions about imagery or comments were posed. Two framing questions were asked in every interview towards the end:

1. Have you ever been taught by anyone who was close to being this ideal teacher? / Have you ever come across an “ideal” language teacher?

2. How closely do you think you approach being this ideal language teacher yourself? / What would you need to do or have to move yourself closer to becoming an ideal language teacher?

Interview recordings were transcribed using content transcription, and the transcriptions were then analysed following the protocols and established steps of VCRM as described above. In the first step, the circumstances and deliberations around the interview were written down in a retrospective narrative, emphasising the researcher’s viewpoint. Parts of this narrative are presented here in the findings. The second step, creating an iPoem, followed VCRM instructions with very few variations, for example, a three-column style was chosen for the first poem as this seemed to fit the content. The third step, finding contrapuntal voices, was achieved by highlighting with pen on paper in one case, and with the highlighting function in word in the other case. Both ways of highlighting work similarly well. Finally, the fourth step brought the analysis together.

The listening and recording of reactions to interviews can be done by multiple researchers who discuss and reconcile their views – another way to avoid privileging one particular researcher’s point of view. In this project, I chose a different approach, associated with qualitative research: the participant check. After analysing the interviews with VCRM, the findings were returned to the interviewees and their opinion and interpretation requested. Reactions and responses were then integrated into the results section.

Overall 31 interviews have been conducted, but for the purpose of demonstrating the insights of applying this method, two experienced teachers’ contributions have been chosen for close analysis here. According to Basturkmen (2012), studies show that experienced teachers’ stated beliefs may have closer correspondence to their practices (pp. 283, 291). Although this study is not aiming for identifying actual teaching practices, the choice of experienced teachers as participants might have certain benefits. Experienced language teachers may be more able to express their
beliefs (Basturkmen, 2012), being able to verbalize the knowledge often acquired and held implicitly (Woods & Çakir, 2011).

I also selected two participants from very different cultural contexts. The first participant is a male teacher of English in China, a native speaker of Mandarin with a long experience of teaching English at tertiary level. The second is a female teacher of Spanish in the UK, a native speaker of Spanish, with considerable experience of teaching her native language at different educational levels. This selection was made on the grounds of diversity; it offers as wide a variation as possible: one teacher teaching her own language as a native speaker teacher, one teaching a culturally and linguistically quite different L2 in his home country; one male, one female; one in the West, and one in an Asian country. However, there are also many communalities between those teachers: their choice to become language teachers, their role as mediators between cultures, their long experience, and their interest in continuing professional development in their field. The diversity of backgrounds helps to show how the method works in different circumstances, however, the results are in no way intended to exemplify the cultures of these two teachers or imply further reaching conclusions about the teaching culture in these contexts.

Ethical permission for the research was granted by the author’s academic institution, the Open University, UK, through its Human Research Ethics Committee, and consent was given by the teachers prior to the start of data collection.

Two examples: Liang and Conny

Step 1: Context

The interview with Liang (all names are pseudonyms) was conducted at the end of the first day of a large-scale workshop at a university in Beijing, China. Because of the high number of workshop participants local facilitators had been recruited as helpers for small-group participatory work. Liang is one of these facilitators who also became the first co-researcher in finding out about “ideal teacher” images.

Step 1 of the VCRM method sets the context of the interview. In this case, my lack of familiarity with the Chinese culture led me to rely on anecdotal descriptions of teacher-learner relationships in a Confucian setting. One of these anecdotes pictured
the “ideal teacher” as someone not only interested in the person of their student but almost taking on a paternal role in selecting and suggesting suitable spouses. The tellers of the anecdote did present this as an amusing but not out-of-the-norm feature of their favourite teachers.

Liang’s drawing (Appendix B) is small and simple, it does not fill the space on the sheet of paper provided, and it only shows one figure: a juggler. In the interview, Liang surprised me, not because of the cultural differences, but because of his emotional reaction to a teacher image in his past: he had truly met and experienced being taught by this “ideal teacher” and he managed to describe him to me in such words that a vivid story came to life; a story of being cared for and truly appreciated, of being guided and taught but also being seen as a whole person with duties and flaws, needs and dreams.

The second case study focuses on Conny, a female teacher of Spanish in the UK. As I am very familiar with the context of teaching languages in the UK, I am aware of theoretical underpinnings, teacher education, regulations and expectations. I am not familiar with Conny’s culture of origin, but I can empathize with her passion for sharing the culture (C2) as well as the language (L2) that she is teaching. It did not surprise me that when Conny mentions language teaching she adds “and culture” in the same sentence.

The drawing task and interview with Conny took place after a workshop on the integration of ICT into the language classroom at a London university. Conny was one of the volunteers who took an active role part in the workshop. Her drawing reveals – quite literally – a world: Conny’s imagined classroom is a circular shape with speech bubbles on the outside and connecting lines and arrows everywhere. In the interview Conny talks about this image as “a potential world”, it could be “the planet”, but maybe not.

Conny’s vision of the role of a language teacher is clear right from the start; her position might be important, but it is not central: her role is to help, to give students the opportunity to learn. Communication in her classroom is multidirectional; learners communicate with each other, and feed back to the teacher what works and what doesn’t work. In their feedback Conny sees a chance for herself to learn and to improve: “they teach you something”.

Working through the transcript, I notice my own influence in questions and re-shaping Conny’s contributions. This was not a neutral interview but a dialogue amongst peers; my own experience as language teacher in the UK reverberates throughout the talk much more than through the first interview with Liang. Maybe because of my own pedagogic preference of teaching as facilitation, of student-centred rather than teacher-centred practices, I can see – in retrospect – where my empathy might have clouded Conny’s voice and where my interpretation might be foremost. For example, when Conny talks about her ideal teacher of the past, a French teacher in her primary school, she literally says “she motivate[d] me a lot, and I learned.” I rephrase this as “You learned a lot”, and quite soon after, Conny picks up on this subtle shift and reflects back to me – or maybe expands her original statement – by saying “Yes, so I learned a lot… and I learned.”

When talking about successful activities, Conny uses strong emotional words to describe her learners’ reactions: happy, smiling, active. When the reactions – and this is how Conny judges the success of an activity – are not quite so clear indications of enjoyment, Conny’s recipe for improvement is empowerment: “If they are like oh this is not working, but I think that I can improve in some ways, like give them more, don’t lead the lesson as much, give them more…” – “More freedom.” – “More freedom”. Whether or not “freedom” was the word Conny was looking for: In our joint construction of an ideal teacher image, we both agreed that more of one (freedom) and less of the other (leadership) is what we are striving for.

Step 2 a: Liang’s I-poem

The I-poem step in the analysis sharpens the contrast between those two teachers and their images of ideal teachers and also their commonalities. Liang’s first person has three voices: the emotional and passionate, using words like “I believe” and “I want”, the rational, mainly using terms like thinking and “ought-to” statements with “I should say”, and finally the voice of experience, harmonising those two, bringing facts and stories that link passion with ratio, wanting with external demands and ‘ideals’ with the role expectations of a teacher identity. Liang, like Conny, starts with a negative, an absence in his drawing: “I have a clear picture in my mind // but I REALLY can’t draw”. Again, similar to Conny, his personal statements end on a
strong conviction that ideals can be achieved and are quite close: “I try to be close to that I should say, that idea and work towards that ideal, yes.”

The entire I-poem is quite long, seven stanzas in three voices, so just a small selection that shows typical I-statements in three different aspects is presented here. When constructing this I-poem, I first used different colours in the transcript to distinguish emotional from cognitive I-statements. Then I sorted the different voices I could hear into columns. The left column contains emotional statements and strong beliefs; the right column those I-statements that I interpreted as “ought-to” voice; and the middle column statements that mediate and harmonize between the two in relating past histories and facts. The transcription conventions used here are content transcription with some indication of hesitation and pauses (...), subvocalization (uh, mhm), and overlap or self-interruption (/\ or /\).

Table 1: Liang’s I-Poem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I believe</th>
<th>from those teachers that I have,</th>
<th>so I think, uh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I know those</td>
<td>I think, from those good teachers that I have,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sooo, yes, that’s what I believe //</td>
<td>I have taught face-to-face and then also I have taught online</td>
<td>also, I think, should</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have taught here for 16 years and before that I was campus teacher.</td>
<td>Uh, I think I …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I /. I really … feel lucky to have him.</td>
<td>I’m a English teacher, and I learned the language,</td>
<td>I think language teacher and uh, classroom teacher and I think for online teacher,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think, yes, I’ve got some of the aspects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I learned it for many years, and then I learned it /.
I experienced the culture and the language also, yes, I try to read books,
I should say,

| I learned it for many years, and then I learned it /.
I experienced the culture and the language also, yes, I try to read books, |
|---|---|

Step 2 b: Conny’s I-poem

As I-poems do not follow a strict format and are created by the researcher as her own interpretation of the data, Conny’s I-poem takes a different shape here. In poetry, the shape of the words on a page can be as important as the meaning behind them. My reading of Conny’s voice was more one of fluctuation and waves, and not a replication of the cognition-emotion division I could clearly see in Liang’s words.

Conny’s different perspectives follow each other rather than being mixed in, so her poem is divided into five stanzas. I entitled Conny’s I-poem “Maybe in the Middle” as this is her first striking use of the first person pronoun after a few uses of “I think”: “Yes, I think that my position could be in the middle.” In the third stanza, Conny describes her ideal teacher from the past:

Table 2: Conny’s I-Poem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When I was very young</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had a teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and I learned</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And I remember myself doing my hair…

Yes, so I learned a lot. I remember myself…
And I learned.

This short excerpt from Conny’s I-poem illustrates the physicality of memory: Conny’s memory of being a child and of doing her hair.

**Step 3: Contrapuntal voices**

The third step of VCRM is intended to bring contrapuntal voices, as Gilligan et al. (2003) call it, to the foreground. The counterpoints can signify differences or contradictions within an interviewee’s statements but also between them and the interviewer’s viewpoints. For Liang’s interview, the I-poem had already shown some contrapuntal voices: emotion and wishes against demands and reason; both then linked and harmonized by experience. In reminiscing about the ideal teacher Liang had experienced in his youth, he described some of the obstacles towards developing into a good teacher and at the same time reveals the complex interlinking of cultural expectations, personal goals and a good teacher’s influence:

“LG: Okay. And I didn’t have high motivation at that time. uh, So, he … encouraged me and I got the /. I got the interest, but I didn’t work as very hard as he expected. So, y’know, I was 15 at that time, I always wanted to play.”

Encouraged by his teacher, Liang developed an interest in the language (English), however, according to his own high expectations and to what he assumed his teacher expected from him, he still did not work hard enough. In my analysis, I marked this section as revealing three different ‘voices’: the Chinese voice, culturally different from my perspective; the ideal voice, incorporated here both by the former teacher’s presence and also by the expectations Liang sets for himself; and finally the voice of obstacles or the contrapuntal voice showing where the individual or the ambition failed to reach an ideal.

As every interview is different, Conny’s contrapuntal voices are also different from Liang’s. Due to the cultural closeness of our teaching contexts, I did not identify a specific Spanish voice. The voices in this interview change considerably: I saw in the text a strong teacher voice in contrast to a teacher disappearing into the background.
We start with an image devoid of self, devoid of “the teacher”. When questioned about this, Conny says: “I think that my position could be in the middle. … Yes, so maybe I can draw myself in the middle.” There is an “I”, a person present – yet not quite present, hesitant, in the subjunctive, tentative. Again, in Conny’s statement, “[b]ut when you give the students the opportunity to learn and you observe how they do between them, you can go a little bit far away and observe oh this is working. Or maybe you, they teach you something.” The teacher here almost seems like a disturbance in the class, best vanishing into the background to “observe” and learn: However, that this position in the background is quite powerful and didactic is revealed by the strong teacher voice: “Because for me it’s important to create learning resources that are enjoyable…” and, at a later stage referring to ICT tools: “So I am researching on the kind of tools that are easy, like drag and, something…” Towards the end of the interview, Conny’s personality shines through strongly in her emphasis of creativity, her belief that she is approaching her teacher ideal and in statements about her own opinion and her vision. This is balanced, verbally by hedging (“I think”), and conceptually by a commitment to continually checking her work against feedback and her endeavour to constantly improve herself (“but I think that I can improve in some ways,…” “Yes, I think that is where I am, it’s something that I would like to do more.”).

Step 4: Bringing it all together

The final step of the VCRM analysis pulls together the different elements and presents findings, yet again interwoven with the researcher’s own voice. To balance the order of presentation, I will start the final step with Conny’s contribution.

Conny’s ideal language teacher is an engaged and reflective person, very much in tune with her students and their needs and always willing to improve and modify her teaching based on feedback received. Her ideals are time-sensitive: her model from the past was a teacher using authentic materials. When Conny links her memory to the physical activity of doing her hair in a language related role-play, this reminded me of the teaching method of total physical response. Although the teacher in Conny’s primary school might not have consciously used this technique, Conny describes methods and tools of the time she is talking about. When she explains her
own ideals and goals, she mentions the use of technology and the integration of communication tools (ICT) into her lessons. (‘‘...because I have been teaching ICT for a long time, I think that I am now trying to compare. Because when you learn with a computer you learn by, it’s more independent.’’)

Conny’s ideals derive from her self-reflection, from an experience in her past and from her strong theoretical believes in student-centred, reflective, technology enhanced, communicative teaching and learning. She does not always use those theoretical terms when talking about her work as a teacher but her drawing and the I-poem bring those aspects to the fore. Self-reflective processes are built into Conny’s everyday work as a teacher, her empathy for her students’ needs, and the feeling that she is close to her ideal. These are all linked to the “strong teacher” voice represented in the contrapuntal readings: a knowledgeable and creative individual, who disappears into the margins to give students centre space for learning and communicating. And this strong teacher is resilient and able to not only carry on in her job but permanently strives to improve.

Liang’s ideal language teacher is knowledgeable, skilful and motivating. He explains the difficult juggling act between knowing the target language, understanding one’s own language and mediating between the two and between two cultures. His image of a juggler shows a little figure, quite isolated on the page but vigorously engaged in keeping the different tools in the air and moving. Ideals in his past include a university teacher, but more emotionally relevant, his highschool teacher who took Liang’s education personal, making sure that the young learner invested time and effort into learning English, a language dear to the teacher’s heart.

Liang’s flexibility in changing from classroom to online teaching can be linked to his love of the language and culture and his desire to emulate his special teacher from his past (“So then, that awakening power y’know, it wakes us up and we really want to read and to learn and to move towards that kind of teacher, and BEcome that kind of teacher in the future, yes.”).

In my analysis I identified the value placed on hard work, on being measured by effort and not just achievement in the pursuit of knowledge as one of the specific cultural and institutional influences on the ideal. The I-poem and the counterpoint of voices in Liang’s interview highlighted emotional depths of his fond memory of this
teacher; and the dialogue with the researcher brought to light the issue of power as a permanence of influence: the power a teacher has over a student’s life, his decisions and his feelings. Keeping the ideal alive in Liang’s own teaching is a source of strength but also a touchstone: from an outsider’s perspective there is a delicate balance between a fear of not living up to the high standards set by example and by Liang’s own expectations, guilt of not having been the best student possible in the past, and a desire to “BEcome” that ideal teacher in the future.

Discussion

Given the epistemological stance in this study – attempting to understand and empathize rather than explain or prove – the complex, three-step method (drawing, interview, VCRM) has proven very valuable for capturing language teachers’ notions of an ideal teacher. Ideals cannot always easily be verbalised, so starting with a time for introspection and creating images rather than words to capture the results of this introspection first, helped create depth. Using VCRM to “stand alongside” (Edwards & Weller, 2012) the teachers while analysing the reflective interviews allows the freedom of interpreting different voices, none of which are privileged or silenced. Participants and researcher are not reduced to definitive statements (Talmy, 2010; Søreide, 2006) but are presented as in dialogue, in communication, and in negotiation about conclusions drawn from the research. My own voice as a researcher reverberates throughout this study, balancing my own perspective and experience with the participants’ unique insights.

The method has helped to reveal how the researcher is part of a dialogue and helps the teachers to form and verbalise the ideals. That ideals are co-constructed has been mentioned before (Johnson & Watson, 2004); VCRM as method of analysis emphasises this link between the researcher and the teacher. Ideal language teacher images for both of the interviewees are influenced by their experience as learners, by their teaching context and their practice that plays an important role in defining desired teaching behaviour. They also react to pedagogic theory, tradition and method: Conny’s student centred approach (Rogers, 1983) and Liang’s Confucian model (Shi, 2006) are both historically shaped. However, balancing these internal influences are personal ambitions: the wish to emulate a teacher who has
influenced their choice of profession, the desire to be the best possible teacher for their students’ needs (Gkonou, Mercer & Daubney, 2018). Both Conny and Liang see themselves as close to the ideal but also permanently measuring themselves against it and striving towards it:

“I try to be close to that I should say, that idea and work towards that ideal, yes.” (Liang)

“I think that I am close.” (Conny)

The strength of the method described lies not only in the elicitation of meaningful data, but also in democratising through an appropriate method of analysis the different voices involved in forming language teachers’ ideals. In the case of Liang, the voices can be described as emotional or strong beliefs, set in contrast to external demands or required standards, and balanced by a personal, historical perspective of experience, describing a development towards an ideal.

A questionnaire or semi-structured interview study (e.g. Peragine, 2020) might have missed an important aspect in Conny’s case: the strength of a confident teacher to vanish into the background. The three-step method highlighted Conny’s position as a teacher who is not even there (in the image). However, this is balanced by a strong teacher’s voice, reflecting on the benefits of letting students take the centre stage (in the interview). And the VCRM method of analysis – unlike other methods - allows and emphasises these contrapuntal voices.

VCRM can also provide depth of analysis through its combination of researcher’s and participants’ voices. The two examples presented here exemplify how VCRM can make differences and cultural influences visible: On the one hand, the Chinese cultural context that might be responsible for attributing motivational strength to the good, concerned, personally interested teacher, a Confucian father figure (Shi, 2006; Wu, 2005, cited in Shi, 2018). On the other hand, the ideal is linked to the UK teaching context that values up-to-dateness and theory-based methods. This paper showed how the methods employed can bring to the fore a cultural context of ideals in language teaching. For more specific cultural comparisons to identify how, exactly, language teachers’ individual ideals could be linked to and influenced by institutional, cultural, and national ideals additional teachers in a Chinese context could be investigated.
Often seen as a limitation of qualitative analysis, the fact that different interpretations are possible worked to advantage in the case of this study. For example, in creating an I-poem Edwards and Weller (2012) choose to include the “you” as a way of expressing personal ideas. In my data set Conny sometimes used the general “you” to refer to teachers’ situations. For the purposes of this VCRM analysis, I disregarded these statements. Liang, on the other hand, frequently used the phrase “I should say” which could be interpreted as a general filler, like “y’know” but in this analysis make up a part of his I-poem. In my interpretation the phrase helped shape the impression of someone deliberating and debating with himself, a sound of different voices in his story. The result is that, in my interpretation at least, Conny’s I-poem is considerably shorter than Liang’s. These stylistic differences are an indication of the different ways of referring to oneself. They could be attributed to gender differences (fewer first person pronouns in the speech of women), to cultural differences, or to individual personality.

This paper has not aimed at providing a comprehensive overview of language teachers’ ideals but to evidence the validity of the chosen complex, three-step method. Using the same approach, a larger data pool of language teachers in different contexts, from different cultures, with different levels of experience should be investigated. Ideals, as the case of Conny shows clearly, are also time-sensitive. In the light of COVID19 and changing circumstances for language teaching, further investigation into teachers’ ideals are necessary to potentially reveal a new perspective that takes into account an enforced move to online language teaching.

**Conclusion**

This paper has shown how a complex, three-step method can reveal language teachers’ ideals in fine detail without hiding the contradictions entailed in a fluid and developing concept.

Understanding language teachers’ ideals can highlight the tension between external and internal standards, past experiences and future expectations, and may be able to explain some of the pressures teachers, and particularly language teachers are experiencing. Using VCRM to analyse reflective interviews stimulated by drawings of
ideal language teachers discovered a rich image of a balancing act between external demands, internal aspirations and coping with the day job. Discovering these tensions is a necessary step towards future-proofing the profession, and thus the three-step method should be used in future studies to help us create a deep understanding of language teachers’ ideals.

References


Investigating language teachers’ ideals in images and interviews

Abstract:
Ideals have been linked to identity, motivation and stamina. To investigate language teachers’ ideals in depth, this study employs a novel complex, three-step method, analysing data collected through drawings and one-to-one reflective interviews with a voice centred relational method (VCRM) for analysis. VCRM conserves the interviewees’ personal voice and includes the researcher as part of the process of analysis. This paper will show how the complex method can be employed and how the findings derived from it allow insights into the forces that keep teachers going, their origins, and their potential for integrating change. Thus, qualitative data collection methods combined with a voice-centred analysis method can be harnessed to enhance our understanding of teacher ideals and the tensions between external demands, internal standards, and different cultures language teachers have to cope with.

Keywords:
Language teachers; ideal teachers; Voice-Centred Relational Method (VCRM); visual methods;

Introduction

Language teachers in the 21st century work under considerable pressure to adapt to changing external environments, not least amongst them rapid changes in our means and methods of communication. Even before teaching changed during the COVID19 crisis, online communication had brought virtual and actual communities ever closer. In this new world of communicating, language teachers play an important role as cultural mediators. The rapidly changing environment is a challenge to the teaching identity developed over time; an identity that has been acknowledged as fluid, developing and multifaceted in recent research (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019); it is constructed from external influences, such as the role expectations of teachers, and internal elements, such as aspirations, expectations and ideals. This article focuses on ideals and images of excellent teaching that can sustain teachers through times of change and difficulties.

To understand more about the ideals held by experienced language teachers, this study employs a novel complex, three-step method for analysing data: Data is collected from a drawing task (Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2018; Clark, 2011) and
reflective one-to-one interviews (Author et al., 2015; Gass & Mackey, 2013) and analysed using voice centred relational method (VCRM) (Brown & Gilligan, 1991). VCRM conserves the interviewees’ voice and includes the researcher as part of the process of analysis. The three steps of the method allow the co-constructing of a rich image, unearthing deeper, hidden ideals and accessing non-rational memories. This deep understanding is needed, not only to appreciate teachers who have endured in the profession, who have shown resilience, and who have acquired experience to master the change needed to integrate requirements of the 21st century teaching profession (ACTFL, 2017) but also to help novice and trainee teachers to develop ideals or “visions” (Hammerness, 2004) that prepare them for coming challenges in language teaching.

In this paper I argue that using a voice centred relational method (VCRM) to analyse one-to-one interviews reflecting on drawings created by language teachers has the potential to capture notions of ideal teachers and give voice to individual language teachers, thus providing useful insights into ideals of excellent teaching. To demonstrate this I describe how I have applied the VCRM method to the context of language teaching, drawing on two illustrative examples. I then reflect on the success and challenges of applying this method and consider implications for future research.

The changing lives of language teachers

Language teaching is a precarious profession. Language teachers share with all teachers their exposure to the stress factors of a highly regulated, highly visible and engaged profession (Avanzi et al., 2018). They suffer from burnout and loss of motivation like other teachers (Mercer, 2018; Tickle, 2018). In addition, they also work as mediators between two languages and two cultures; they often use a language that is not their first or even second language to communicate convincingly with their learners. They sometimes represent an outsider culture to a closed society, or their own heritage to a community of strangers. The psychological pressures on language teachers and their negative consequences have been amply described (Mercer, 2018). A recent theoretical focus on teacher agency (Miller, Kayi-Aydar, Varghese & Vitanova, 2018) has helped to highlight the complexity of teachers’
identities and choices, and suggested a variety of theoretical lenses and methodological perspectives to investigate these issues (e.g. Hiver & Whitehead, 2018). Teachers’ career paths and their choices are influenced by their training, by the requirements of the institution(s) they work for, by government or professional guidelines and by pressure from colleagues, parents, and learners. These are all outside factors. Internal factors, such as their original reasons for choosing teaching as a career; their commitment to the profession, the institution and their learners; and their past experiences also play an important role (Lamb & Wedell, 2015). One aspect that straddles both external and internal influences on teacher careers are ideals: ideals of the “model teacher” proposed by national standards, teaching awards, and recognitions of excellence, and ideals connected to the “ideal teacher self” (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014), where memories of good teachers shape the way teaching is perceived (Davin, Chavoshan & Donato, 2018), where ambitions, aspirations and future career prospects can influence what one wants to achieve and how one balances dreams and realistic expectations.

Thus, the concept of ideals has potentially two sides: the ideal language teacher vs. the language teachers’ ideals (see below). Ideal language teachers can be interpreted as “Platonic ideals”, the basic and defining form of a concept that shapes how the reality or substance is shaped and perceived. These defining forms are susceptible to regulation and cultural influence. In a less essentialist way, ideal language teachers can also be defined as “prototypical” (Sternberg & Horvath, 1995), exemplifying what is good or central within the category of teachers. On the other hand, ideals as self-regulatory concepts and part of the inner workings of an individual are fragile constructs and hard to grasp but fundamental for the achievement of becoming a person (Rogers, 1961) and thus form an integral part of an individual’s identity. Ideals can change under the influence of theories and experience; they can be given up and abandoned or secretly pursued against resistance.

This study aims to tap into both sides of the ideals of language teachers and was undertaken in the understanding that the complex entity that is a language teacher’s professional identity – like their personal identity – is by no means fixed but rather constantly changing and developing, reacting to internal influences and external
pressures and expectations, such as the changing way of how we communicate (Hampel, 2019; Kessler, 2018; Lomicka and Lord, 2019) and the resulting demands for up-to-date language teaching methods (ACTFL, 2017; MLA, 2013; OECD, 2019).

Ideal language teachers and language teacher ideals

Teacher ideals or ideal teachers are culturally influenced. In Western educational practice and research, ideals can be associated with identity (Borg, 2003), agency (Miller et al., 2018), reflection (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010), or student expectations (Murphy, 2015). In a Chinese context, ideal teachers are called “Excellent teachers” and the concept relates to the institutional practice of awarding model teachers (Shi, 2018). In the largest study on excellent teachers of English to date, Wu (2005, in Shi, 2018) found that amongst elements such as subject and pedagogic knowledge, Chinese excellent teachers also shared views on language teaching and professional ethics. Ethics or morals of a teacher in China are traditionally traced back to Confucian ideals of teaching (Shi, 2006), emphasising the paternal quality and a relation to students. A Chinese excellent teacher is responsible, shows empathy, provides pastoral care, and spends large amounts of time out-of-class communicating with students (Shi, 2018).

Ideal standards for teaching can be described by collecting documentary evidence of model teachers. More in-depth analyses have attempted to link the inner motivation of teachers to their ideals, and often to their current and future practice (e.g. Davin et al., 2018). A bad experience, for example, of being taught in the past can lead to a counter-reaction and avoidance of similar teaching techniques (Moodie, 2016).

Looking at the practice of language teaching, ideals can be seen in a pragmatic way as an aid to sustain teachers’ motivation and strength (Peragine, 2020). In this case, the description of ideals remains at a surface level, covering mainly classroom behaviour. Looking at ideal teaching techniques leads to more complex investigations of teachers’ beliefs and attitudes. Brown (2009), in his attempt to match students’ and teachers’ ideas about language learning and teaching, finds that language teachers adhere to the established pedagogy of communicative language teaching. Although this gives some insights into what ideals may drive teachers,
Brown’s study does not approach the relevance of deep-held beliefs and is based solely on questionnaire data.

One facet of the construction of teacher identity is the development of a teaching identity during teacher training. Working with student teachers can provide some insights into factors that influence their ideals (e.g. Bennett, 2012; Korhonen & Törnä; 2016). Research on ideals of language teachers can take the perspective of an “ideal teaching self” (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Kubanyiova, 2009). “Ideal selves” in language learning are a concept derived by Dörnyei (2009) from the possible selves theory of Markus and Nurius (1986), who, in turn, refer back to Rogers’ person-centred psychotherapy (Rogers, 1961). In language learning, the ideal self can provide an internal drive for self-improvement (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). One of the main concepts used by Dörnyei and Kubanyiova in their 2014 book “Motivating learners, motivating teachers” (2014) is that of creating or “building vision” (also see, Hammerness, 2004), using methods such as guided imagery or writing tasks that are intended to help generate images of ideal language teacher selves. The authors acknowledge that there is as yet little empirical research on the “construction of language teachers’ selves in their teaching practice” (p.136). Despite strong theoretical acknowledgement of teacher identity as multifaceted, fluid and developing, empirical research still often uses conventional data collection methods such as questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations (e.g. Karimi & Mofidi, 2019; Miller & Gkonou, 2018). Hence, there is still a relative lack of rich descriptions of the ideals that experienced language teachers hold dear and how they influence their practice. New methods need to be used to dig deeper into teachers’ ideals, as described in the next section.

Digging deep into teachers’ ideals

As mentioned above, the personal ideals of teachers are closely linked to their identity. Direct methods, such as surveys and interviews can generate data about ideals (see Arnon & Reichel, 2007; Hammerness, 2001). These data, however, can be influenced by official standards, requirements and expectations. To research these ideals in depth different qualitative methods have been employed, prominently amongst them narrative interviews (e.g. Johnson & Watson, 2004) and visual
methods (e.g. Bennett, 2012; Nevgi & Löfström, 2014). Johnson and Watson identify interviews as co-constructed between the interviewer and the interviewee, as a "social practice” rather than a research instrument (Talmy, 2010). Their analysis dives deep into the changes in identity a student experiences during a teacher training programme. An example that shows how drawings can be used to elicit ideas about developing identities as teachers is Bennett’s study of music teachers in Australia (Bennett, 2012). Her use of drawings in a longitudinal study helped her to understand artists’ reluctance to take on teaching as a profession, and on the other hand, helped her students to develop an identity as future teachers of music and not only as musicians. However, like with Nevgi and Lofstrom (2014), who use visual methods to focus on the teaching identity of university lecturers, none of these three studies is specific to language teachers.

To access people’s emotions, a number of psychological and psychotherapeutic schools of thoughts have developed methods that utilize visuals and imagery, e.g. Gestalt Psychology (Zabransky, Wagner-Lukesch, Stemberger & Böhm, 2018) or Kathathym Imaginative Therapy. In language teaching, visualisation techniques have been used to motivate language learners within the framework of the ideal L2 self (Mackay, 2019). For research in applied linguistics a variety of visual methods have been developed, based on the understanding that meaning is not made only with words as established in Kress and van Leeuwen's seminal book on “Reading images” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). As a data collection method drawings have been used to access people’s emotional memories and establish a narrative based not only on words (see Kalaja, Dufva & Alanen, 2013).

Visual methods can be traced back to research with children (see Clark, 2011; Kuhn, 2003) and learners (Aragão, 2011; Hautamäki; 2010). Ahn & West (2018), for example, investigate how children see a good language teacher. Their study involves the analysis of drawings and written narratives by South Korean school children. Similar to Millonig (2015), Ahn and West see the advantage of drawing for younger children who lack writing skills. Their results highlight the complexity of good language teacher identity. This perspective, the learners’ view, however, can only provide one aspect of this complex image.

Kalaja and Pitkänen-Huhta point out that visual methods also have great potential in language teaching research as they: “offer participants an alternative to verbal
means to express their experiences and feelings and to reflect on their language practices, identities and learning and teaching processes" (Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2018, p. 159). Further studies of language teaching and learning have used drawing tasks for data collection; for example to access primary school children’s ideas about English as a language for communication (Author et al., 2017); or to access visual representations of Latin texts in communicative language teaching settings where recourse to an English translation should be avoided (Lloyd, 2017). In addition to directly collecting data, visual methods have also been shown to provide valuable stimuli for interviews and discussions (Kalaja et al., 2013).

Still missing is a method that combines the benefits of different techniques and allows the voice of the teachers to be represented in a rich and democratising way. Thus, to help shift the power of defining teachers’ ideals in a personal way, this study has developed the three-step method, comprising drawings as a stimulus to engender deep reflection and emotional resonance, directly followed by reflective one-to-one interviews to verbalize these reflections, which are finally analysed using the VCRM method which preserves the teacher’s voice. Using methods aimed at accessing participants’ emotional responses comes with an implicit obligation to take care of the well-being of participants and the balance of power during research interactions and afterwards in data interpretation. It is important to encourage participants to voice their assent or dissent at different stages of the research, and to allow the voices to develop, acknowledging the labour of reflecting and co-constructing meaning in the one-to-one interviews. Although an analysis of the drawings themselves as artefacts is possible, the democratising goal of this research hinges on linking the three steps: stimulus, reflection, and interpretation.

Data collection steps: images and interviews

This section describes the two tools used for data collection: the elicitation of images produced by the participants in a drawing task and one-to-one interviews reflecting on the stimulus of the image.

The first step of the three-step method consists of individual drawings. For most adults who are not used to drawing or artistic expressions, the invitation to draw an
image following a specific instruction can help to rekindle memories of past experiences linked to one's own schooling (see Millonig, 2015) and times when drawing a picture was a valid way of expressing one’s thoughts. The invitation to draw can focus the mind and create images that are not necessarily put on paper. Thus, memories are accessed in a different way and the ground is prepared for a meaningful interview based on the stimulus of the drawing. Ideals are formed under external influences; accessing a memory of early influences, e.g. the experience of being taught by an “ideal teacher”, can lead to deep reflection and thus to rich and meaningful data about one’s own ideals. The drawing task used in this study also allows interviewees time to think about the topic and prepares them for discussing their experiences but also their feelings about images of the ideal teacher. For teachers, in particular, this reminiscing may also trigger identification with their students and allow a shift of perspective from being a teacher in the classroom to being the recipient of teaching.

The second step is a reflective one-to-one interview. Drawings can activate deep memories; they can then act as stimulus for interviews that help to verbalize these ideas. This type of “stimulated recall” interviews have been used with different types of stimuli, for example video recordings (Gass & Mackey, 2013), eyetracking data (Author et al., 2015) or photographs (Wallace, 2015). Relying only on the researcher’s interpretation of the stimulus would miss out on the active participation of the interviewee and deny them the opportunity to reflect on meaning generated in the drawing task. Through the interview, research participants can explore and explain their intended meaning supported by gentle questioning, and expand on their reflection of ideals. Indeed, interviews are not passive tools (see Silverman, 2001; Talmy, 2010) but fundamentally dialogues. The role, position and influence of the researcher asking the questions must not be overlooked. As experienced language teacher I have conducted interviews with colleagues – such as the two examples presented in this paper - and thus established a basis for a dialogue of a shared understanding of language teaching.

Data analysis step: Voice-Centered Relational Method
The third step of the three-step method is the analysis of data using the VCRM. VCRM facilitates an understanding of teachers’ ideals by accessing their memories about past experiences through the drawing task and by exploring the ideals, past and present, through a dialogue. To bring these ideals to the fore, the analytical approach must allow for at least two voices: that of the interviewee and the researcher. This joint creation of a story acknowledges that ideals in teachers’ lives are not fixed or stable. They are also often jointly constructed with colleagues and fellow teachers.

Deeply personal stories came to light during the interviews when the teachers expressed what made them choose a career in languages, or when they showed their commitment to the culture they represent through language teaching and talked about ways of keeping going in the face of adversity. To allow these stories to be presented as closely as possible to their authors’ voice, the Voice Centred Relational Method (VCRM) (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch, 2003) was chosen for data analysis.

Gilligan and her colleagues refer to psychoanalytical methods, e.g. Freudian analysis, and Piaget as precursors of VCRM, but the most decisive influences come from feminist theory and feminist social psychology. VCRM is a careful multi-step analysis of interview data designed to highlight the personal perspectives (the “voices”) of participants as constructed in relation with the interviewer and/or researcher (Brown & Gilligan, 1991). An important feature of VCRM is that the representations are not all purely rational: through VCRM emotional and artistic elements find their way into academic articles. VCRM has been applied in different contexts, always emphasising the different, sometimes contradictory voices that make up a person’s inner self (Gilligan, 2015).

The VCRM method shares aims with other approaches, e.g. phenomenological analysis (Hives & Whitehead, 2018; Smith & Osborne, 2004), in trying to reveal the inner world and thoughts of individuals and their relationships to the social world they inhabit. The intention of giving voice to the ignored or underprivileged links the method not only to feminist theory but also to critical pedagogical approaches (Freire, 2018), and client-centred counselling or psychology (Rogers, 1961; 1983).
In practice, VCRM describes a series of steps – or “listening” in the method’s own terminology – that the researcher can follow to analyse and describe participant-generated data, for example interview transcripts (Gilligan et al., 2003; Woodcock, 2016). Rather than hiding behind a coding scheme or pre-defined thematic categories, the researcher engages continually with the data and presents her or his engagement as part of the findings.

In a first step, the content or “plot” of the interview is recorded, and the interview described from the researcher’s point of view. This step gives a brief introduction to the main points and allows on the one hand the researcher’s voice to set the scene and reveal her own reactions to the content. On the other hand it places the interviewee’s voice in its specific context. Not all interviews are the same, and there is no claim associated with VCRM to discover an essential truth about the participants.

The second ‘listening’ uses literary methods. Statements in the transcript referring to the interviewee in the first person are collected and re-arranged and interpreted by the researcher as an “I-poem” (for a detailed description and critique, see Edwards & Weller, 2012). The format of a poem allows the researcher more freedom in interpretation, guides away from the rational content of the interview text and can reveal emotional layers beneath the surface of the text. Emotions, whether expressed by the interviewee or the interviewer or interpreted by the researcher are important in VCRM. According to Edwards and Weller (2012), using the I-Poem method shifts the analytic ontology: from “gazing at” the participants’ contributions it allows to shift the perspective to “standing alongside” them in analysing and interpreting their meaning. Research questions like the search for ideals and their origins can best be answered by employing such a method of analysis that privileges the voice of the participants.

The third step of the VCRM analysis is a deliberate attempt to make different and contradicting voices visible (Woodcock, 2016). The text is re-read a number of times and different perspectives are highlighted in different colours. This search for the “contrapuntal voice” (in VCRM terminology) shows how stories are not linear and simple, and people cannot be reduced to one statement or voice.

To begin, we specify the voices we will listen for and determine what the markers of a particular contrapuntal voice are or, more simply, how we will know this voice when
we hear it. The text is then read through, listening for just one voice at a time, and the appearance or evidence of this voice is underlined in a color chosen to mark it. [...] The contrapuntal voices do not have to be in opposition to one another; they may be opposing or complementary in some way. Listening for at least two contrapuntal voices takes into account that a person expresses his or her experience in a multiplicity of voices or ways. (Gilligan et al., 2003, p. 165)

Emotions, feelings and deeper layers of thoughts are often hidden behind the main storyline and glimpses of different voices are highlighted by colour coding. The researcher uses the research questions and themes to guide the search for layers of meaning but is always respectful of the participants' own voice.

The fourth and final step of the VCRM method, is a synthesis of different voices concerning one person or rather a summary of all findings and interpretation of one interview. After reading the transcript at least four times (in the four steps), the findings are related back to the research question and a final analysis is provided.

This study

To exemplify the strength of this complex, three-step method, two examples from a larger pool of drawings and interviews were selected. The data collection procedure is described in this section, followed in the next by an in-depth analysis of the two examples.

In the current project, participants were provided with a selection of coloured pens and a sheet of paper with instructions (see Appendix A). They were asked to draw an image of an ideal language teacher, and given 10 to 20 minutes to complete the task. If asked, the researcher explained that drawing is intended to help participants focus and to access their deeper levels of understanding, switching from a more rational approach, describing verbally what an ideal teacher is, to focusing on images and memories of ideal teachers, allowing the emotional and “childlike” parts of the person to come to the fore in a simple drawing task.

After the drawing was completed, the interviewer asked the participant to describe and explain the “ideal teacher” pictured. Although some guiding questions had been prepared, the drawing task was sufficiently stimulating to bring out full and vivid descriptions and deliberations. Where additional stimulus was needed, questions
about elements of the drawing, clarification questions about imagery or comments were posed. Two framing questions were asked in every interview towards the end:

1. Have you ever been taught by anyone who was close to being this ideal teacher? / Have you ever come across an “ideal” language teacher?

2. How closely do you think you approach being this ideal language teacher yourself? / What would you need to do or have to move yourself closer to becoming an ideal language teacher?

Interview recordings were transcribed using content transcription, and the transcriptions were then analysed following the protocols and established steps of VCRM as described above. In the first step, the circumstances and deliberations around the interview were written down in a retrospective narrative, emphasising the researcher’s viewpoint. Parts of this narrative are presented here in the findings. The second step, creating an iPoem, followed VCRM instructions with very few variations, for example, a three-column style was chosen for the first poem as this seemed to fit the content. The third step, finding contrapuntal voices, was achieved by highlighting with pen on paper in one case, and with the highlighting function in word in the other case. Both ways of highlighting work similarly well. Finally, the fourth step brought the analysis together.

The listening and recording of reactions to interviews can be done by multiple researchers who discuss and reconcile their views – another way to avoid privileging one particular researcher’s point of view. In this project, I chose a different approach, associated with qualitative research: the participant check. After analysing the interviews with VCRM, the findings were returned to the interviewees and their opinion and interpretation requested. Reactions and responses were then integrated into the results section.

Overall 31 interviews have been conducted, but for the purpose of demonstrating the insights of applying this method, two experienced teachers’ contributions have been chosen for close analysis here. According to Basturkmen (2012), studies show that experienced teachers’ stated beliefs may have closer correspondence to their practices (pp. 283, 291). Although this study is not aiming for identifying actual teaching practices, the choice of experienced teachers as participants might have certain benefits. Experienced language teachers may be more able to express their
beliefs (Basturkmen, 2012), being able to verbalize the knowledge often acquired and held implicitly (Woods & Çakir, 2011).

I also selected two participants from very different cultural contexts. The first participant is a male teacher of English in China, a native speaker of Mandarin with a long experience of teaching English at tertiary level. The second is a female teacher of Spanish in the UK, a native speaker of Spanish, with considerable experience of teaching her native language at different educational levels. This selection was made on the grounds of diversity; it offers as wide a variation as possible: one teacher teaching her own language as a native speaker teacher, one teaching a culturally and linguistically quite different L2 in his home country; one male, one female; one in the West, and one in an Asian country. However, there are also many communalities between those teachers: their choice to become language teachers, their role as mediators between cultures, their long experience, and their interest in continuing professional development in their field. The diversity of backgrounds helps to show how the method works in different circumstances, however, the results are in no way intended to exemplify the cultures of these two teachers or imply further reaching conclusions about the teaching culture in these contexts.

Ethical permission for the research was granted by the author’s academic institution, the Open University, UK, through its Human Research Ethics Committee, and consent was given by the teachers prior to the start of data collection.

Two examples: Liang and Conny

Step 1: Context

The interview with Liang (all names are pseudonyms) was conducted at the end of the first day of a large-scale workshop at a university in Beijing, China. Because of the high number of workshop participants local facilitators had been recruited as helpers for small-group participatory work. Liang is one of these facilitators who also became the first co-researcher in finding out about “ideal teacher” images.

Step 1 of the VCRM method sets the context of the interview. In this case, my lack of familiarity with the Chinese culture led me to rely on anecdotal descriptions of teacher-learner relationships in a Confucian setting. One of these anecdotes pictured
the “ideal teacher” as someone not only interested in the person of their student but almost taking on a paternal role in selecting and suggesting suitable spouses. The tellers of the anecdote did present this as an amusing but not out-of-the-norm feature of their favourite teachers.

Liang’s drawing (Appendix B) is small and simple, it does not fill the space on the sheet of paper provided, and it only shows one figure: a juggler. In the interview, Liang surprised me, not because of the cultural differences, but because of his emotional reaction to a teacher image in his past: he had truly met and experienced being taught by this “ideal teacher” and he managed to describe him to me in such words that a vivid story came to life; a story of being cared for and truly appreciated, of being guided and taught but also being seen as a whole person with duties and flaws, needs and dreams.

The second case study focuses on Conny, a female teacher of Spanish in the UK. As I am very familiar with the context of teaching languages in the UK, I am aware of theoretical underpinnings, teacher education, regulations and expectations. I am not familiar with Conny’s culture of origin, but I can empathize with her passion for sharing the culture (C2) as well as the language (L2) that she is teaching. It did not surprise me that when Conny mentions language teaching she adds “and culture” in the same sentence.

The drawing task and interview with Conny took place after a workshop on the integration of ICT into the language classroom at a London university. Conny was one of the volunteers who took an active role part in the workshop. Her drawing reveals – quite literally – a world: Conny’s imagined classroom is a circular shape with speech bubbles on the outside and connecting lines and arrows everywhere. In the interview Conny talks about this image as “a potential world”, it could be “the planet”, but maybe not.

Conny’s vision of the role of a language teacher is clear right from the start; her position might be important, but it is not central: her role is to help, to give students the opportunity to learn. Communication in her classroom is multidirectional; learners communicate with each other, and feed back to the teacher what works and what doesn’t work. In their feedback Conny sees a chance for herself to learn and to improve: “they teach you something”.
Working through the transcript, I notice my own influence in questions and re-shaping Conny’s contributions. This was not a neutral interview but a dialogue amongst peers; my own experience as language teacher in the UK reverberates throughout the talk much more than through the first interview with Liang. Maybe because of my own pedagogic preference of teaching as facilitation, of student-centred rather than teacher-centred practices, I can see – in retrospect – where my empathy might have clouded Conny’s voice and where my interpretation might be foremost. For example, when Conny talks about her ideal teacher of the past, a French teacher in her primary school, she literally says “she motivate[d] me a lot, and I learned.” I rephrase this as “You learned a lot”, and quite soon after, Conny picks up on this subtle shift and reflects back to me – or maybe expands her original statement – by saying “Yes, so I learned a lot… and I learned.”

When talking about successful activities, Conny uses strong emotional words to describe her learners’ reactions: happy, smiling, active. When the reactions – and this is how Conny judges the success of an activity – are not quite so clear indications of enjoyment, Conny’s recipe for improvement is empowerment: “If they are like oh this is not working, but I think that I can improve in some ways, like give them more, don’t lead the lesson as much, give them more…” – “More freedom.” – “More freedom”. Whether or not “freedom” was the word Conny was looking for: In our joint construction of an ideal teacher image, we both agreed that more of one (freedom) and less of the other (leadership) is what we are striving for.

Step 2 a: Liang’s I-poem

The I-poem step in the analysis sharpens the contrast between those two teachers and their images of ideal teachers and also their commonalities. Liang’s first person has three voices: the emotional and passionate, using words like “I believe” and “I want”, the rational, mainly using terms like thinking and “ought-to” statements with “I should say”, and finally the voice of experience, harmonising those two, bringing facts and stories that link passion with ratio, wanting with external demands and ‘ideals’ with the role expectations of a teacher identity. Liang, like Conny, starts with a negative, an absence in his drawing: “I have a clear picture in my mind // but I REALLY can’t draw”. Again, similar to Conny, his personal statements end on a
strong conviction that ideals can be achieved and are quite close: “I try to be close to that I should say, that idea and work towards that ideal, yes.”

The entire I-poem is quite long, seven stanzas in three voices, so just a small selection that shows typical I-statements in three different aspects is presented here.

When constructing this I-poem, I first used different colours in the transcript to distinguish emotional from cognitive I-statements. Then I sorted the different voices I could hear into columns. The left column contains emotional statements and strong beliefs; the right column those I-statements that I interpreted as “ought-to” voice; and the middle column statements that mediate and harmonize between the two in relating past histories and facts. The transcription conventions used here are content transcription with some indication of hesitation and pauses (...), subvocalization (uh, mhm), and overlap or self-interruption (/ or /).

Table 1: Liang’s I-Poem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I believe we have to understand our students … WELL. and I believe Sooo, yes, that’s what I believe //</th>
<th>from those teachers that I have, I know those I have taught face-to-face and then also I have taught online I have taught here for 16 years and before that I was campus teacher.</th>
<th>so I think, uh I think, from those good teachers that I have, also, I think, should Uh, I think I … I think language teacher and uh, classroom teacher and I think for online teacher,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I /. I really … feel lucky to have him.</td>
<td>I’m a English teacher, and I learned the language,</td>
<td>I think, yes, I’ve got some of the aspects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I learned it for many years,
and then I learned it /.
I experienced the culture
and the language also, yes,
I try to read books,

I should say,
And I learned.

This short excerpt from Conny’s I-poem illustrates the physicality of memory: Conny’s memory of being a child and of doing her hair.

**Step 3: Contrapuntal voices**

The third step of VCRM is intended to bring contrapuntal voices, as Gilligan et al. (2003) call it, to the foreground. The counterpoints can signify differences or contradictions within an interviewee’s statements but also between them and the interviewer’s viewpoints. For Liang’s interview, the I-poem had already shown some contrapuntal voices: emotion and wishes against demands and reason; both then linked and harmonized by experience. In reminiscing about the ideal teacher Liang had experienced in his youth, he described some of the obstacles towards developing into a good teacher and at the same time reveals the complex interlinking of cultural expectations, personal goals and a good teacher’s influence:

“LG: Okay. And I didn’t have high motivation at that time. uh, So, he … encouraged me and I got the /. I got the interest, but I didn’t work as very hard as he expected. So, y’know, I was 15 at that time, I always wanted to play.”

Encouraged by his teacher, Liang developed an interest in the language (English), however, according to his own high expectations and to what he assumed his teacher expected from him, he still did not work hard enough. In my analysis, I marked this section as revealing three different ‘voices’: the Chinese voice, culturally different from my perspective; the ideal voice, incorporated here both by the former teacher’s presence and also by the expectations Liang sets for himself; and finally the voice of obstacles or the contrapuntal voice showing where the individual or the ambition failed to reach an ideal.

As every interview is different, Conny’s contrapuntal voices are also different from Liang’s. Due to the cultural closeness of our teaching contexts, I did not identify a specific Spanish voice. The voices in this interview change considerably: I saw in the text a strong teacher voice in contrast to a teacher disappearing into the background.
We start with an image devoid of self, devoid of “the teacher”. When questioned about this, Conny says: “I think that my position could be in the middle. … Yes, so maybe I can draw myself in the middle.” There is an “I”, a person present – yet not quite present, hesitant, in the subjunctive, tentative. Again, in Conny’s statement, “[b]ut when you give the students the opportunity to learn and you observe how they do between them, you can go a little bit far away and observe oh this is working. Or maybe you, they teach you something.” The teacher here almost seems like a disturbance in the class, best vanishing into the background to “observe” and learn: However, that this position in the background is quite powerful and didactic is revealed by the strong teacher voice: “Because for me it’s important to create learning resources that are enjoyable…” and, at a later stage referring to ICT tools: “So I am researching on the kind of tools that are easy, like drag and, something…” Towards the end of the interview, Conny’s personality shines through strongly in her emphasis of creativity, her belief that she is approaching her teacher ideal and in statements about her own opinion and her vision. This is balanced, verbally by hedging (“I think”), and conceptually by a commitment to continually checking her work against feedback and her endeavour to constantly improve herself (“but I think that I can improve in some ways,…” “Yes, I think that is where I am, it’s something that I would like to do more.”).

Step 4: Bringing it all together

The final step of the VCRM analysis pulls together the different elements and presents findings, yet again interwoven with the researcher’s own voice. To balance the order of presentation, I will start the final step with Conny’s contribution. Conny’s ideal language teacher is an engaged and reflective person, very much in tune with her students and their needs and always willing to improve and modify her teaching based on feedback received. Her ideals are time-sensitive: her model from the past was a teacher using authentic materials. When Conny links her memory to the physical activity of doing her hair in a language related role-play, this reminded me of the teaching method of total physical response. Although the teacher in Conny’s primary school might not have consciously used this technique, Conny describes methods and tools of the time she is talking about. When she explains her
own ideals and goals, she mentions the use of technology and the integration of communication tools (ICT) into her lessons. ("...because I have been teaching ICT for a long time, I think that I am now trying to compare. Because when you learn with a computer you learn by, it’s more independent.")

Conny’s ideals derive from her self-reflection, from an experience in her past and from her strong theoretical believes in student-centred, reflective, technology enhanced, communicative teaching and learning. She does not always use those theoretical terms when talking about her work as a teacher but her drawing and the I-poem bring those aspects to the fore. Self-reflective processes are built into Conny’s everyday work as a teacher, her empathy for her students’ needs, and the feeling that she is close to her ideal. These are all linked to the “strong teacher” voice represented in the contrapuntal readings: a knowledgeable and creative individual, who disappears into the margins to give students centre space for learning and communicating. And this strong teacher is resilient and able to not only carry on in her job but permanently strives to improve.

Liang’s ideal language teacher is knowledgeable, skilful and motivating. He explains the difficult juggling act between knowing the target language, understanding one’s own language and mediating between the two and between two cultures. His image of a juggler shows a little figure, quite isolated on the page but vigorously engaged in keeping the different tools in the air and moving. Ideals in his past include a university teacher, but more emotionally relevant, his highschool teacher who took Liang’s education personal, making sure that the young learner invested time and effort into learning English, a language dear to the teacher’s heart.

Liang’s flexibility in changing from classroom to online teaching can be linked to his love of the language and culture and his desire to emulate his special teacher from his past ("So then, that awakening power y’know, it wakes us up and we really want to read and to learn and to move towards that kind of teacher, and BEcome that kind of teacher in the future, yes.").

In my analysis I identified the value placed on hard work, on being measured by effort and not just achievement in the pursuit of knowledge as one of the specific cultural and institutional influences on the ideal. The I-poem and the counterpoint of voices in Liang’s interview highlighted emotional depths of his fond memory of this
teacher; and the dialogue with the researcher brought to light the issue of power as a permanence of influence: the power a teacher has over a student’s life, his decisions and his feelings. Keeping the ideal alive in Liang’s own teaching is a source of strength but also a touchstone: from an outsider’s perspective there is a delicate balance between a fear of not living up to the high standards set by example and by Liang’s own expectations, guilt of not having been the best student possible in the past, and a desire to “BEcome” that ideal teacher in the future.

Discussion

Given the epistemological stance in this study – attempting to understand and empathize rather than explain or prove – the complex, three-step method (drawing, interview, VCRM) has proven very valuable for capturing language teachers’ notions of an ideal teacher. Ideals cannot always easily be verbalised, so starting with a time for introspection and creating images rather than words to capture the results of this introspection first, helped create depth. Using VCRM to “stand alongside” (Edwards & Weller, 2012) the teachers while analysing the reflective interviews allows the freedom of interpreting different voices, none of which are privileged or silenced. Participants and researcher are not reduced to definitive statements (Talmy, 2010; Søreide, 2006) but are presented as in dialogue, in communication, and in negotiation about conclusions drawn from the research. My own voice as a researcher reverberates throughout this study, balancing my own perspective and experience with the participants’ unique insights.

The method has helped to reveal how the researcher is part of a dialogue and helps the teachers to form and verbalise the ideals. That ideals are co-constructed has been mentioned before (Johnson & Watson, 2004); VCRM as method of analysis emphasises this link between the researcher and the teacher. Ideal language teacher images for both of the interviewees are influenced by their experience as learners, by their teaching context and their practice that plays an important role in defining desired teaching behaviour. They also react to pedagogic theory, tradition and method: Conny’s student centred approach (Rogers, 1983) and Liang’s Confucian model (Shi, 2006) are both historically shaped. However, balancing these internal influences are personal ambitions: the wish to emulate a teacher who has
influenced their choice of profession, the desire to be the best possible teacher for their students’ needs (Gkonou, Mercer & Daubney, 2018). Both Conny and Liang see themselves as close to the ideal but also permanently measuring themselves against it and striving towards it:

“I try to be close to that I should say, that idea and work towards that ideal, yes.” (Liang)

“I think that I am close.” (Conny)

The strength of the method described lies not only in the elicitation of meaningful data, but also in democratising through an appropriate method of analysis the different voices involved in forming language teachers’ ideals. In the case of Liang, the voices can be described as emotional or strong beliefs, set in contrast to external demands or required standards, and balanced by a personal, historical perspective of experience, describing a development towards an ideal.

A questionnaire or semi-structured interview study (e.g. Peragine, 2020) might have missed an important aspect in Conny’s case: the strength of a confident teacher to vanish into the background. The three-step method highlighted Conny’s position as a teacher who is not even there (in the image). However, this is balanced by a strong teacher’s voice, reflecting on the benefits of letting students take the centre stage (in the interview). And the VCRM method of analysis – unlike other methods - allows and emphasises these contrapuntal voices.

VCRM can also provide depth of analysis through its combination of researcher’s and participants’ voices. The two examples presented here exemplify how VCRM can make differences and cultural influences visible: On the one hand, the Chinese cultural context that might be responsible for attributing motivational strength to the good, concerned, personally interested teacher, a Confucian father figure (Shi, 2006; Wu, 2005, cited in Shi, 2018). On the other hand, the ideal is linked to the UK teaching context that values up-to-dateness and theory-based methods. This paper showed how the methods employed can bring to the fore a cultural context of ideals in language teaching. For more specific cultural comparisons to identify how, exactly, language teachers’ individual ideals could be linked to and influenced by institutional, cultural, and national ideals additional teachers in a Chinese context could be investigated.
Often seen as a limitation of qualitative analysis, the fact that different interpretations are possible worked to advantage in the case of this study. For example, in creating an I-poem Edwards and Weller (2012) choose to include the “you” as a way of expressing personal ideas. In my data set Conny sometimes used the general “you” to refer to teachers’ situations. For the purposes of this VCRM analysis, I disregarded these statements. Liang, on the other hand, frequently used the phrase “I should say” which could be interpreted as a general filler, like “y’know” but in this analysis make up a part of his I-poem. In my interpretation the phrase helped shape the impression of someone deliberating and debating with himself, a sound of different voices in his story. The result is that, in my interpretation at least, Conny’s I-poem is considerably shorter than Liang’s. These stylistic differences are an indication of the different ways of referring to oneself. They could be attributed to gender differences (fewer first person pronouns in the speech of women), to cultural differences, or to individual personality.

This paper has not aimed at providing a comprehensive overview of language teachers’ ideals but to evidence the validity of the chosen complex, three-step method. Using the same approach, a larger data pool of language teachers in different contexts, from different cultures, with different levels of experience should be investigated. Ideals, as the case of Conny shows clearly, are also time-sensitive. In the light of COVID19 and changing circumstances for language teaching, further investigation into teachers’ ideals are necessary to potentially reveal a new perspective that takes into account an enforced move to online language teaching.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how a complex, three-step method can reveal language teachers’ ideals in fine detail without hiding the contradictions entailed in a fluid and developing concept.

Understanding language teachers’ ideals can highlight the tension between external and internal standards, past experiences and future expectations, and may be able to explain some of the pressures teachers, and particularly language teachers are experiencing. Using VCRM to analyse reflective interviews stimulated by drawings of
ideal language teachers discovered a rich image of a balancing act between external demands, internal aspirations and coping with the day job. Discovering these tensions is a necessary step towards future-proofing the profession, and thus the three-step method should be used in future studies to help us create a deep understanding of language teachers’ ideals.

References


Author et al. (2015) [Details removed for peer review]

Author et al. (2017) [Details removed for peer review]

Author et al. (2020) [Details removed for peer review]


Appendix A

Ideal Language Teacher Research

Please imagine the ideal language teacher, forming an image of them in their teaching setting in your mind. Then draw the image you see in the space below, including as much detail as possible. Do not worry about the quality of your drawing – you will be able to explain everything you have drawn in you interview.

Thank you very much for taking part in this research.
Appendix B

Ideal Language Teacher Research

Please imagine the ideal language teacher, forming an image of them in their teaching setting in your mind. Then draw the image you see in the space below, including as much detail as possible. Do not worry about the quality of your drawing – you will be able to explain everything you have drawn in your interview.

Example drawing: Liang

Thank you very much for taking part in this research.
Investigating language teachers’ ideals in images and interviews

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The article submitted is my own work. Any text quoted from other sources has been referenced appropriately.

Abstract:
Ideals have been linked to identity, motivation and stamina. To investigate language teachers’ ideals in depth, this study employs a novel complex, three-step method, analysing data collected through drawings and one-to-one reflective interviews with a voice centred relational method (VCRM) for analysis. VCRM conserves the interviewees’ personal voice and includes the researcher as part of the process of analysis. This paper will show how the complex method can be employed and how the findings derived from it allow insights into the forces that keep teachers going, their origins, and their potential for integrating change. Thus, qualitative data collection methods combined with a voice-centred analysis method can be harnessed to enhance our understanding of teacher ideals and the tensions between external demands, internal standards, and different cultures language teachers have to cope with.

Keywords:
Language teachers; ideal teachers; Voice-Centred Relational Method (VCRM); visual methods;