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LANGUAGE TEACHER POSITIONING IN A TEACHER PROMOTION EXAMINATION: A SMALL STORY APPROACH

Abstract

Although there is an increasing body of research on diverse aspects of language teachers' professional practice there are still contexts that remain hardly explored. One such context is the oral examination situation encountered by experienced language teachers in Poland who aspire to be promoted in the ranks of the teaching profession. Drawing on positioning theory as a methodological tool to analyse the experience of one English teacher's promotion examination situation, I will attempt to find out what aspects of teacher identity emerge from the small stories employed in the examination situation, as well as what lessons can be learnt from a study about teacher positioning (both self-positioning and being positioned) in the professional assessment context. Although the study is set in the Polish context, it may contribute to the knowledge on language teacher identity (re)construction in general through its focus on one area of language teacher professional practice – taking a teacher promotion examination.

Keywords: in-service teachers, professional promotion examination, positioning, small-storying, teacher identity

Słowa kluczowe: egzamin nauczycieli na awans zawodowy, pozycjonowanie, małe historie, tożsamość nauczyciela

1. Introduction

This article reports on a study that investigates one English teacher's professional promotion examination in Poland. The aim of the article is twofold. First, I would like to give voice to the examinee, an English teacher, who may serve as an example, representative of many in-service language teachers taking a similar professional, promotion examination, so that readers can gain a better understanding of how examinees construct their teacher identities through the use of small story analysis (Bamberg, 2006). My second aim is to make a contribution to the area of language teacher assessment, a topic that is rarely researched, as well as to small stories as a site of teacher identity construction in an examination context when analysed from a positioning approach. The positioning approach is used as an interpretation instrument for examining the narrative a teacher presented during a formal promotion examination. Positioning is conducted at two levels: the self-positioning of the teacher in relation to her profession and to the examination interlocutors, and her being positioned during the examination by some of the board members.

My interest in this subject originates from my frequent participation in language teacher promotion examinations to which I have been invited as a committee member for almost two decades. Therefore, my emic and insider perspective will be included in the analysis.

The opening section outlines the theoretical framework for this study focusing on teacher assessment, the positioning approach and small-storying. Following this, I describe the study in which one in-service English teacher – the participant of the study – positions herself and is positioned through small stories which are extracted from a lengthy narrative taken from an interview in a teacher promotion examination.

2. A combined theoretical framework

The constructs of teacher assessment, positioning and small-storying are briefly described and followed by an explanation of how together they can be used to study the identity construction of a language teacher in a promotion examination.

2.1. Teacher assessment

Monitoring teachers' work, in the sense of investigating the act of assessment, has hardly been explored. In assessment, most scholars have focused on teacher selection processes, intricacies of summative and formative assessment, or the threats of neo-liberalism with its accountability reforms (Block

et al., 2012). The study participants in the bulk of such research were students trained to become teachers to whom scholars had the easiest access. By contrast, work on the evaluation of in-service language teachers is very scant. More established practitioners are usually unwilling to be subjects of investigation, assuming that potential study results may produce unnecessary stress and/or damage their teacher image, even if only imagined and untrue. That said, a notable exception is Howard and Donaghue's (2015) book, the last three chapters of which, contributed by King (2015), Howard (2015) and Trotman (2015), are devoted to evaluation of in-service teachers.

As neo-liberal policies with their appraisal systems prevail in most sectors of human activity, nor has the field of teacher education remained untouched. Standards and outcomes-based evaluations have already affected areas traditionally belonging to teachers' decisions, such as student learning, topics, curriculum, choice of course books, etc. (Carter & Lochte, 2017). This managerial movement has somewhat shifted the locus of control in teacher credentialing, from a reliance on traditional teacher dispositions (i.e. knowledge, autonomy, responsibility) to the necessity to comply with a set of imposed criteria, including the teacher's knowledge of legal regulations, which are presented as and believed to constitute 'effective teaching'.

In accordance with the prevalent examination trends (e.g. edTPA)¹, the Polish teacher professional promotion examination also reflects the attributes of neoliberal thinking. Those who want to be promoted have to pass through a four-level path, from a teacher trainee to a chartered teacher, which may span over several years. In order to fulfil each level, teachers are obliged to complete various educational activities and achieve positive outcomes. Their activities have to be well documented and often reflected in the products of their work. However, the inherent part of this examination procedure is the oral examination, taken in front of a commission. This consists of two parts: the teacher's narrative about her work, followed by the examiners' questions². Although a few studies in Poland have addressed the teacher career advancement path from a research perspective (i.e. Kędzierska, 2012), apart from single study reports by Aleksandrowska (2014), who examined language teachers' didactic achievements in their examination reports, and Werbińska (2017), who identified the interpretative repertoires language teachers used in their promotion narratives, there have been hardly any investigations of

¹ edTPA is a US subject-specific and standards-based assessment that is used with prospective teachers.

² This study applies to the promotion examination of a teacher who aspires to become an appointed teacher (level 2 on the 4 level scheme).

language teacher career advancement examinations. The present paper aims to partially fill this void and investigate the issue of language teacher assessment in relation to her positioning.

2.2. Positioning

Positioning theory (Davies & Harre, 1990) is situated in poststructuralism, narratology, and partly in Austin's (1962) speech acts. Like the poststructuralist perspective, positioning contests the conventional dichotomies in applied linguistics between, for example, structure and agency, conformity and resistance, etc. Like narratology, it is linked to the idea that people (re)produce themselves through their lived autobiographies in an attempt to form consistency and coherence from their multiple selves (Baxter, 2016: 42) and, as in Austin's work, they restrict, or allow, certain social actions through occupying positions that were interactionally constructed by them. The theory acknowledges the power of discursive practices. At the same time it recognizes that a person emerges through the processes of social interaction not as a finite end product, but as one who contributes to constructing the discourses in which they participate (Baxter, 2016: 41). In a word, through positioning, people locate themselves and others in and through interactions.

Davies and Harre (1990: 47) argue that there exist two types of positioning within a discursive event in which participants find themselves: interactive and reflexive positionings. Interactive positioning is when one person positions another, usually through the process of turn-taking, whereas in reflexive positioning one person has some agency to position themselves. The authors suggest that neither positioning type is intentional, but rather appears naturally in the process of reproducing oneself within existing and emerging discourses. In a conversation, an utterance may suggest either an interactive or reflexive positioning assigned by one of the speakers, which may change as the conversation develops.

Research on positioning in applied linguistics has been rather scant. The greatest contribution has probably been made by Kayi-Aydar (2015) who investigated primary and secondary school classrooms through the interactive or reflexive positionings of students learning English, also in book-length form (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). Other research projects worthy of note which analysed positioning in SLA are, for example, studies on beliefs (De Costa, 2011), second language learning (Menard-Warwick, 2008), politicized and racialized cultural groups (Giroir, 2014), native-speakerism (Trent, 2012), and first-year English teaching (Werbińska, 2015). As positioning studies the "rights, duties and obligations distributed among interlocutors or characters in and through conversations

or narratives" (Kayi-Aydar, 2019: 1) focusing "on the *moment* [original emphasis] to explain the actions in a moral landscape" (Kayi-Aydar, 2019: 1), it seems an effective instrument to understand the complexity of relations between the right to perform (or lack of that right) people have, or believe they have, and what they do, in the light of their beliefs (Harre & Slocum, 2003: 125).

2.3. Small-storying

Important in this study is also the concept of the small story (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008), or narratives-in-interaction, which are more fragmentary accounts of experience in teacher identity construction. Drawing on talk-in-interaction, this approach focuses on short stretches of narrative within a conversation, instead of focusing on the narrative of a study participant as a contribution to the conversation as a whole. The advantage of using the small story framework is being able to access ambiguities and tensions which often appear in oral narratives. Advocates of small-storying (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Barkhuizen, 2010; Barkhuizen, 2016; Barkhuizen, 2017) argue that it is these short stories, unlike the big stories of life history research, that provide insights into various aspects of language learning and teaching. What is more, Bamberg (2010) claims that "placing emphasis on small stories allows for the study of how people as agentive actors position themselves – and in doing so become positioned" (2010: 13). As many studies on teacher identity (i.e. Bamberg, 2010; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Linaker, 2019; Werbińska, 2017) consider agency as its inherent component, the application of small stories for deconstructing identity in a given time and space (the examination context) seems relevant.

2.4. Collaborative constructs: teacher assessment, positioning, small-storying

In this study I choose a positioning analysis framework, as applied by Davies and Harre (1990), because it allows me to analyse small stories as acts of teacher identity performance in a given context – during an in-service teacher's formal examination. I follow Gee's (2001) definition of identity as "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person', in a given context" (Gee, 2001: 99), Bamberg's (2010: 7) understanding of identity as, among others, "the active and agentive locus of control" as well as Sfard and Prusak's (2005) suggestion which defines identity in terms of stories about a person. My study also ties in with Beijgaard et al.'s (2004: 107) research, for whom teacher professional identity can be divided into three categories of which one is (re)presented by teachers' stories. This analysis has been carried out at a reflexive and interactive level. At the first level (reflexive) I note how the teacher self-positions herself through her examination narrative

and at the second level (interactive) I explore how the teacher is being positioned by some of the examination committee members.

3. The study

3.1. Research questions

Building on the combined theoretical framework, I have approached my investigation on language teacher identity construction during a professional promotion examination from the perspective of small story analysis within the positioning approach. This study takes data from a larger project that looked at a group of twenty teachers who were all in-service language teachers participating in the formal professional promotion examination. The larger study was guided by a broad research question: How do language teachers negotiate their position during their participation in a professional promotion examination? From this study, I elaborate here on one participant's experience and the questions that guide me now are:

- (1) What aspects of teacher identity emerge from the small stories employed in the examination situation?
- (2) What lessons can be learnt from the study concerning those who examine the language teacher?

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The qualitative data in this study relate to a formal examination narrative with Anna (a pseudonym), an English language teacher who has for several years been working in a primary school in a small town in the north of Poland. The whole examination was in Polish, lasted approximately one hour, and consisted of the teacher's narrative and the questions from the commission. The venue was a large room in the town hall office where six members of the board were sitting at an oblong table: a representative of the town mayor, the school principal of the school where the teacher works, two experts (CM1, CM2), one of whom taught a subject other than a foreign language, a representative of the local educational authorities (CM3), a representative of a teachers' trade union and an administrator whose job was to take the minutes of the event.

My role in this examination was as one of the experts. In order to assure my truthfulness and credibility, it is worth stressing that the technical competence of being an 'assessing' expert during a teacher's examination was not the only competence on my part. I myself went through a similar English teacher examination for professional advancement several years ago, so

I share a similar background to the teacher, which, in a way, helps me better understand what it is really like for a teacher to take part in the teacher promotion examination. Besides this, I have been conducting teacher research for almost two decades now, which helps me distance myself sufficiently to be able to provide an objective evaluation of a study participant. It can be said, therefore, that my being an expert in the teacher's examination involved my being both an experienced practitioner and a competent evaluator.

During the whole examination event I took meticulous notes on what was happening around. As it was impossible to note down all the interlocutors' words, in some utterances I managed to note the beginnings of utterances but always did my best to put down all conversation threads as well as characteristic expressions that were used by both the examinee and the examiners. In order to limit memory loss and write down as many facts, impressions and queries related to the examination as possible, I completed my notes straight after the event, and this took place in the car that I used to arrive at the venue. Thanks to this I managed to obtain thick descriptions (Geertz, 1983) and reconstruct the meanings of the examination dialogues from the raw data so as to re-present the examination dialogues as truthfully as possible. The data consisting of the notes from the study took up almost 20 pages of A5 format.

The analysis of the data consisted of three phases. I started with my reading the notes of examination excerpts without any coding. Then, I coded the whole material, almost line-by-line, which generated many codes. My aim was to identify quotes or passages that could provide a significant 'key' to understanding Anna's negotiation of her teacher identity in the examination situation. I particularly focused on her I-statements, the statements in the first person, which are categorized on the basis of predicates occurring after them (for details, see Gee 2005: 141–142). Then I read the data against these codes, which led to the elimination of some previous codes and the creation of categories (see Appendix). The second phase was to find examples of reflexive and interactive positioning to see what happened as a result of a particular positioning act. In other words, I wanted to learn if and to what extent the applied and coded positions were 'allowed' or 'disallowed' in the investigated context, which was to help me to better understand Anna's examination experience. Equipped with the categories from phase one and the effects of the adopted positioning acts from phase two, I finally (phase three) revisited my data at two levels: for Anna's self-positioning and the way she was positioned by some of her interlocutors. The positioning is presented next.

3.2.1. Level 1 positioning: Self-positioning

Anna's narrative is set within the discourse of the language teacher's profession. She constructs her professional teacher identity chronologically through the narrative, outlining the most significant events in her professional career through small stories.

From the very beginning, Anna seems to perceive the examination interlocutors as colleagues, collaborators and empathetic individuals, and she self-positions herself accordingly. She enters the room smiling from afar, sits down confidently, helps herself to a glass of water saying:

Hello once again. Let me pour some water because the situation is a little bit stressful [smiles]. I suspect it may dry up my throat a little. Can I use my notes? [hardly waiting for the answer] OK. Good.

She seems self-confident despite referring to "a stressful situation", introduces rather casual language (*Hello, let me pour myself some water, OK*) and, through this, positions herself as a colleague on a par with the rest of the examination commission members.

In the self-positioning stage, Anna is positioning herself against the dominant discourses, or master narratives, to which she refers in her presentation. She begins her narrative by recalling her initial steps towards building her teaching career and by setting a scene which is significant to her.

I've worked at different school levels. I started in school in S. It was a primary and nursery school but when I was finishing my internship³ I worked in two primary schools: in S and in G. In addition, during my internship I worked in a private educational institution. There I conducted lessons for kindergartens, older children and parents.

Through referring to a number of schools in which she has worked, she positions herself, at the very beginning of her narrative, as an experienced and knowledgeable teacher who knows what it is like to teach English to different age groups. This is strengthened further as her narrative evolves:

In grades 1-3, I'll be talking only about the most important things, acting out something gets the best results. In the book there is a picture story after each unit and we create the continuation of the story or modify the story. I am talking about this because while working with the story, the kids forget about having a class.

³ In the original version she uses the word *staz* which means a three-year period of preparation for obtaining the degree of an appointed teacher.

They enjoy themselves and use the language subconsciously. In older classes what works well is the dialogue as an activation form. I have such a class. They like dialogues more than any other activity. Unfortunately, I have to use all the activities ...

Anna compares working with a student-made dialogue, the most effective classroom technique, in younger and older English classes. She positions herself towards a language teaching expert who has chosen to talk about “the most important things” that really work in the language teaching context. At the same time, she refers to a common discourse about teaching children through play and their learning a language subconsciously, irrespective of the truth value of such a statement. She strives to make an impression that she knows what and how to teach children, and “any other activity” that is forced by the core curriculum is not what she and her pupils would really like to do.

As her narrative develops, Anna acknowledges the presence of some of the board members, especially her principal. She illustrates her respectful attitude towards her principal in the following accounts:

During one of the first observations of my lessons by the principal I was advised to pay attention to listening, working with a text, writing and speaking during every class, yes, yes, to pay attention to each of these functions.

Very insightful for me are lessons observed by my principals. Why? I again like the feedback. I like to know what I did wrong. I can't find this out by myself, the kids won't tell you, but under the watchful eye of someone who has worked longer, with more knowledge ... this is valuable. This gives a lot of insight if someone comes, for example a language specialist [looks at me] ...

It should be added that the principal is usually the only committee member whom the examined teacher knows in person. Anna's paying heed to the principal in front of everyone can certainly be treated at face value as a sign of gratitude for the advice that she received when her lesson was observed by her principal. That said, it can be noted that the verb 'advised' is used, not 'told', which strengthens Anna's positioning as a good teacher who is looking for new ideas in language teaching. Yet, scrutinizing the content of the advice (which is rather obvious and Anna should know this from her language studies), it can also be speculated that Anna is looking for someone with whom she has something in common, a joint experience, which can contribute to verifying her teacher identity. Her clear glance in the direction of the language expert can serve as further evidence of this. Although personally unknown to the examinee, the language expert shares a common experience with the language teacher – learning the same language and teaching the same language, which may pay off, in Anna's opinion, in better understanding of the teacher.

Anna also projects herself as a successful teacher when she talks about the competitions in which her learners regularly participate, or the design of effective classes, which is illustrated in the following examples:

Working through competitions, organizing extra classes to prepare for a district competition, a spelling competition for grades 1-3 ...a girl from my class won the first place

Last year I had two extra classes financed by the EU. That was 7 classes a week in total – luxury and not – I thought I had to make them interested in something. Using the coursebook only wouldn't work. We started a text where there was a reference to Anne of Green Gables. In the conversation the students told me that it was a set book in the following class. By chance, I came across a series of Anne of Green Gables in English, yes. And we made a weekly plan, and each day we had a task to do connected with the book, so that at the end of the week we could watch an episode of Anne in English. The idea was, in a way, spontaneous but, in the end, we had a whole day devoted to Anne, a recitation contest for which the children dressed up, a short debate between Anne's followers and opponents. I didn't have a feeling that it was tiring. I think that watching the film was motivating [she drinks water] ...

In relation to the dominant professional discourses, Anna also positions herself as a teacher who is a reflective practitioner. She illustrates this in her account of formative assessment which can be considered a contemporary master narrative among teachers in Poland:

I'm trying to connect my assessing students with the idea of formative assessment. I remember I was really impressed when I heard about formative assessment the first time. I was used to telling them that we were going to have a test. In what? In English, of course, or in Unit 1. When I learnt that students should be precisely told what the test would be like, the success criteria given, oh dear, I reformulated everything. I don't introduce the whole formative assessment but its elements, for example informing students about what I'll be looking for because ... I also give feedback, even if it's fine. That was also important in my work. ... From the quizzes, tests, oral information, I try to draw conclusions, divide tests into skills, and after the test, analyse my work. If some test types are better mastered, what needs revising, what is still unclear, I always ask them what was the most difficult, perhaps I did something wrong ... this is some material for my reflection. Assessment is also the assessment of my work, I find the learner's feedback important, I do surveys, in fact, I like doing this [smile], then I can see if and what I did was wrong, what I did right, what they want more of, what less of. Such questions are always listed in my surveys.

At level 1 positioning (self-positioning), Anna constructs her teacher identity by what she does as a teacher. She attempts to create a strong professional

identity through the stories of her language teacher expertise. This is achieved through her recalled experience (working at different levels), the use of linguistic resources (*The most important, This works*), recollection of examples pointing to her creativity in lesson design (a series of lessons on *Anne of Green Gables*).

In addition, Anna positions herself as a knower of current ELT master narratives. She maintains her affiliation with the dominant discourses, such as formative assessment or teacher reflectivity. Her positioning is intensified linguistically when she uses the professional terms, such as *feedback*, *WILF* ("what I'll be looking for"⁴), *success criteria*. Yet, she hardly discloses any critical stance or dilemmatic symptoms as to the claims that she makes, nor does she interrogate the global discourse, for example, one concerning the relevance of teaching English to children in state schools in Poland who, according to what she says, play and pick up linguistic knowledge subconsciously.

Hence, at the level of self-positioning, the extracts illuminate Anna's attempts to be considered a self-respectful colleague, a legitimate member of a community of practice and a professional who is counting on the solidarity of board members.

3.2.2. Level 2 positioning: Being positioned

Being positioned by the examination board is important as it affects examinees' feelings and indirectly suggests to teachers, while they are being examined, whether they are likely to pass or fail their examination. Let us consider in what positions the participant of the study is vis-a-vis the members of the committee present in the context of the examination for teacher promotion. It is noteworthy to see how Anna constructs (or rather co-constructs) her identity as someone who happens to find herself in the face of adversity, which is reflected in some of the questions that follow her examination narrative.

CM1: What is the basis upon which you adjust the requirements for students?
Is it only your observation, or perhaps a basic specific requirement?
What is this requirement about? Please, solve this problem.

T: Adjustment? That is ...

CM1: In what scope?

T: I can adjust requirements, generally I do this when a student has an opinion, yes, from a counselling centre. Then I have specific recommendations what I should do, what to pay attention to, but when I see that

⁴ In the original version Anna used the words *NaCoBezu* which in Polish stands for "Na co będą zwracać uwagę". *WILF* is its popular English equivalent.

- a student doesn't have such an opinion but needs help, yes, a kind of individual attitude, I also help.
- CM1: OK, but in what form? Is it only the quantity or form that matters? What is the percentage? What does it look like?
- T: No, no. This is an individual matter depending on what a student needs.
- CM1: And the core curriculum?
- T: It must be covered. I can possibly change the degree of difficulty of a task but generally ...
- CM1: What you are saying is too general. Be specific. Perhaps some forms ...
- T: OK. Good ... Perhaps I'll give you an example. Yes, in S. I have a student who hasn't got an opinion yet but has problems. Grade 4. The boy speaks English quite well, I mean in respect to his possibilities but there is a big problem with writing. He loses words, loses letters. The situation from last week. During the quiz he was to have written a short piece of information but I asked him to simply tell me that information. So he wrote down in the way he could but he also told me. With other tasks there were no problems.
- CM1: How about the other students? Do they know that the student has it easier?
- T: I don't do this only for one student. I walk around and I see if someone has a problem.
- CM1: But these are only your perceptions!
- T: Yes, yes, that is, once again...
- CM1: This is on the basis of your perceptions? Such adjustments you do on perceptions, or strictly according to the opinion?
- T: If there is an opinion, I stick to the opinion, but if there is no opinion ...
- CM1: If there is no opinion, you can't talk about adjustment but only about the individualisation of teaching. And, please, tell me more, it's so beautiful to work in such small groups, Certainly you have a student who is resistant. How do you motivate him to learn a language?
- T: [sigh]. Yes.
- CM1: You gave a lot of examples, but how about a resistant student?
- T: Err ... OK, OK, I have, good. There's a boy who is a bit stigmatized in class. This is grade 5. This is a boy who, in the opinion of the group, never prepares for classes. Even if he offers to do something, the students say: "No, ask somebody else, he won't do it". And there was a situation with Anne of Green Gables. He also entered the competition on the book and he dressed himself as one of the book characters. Although there was no strict work here related to the language, he entered the dressing up competition, did it, read a fragment from the book, in Polish though, but I still think we can talk about his success.
- CM1: OK, I thank you [shaking her head].

In this account Anna attempts to construct a strong teacher identity through the stories from her teaching practice. This is achieved through the use of linguistic

resources, i.e. reiterating affirmatives *OK, OK, yes, good, I have* as well as her agentic initiative of providing examples from her own teaching practice. The use of her teaching experience can be received as reinforcement of her teacher credibility and the ability to solve problems. Through the employment of her small stories about her assisting her students, she positions herself as a teacher who is more concerned about students and their development than legal regulations. Yet, the hierarchical structure of the examination and her subordinate position as opposed to the member of the jury asking her questions clearly restricts her agency. She seems confounded by the questions that are directed at her and, in a sense, expresses self-doubt if what she replies is what the examiner expects to hear. The repetition of *yes, OK* positions her agentively, while at the same time, she is constrained in the way she talks around the question without being able (or so it seems) to hit the point.

In contrast, the following example illustrates Anna's handling the questions asked by another member of the examination board.

CM2: In your narrative, you said that you organized courses for students' parents. I think such training is very difficult. Could you elaborate on this?

T: For a young teacher.

CM2: What was it about? Could you tell us?

T: There was a workshop. I did a training course and then I had to organize a demonstration workshop as part of my diploma. It was a very difficult experience. Not that I had to prepare the content well but to come, to present it in front of people who're older than me, richer in life experience. Difficult, but it bore fruit as far as my personal development goes. I transferred that experience to the world of the school. I organized the same workshop for the parents of my students. And it was a really important event. That trainer's course helped me with conducting meetings with parents, with the contact with parents in general.

CM2: So the workshop was not focused on English ...

T: No, no. It was focused on supporting students, increasing their self-confidence, establishing healthy relations, in fact, with yourself.

CM2: And what is your opinion about teaching English to young learners, grades 1-2, two 45-minute hours per week, in a class consisting of 20 students. Does it make sense?

T: In my opinion, it depends on who conducts the lessons and how. The child who has contact with the language, even only at school, err... is auscultated. The language is not something alien, the child has a different attitude, it is something that he knows and likes ... It's important to increase the number of hours, certainly, but the way the classes are run is the question. Definitely not sitting only at desks, working only with a coursebook because that would discourage children.

The change of the interviewer and the kind of the questions enable Anna to switch to adopting the professional stance again, known to the committee from the beginning of her narrative when she positioned herself in relation to her profession. Thanks to the questions referring to her achievements and being asked for her opinion, Anna can display her expertise and experience a change in her feeling of being positioned. Now she has a chance to talk about the challenge of going through a difficult training that developed her teacher identity, which enables her to position herself as an agent. Had the question not been asked, the audience would have hardly known that Anna is a trainer who is skilful at conducting classes for adults on the significance of interpersonal relations. Her professionalism is also shown in her saying *It depends on who conducts the lessons and how*, which, in a way, stands for a complex opinion on teaching English to young children. The extract illuminates the relationship between Anna and professional aspects of her identity in the sense that her experience of a training course has led to strengthening her agentive stance as a teacher (*I organized the same workshop for the parents of my students. That trainer's course helped me with conducting meetings with parents, with the contact with parents*).

The last question, asked by another member of the jury, again discloses Anna's teacher identity in the face of adversity, which is illustrated by the following discussion:

- CM3: I'm not satisfied as to the regulations. So now I'll ask you: What regulations have you encountered during the internship?
- T: OK... In order to prepare the plan of professional development, I had to get familiarized with Regulation on the Teacher's Professional Promotion.
- CM3: What regulation is it? Is it a law?
- T: A law?
- CM3: What?
- T: A law (hesitantly). Educational law.
- CM3: Charter.
- T: A law. The Teacher's Charter.
- CM3: Please, tell me about at least one part of the decision, what regulations are prescribed in the law?
- T: What regulations are there in the system of the Act?
- CM3: Regulating what issue?
- T: Employment.
- CM3: In the Act on the education system?
- T: Just a moment. No ... , I...I've read all of it. Even my husband laughed at me, just a moment. What's in it?

CM3: At least one issue. One requirement in totality. I'm aware that these documents are so important. The law is so important, multi-paragraph and multi-faceted. A multi-paragraph legal act. What does it regulate? You're talking very vaguely.

T: I am dumbfounded.

CM3: Let's leave it [a sigh of displeasure and disappointment]

The questions from the third interlocutor are again overwhelming for Anna. Clearly, she does not know what she is being asked about. In every way she can, she tries to maintain her credibility as a teacher who has read the regulations, which is confirmed by her half-jocular remark *I've read all of it. Even my husband laughed at me.* At the same time Anna alludes to the fact that the knowledge of legal aspects is not something that really matters in the language teacher's profession. She is somewhat surprised that she is asked about such issues, definitely displeased with herself and even experiencing a conflictual position of herself (*I'm dumbfounded*) because there is a question that she cannot answer although she positioned herself as a good teacher. Clearly, she imagined a different role for herself, strove to perform her identity as an effective teacher but now feels powerless in her interactions with CM3, and this non-powerful position into which she has been put by CM3 becomes dominant towards the end of the examination.

4. Discussion

In this study, I have used a combined theoretical framework for analysing the identity of one English teacher during a formal promotion examination as constructed through short stories within the positioning approach. The analysis therefore includes Davies and Harre's (1990) two acts of positioning: both reflexive (self-positioning) and interactive (being positioned). The analysis of the examination situation demonstrates the transformative force of the discourse in constructing teacher identity by bringing to the fore the confidence of the teacher who, at the beginning of the examination aspires to be treated as an equal professional. This is reflected in her agentic questioning of the examination norms (pouring herself some water, using a slightly informal style: *Hello, OK*).

When positioning herself in relation to the language teaching profession at the self-positioning level, Anna seems confident as she adopts an agentic stance towards her career progression. She teaches at different levels, in various institutions and voluntarily continues her own professional development through completing a trainer's course. The committee members can also learn how Anna positions herself in relation to her pupils. She points out that it is important to depart from the course book and design lessons that

would make a difference (a week on *Anne of Green Gables*). Her reference to TESOL dominant discourses (formative assessment and reflective practice) is evidence of her positioning herself as a well-informed teacher who is implementing the current English teaching trends.

In relation to the interlocutors, Anna selects among the board members. This is revealed when she addresses her words to those with whom she maintains an in-group identity: the school principal working at the same school as she does and one of the language experts who works with the same language as she does. Both members of the committee belong, in her opinion, to the same communities of practice of which she is a member. They are addressed in her narrative because she believes that these jury members uphold the same values (knowledge of school, knowledge of language) and, as a result, empathize with her. Anna definitely desires to be considered an effective, caring and responsible teacher and she self-positions herself as one. Belonging and recognition as a legitimate teacher who deserves to be promoted are her goals.

Unfortunately, her self-positioning as an effective teacher is constrained by some members of the commission. Anna is assigned a non-powerful position when she is questioned about legal acts which are considered by her interlocutors as more important than what happens in the language classroom. The feeling of failure (*I'm dumbfounded*) is clearly seen in her narrative. It seems that CM1 and CM3 assign Anna only a peripheral position, a position of someone who lacks knowledge of the regulations, which is something in which they specialize. Since this is a formal examination, they seem to operate within the examination discourses known to them, such as hierarchy, or differentiation (teacher vs. examiners). CM2, by contrast, gives Anna an opportunity to use the discourse that she expects and perceives as important, one that does not block the teacher from the resources vital to language teaching (i.e. the teacher's classroom practice, fulfilling language teacher roles). Therefore, from the extracts provided here, it can be inferred that being positioned determines the portrayal of the examinee's teacher identity. If the examinee is positioned as lower in the hierarchy than the examiner, the discourse obtained from the examined teacher can be defensive, at times chaotic and lacking in credibility. By contrast, if the examined teacher is positioned as a professional, then positive professional discourse is more likely to be portrayed.

As to the research questions of this study, it can be reiterated that the examination discourse brings a change in the teacher's self-confidence. In answering the first research question, it was found that Anna's teacher identity was self-positioned on the basis of her affiliation with other school teachers and language teachers, as well as with discourses important to her, which are those of a caring, creative and reflective teacher who is interested in professional

development (the self-positioning level). It can also be said that, despite her finally passing the examination with a positive result, the whole situation has left her disappointed with herself, as she cannot successfully answer the question, but also with members of the commission, as their expectations concerning legal issues exceed what she believes makes sense in everyday language teaching. Her teacher identity is definitely shaken (*I'm dumbfounded*) both with respect to the questions about legal regulations asked in the promotion examination by two out of the three jury members⁵ and by the asymmetrical power relations which are invoked in the process of asking these questions (shaking of the head with displeasure, or a sigh of disappointment).

Within the issue discussed here, it is important to reconsider what can be learnt from the examination situation, which is the focus of the second research question. From the present study it can be inferred that, irrespective of the content of the question, the committee members are not prepared to use examination situations as spaces of possibility that recognize an examinee as a legitimate colleague, or for treating examination rooms as 'safe houses' where a teacher can feel equal to the other members connected to the teaching profession who are present in the room, and share not only her experience and knowledge, but also her doubts and professional tensions. Although Anna desired to slightly question these asymmetrical power relations, the examiners showed they were the ones who grant the right for teachers to be positioned as 'correct'. This brings us to another important question: What do language teacher examiners (often administrators who lack knowledge about the specificity of language teaching) know about the knowledge of language teachers and How do they understand it? It can be argued that a lot of them find it legitimate to maintain stiff hierarchical power relations, believing that their position at the examination (as examiners) predestines them to know better.

5. Conclusion

This study contributes to the field in different ways. First, it contributes by stressing the role of self-positioning in research that refers to the narrative (story-based) understanding of identity in the context of a formal examination for teacher professional promotion. Second, it contributes by including an important focus on how a teacher being examined can be positioned by examination board members. Both aspects may be illuminating to those who are unaware of what a teacher examination is like and how examiner-centred the

⁵ The number of questions asked may indicate that this is the most important teacher knowledge.

whole process can be. In addition to this, the present study focuses on both reflexive positioning in narratives (self-positioning) as well as interactive positioning (positioning by others) in an important context in the field of teacher education practice: a formal teacher promotion examination. Finally, the findings bring up some important issues for examination committees, their way of performing their task and their understanding of the nature of this examination.

Further studies are called for to investigate positioning levels across other language teachers' work contexts for comparison. Such studies could investigate how teachers' different positioning – both reflexive and interactive – is employed, for example in the language classroom context. Studies like this can illuminate ways in which the combination of narrative and positioning perspectives can make the process of teacher identity (re)construction clearer.

My decision to focus on just one participant in this study can be seen as its limitation. Some critics may argue that this is not generalizable enough, as I studied only one teacher within one particular examination context and, in addition, drew on data from my hand-written notes, however thick and meticulous they are. However, I would like to point out that the goal of the study was not to generalize, but to better understand and obtain more insights about teacher assessment. Besides, if recording is disallowed, it is hardly possible to obtain ethnographic emic data of such a context of teachers' work. In this respect, this perceived limitation may also be considered as strength of this study. A second limitation of the study that was present and should be noted is the lack of Polish, the language in which the examination was conducted, in the examples provided in the analysis section. The addition of the data in Polish could have produced clearer understanding related to the subtleties and nuances of the words used. Unfortunately, space constraints prevented the presentation of the extracts in both languages: Polish (which was originally used) and English (in which this article is written). Despite its limitations, I hope that this study offers insights into possible ways of understanding identity (re)construction of in-service language teachers through reflexive and interactive positionings in one of their work contexts, that of teacher promotion examinations.

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Appendix
Coding categories

Self-positioning in relation to the examiners

Colleague

Language user

Competent teacher: knower of dominant discourse, reflective practitioner

Self-positioning in relation to students

Designer of interesting lessons

Language learning facilitator

Conflicting positional identities

Language teacher knowledge: legal competence vs. subject and teaching competence

Emotions: disappointment, anger, disorientation