



How do foreign language teachers maintain their proficiency? A grounded theory investigation



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ABSTRACT

Building on Markus and Nurius's (1986) possible selves theory to investigate language teachers' engagement in professional development, this case study examines how nine Italian school foreign language (FL) teachers in two types of high schools (college preparation and vocational schools) experienced and responded to changes in their FL proficiency. Interview data, analyzed with a grounded theory approach, showed that when dealing with professional development, the FL teachers had to decide whether to (1) engage in professional development activities, and (2) maintain their engagement with or without a supportive community. Their decisions and engagement were influenced by the strength of the dissonance between the perception of their actual and possible L2 selves. The findings have implications for designing in-service professional development courses that take into consideration teachers' needs in relation to their school environments as FL teachers navigate the life-long experience of learning and maintaining a foreign language.

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1. Introduction

Language learning is a life-long process and foreign language (FL) teachers are often considered good examples of successful committed advanced learners. Their language proficiency and its improvement over time is crucial for them to be effective FL teachers (Banno, 2003; Reves & Medgyes, 1994) as the language is both the means and the objective of their teaching. Moreover, language proficiency is important for contributing towards FL teachers' identity development because "their experiences as teachers are often situated on the same trajectory as their linguistic development" (Miller & Kubota, 2013, p. 246). As observed by Chambless (2012), there is a possible causal connection between teachers' FL proficiency and the teaching and learning that take place in the classroom. Much of what FL students learn hinges on and is impacted by the aspects of their teachers' proficiency, motivation, and identity.

While acknowledging the significance of teachers' *identities in practice* (Kanno & Stuart, 2011), that is how teachers' identities are shaped by their teaching practices, this paper is motivated by the crucial influence of teachers' proficiency (and motivation to develop it) on their teaching and their students' FL learning. Our interview-based study explores what nine in-service FL teachers in Italian high schools do and the obstacles they encounter in maintaining their proficiency. Based on recent works (e.g., Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014) that have highlighted the importance of vision and goals for language teachers to sustain their engagement in development activities, we chose to use *possible selves* theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and Kubanyiova's (2009) notion of the development of *possible language teacher selves* as a lens to analyze teachers'

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proficiency and motivation in our data. Following our review of earlier relevant research, we explain the rationale for a grounded theory approach, which guides our study, and present our findings. We conclude with implications for FL teachers' professional development and for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Foreign language teachers' proficiency

Earlier research (Bateman, 2008; Fraga-Cañadas, 2010; Yilmaz, 2011) has shown that teachers' self-perceived inadequate proficiency is reflected in more cautious instructional approaches, a decrease in self-efficacy and less use of the target language in class. In particular, in Fraga-Cañadas's (2010) study, Spanish non-native speaker teachers in American high schools experienced fossilization, frustration, and a decline in proficiency due to teaching low-level students for a long time, lack of direct contact with native speakers, and lack of time for practicing the FL outside the classroom. In Yilmaz's (2011) study, Turkish EFL teachers did not rate themselves equally proficient in the four skills resulting in higher self-efficacy in instructional strategies and lower sense of efficacy in engaging students in language-learning activities effectively. These results have important implications, as teachers who do not believe in their ability to promote learning "construct classroom environments that are likely to undermine students' judgments of their abilities and their cognitive developments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 241). Thus, as explained by Chambless (2012), FL teachers' proficiency can directly impact students' learning, as the amount of FL spoken in class, and the teaching approach adopted are a result of teachers' proficiency and deeply inform the whole students' learning process.

However, definitions of FL proficiency can vary greatly, ranging from Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam's (2009) native-like attainment to Pillier's (2002) use-oriented description as a temporary phenomenon specific to context, audience, and medium. The former argued that "native like ultimate attainment in adult learners is, in principle, nonexistent" (p. 499), as near-native speakers differed from native speakers when some L2 features were analyzed in greater detail. The latter supported a situated concept of proficiency which is more attainable. This could mean that while FL teachers should master the language they teach, their proficiency level can vary and be specific to their teaching context. Nevertheless, many FL teachers, such as those interviewed in the present study, set achieving native speaker status as their goal as advanced language learners.

2.2. Native and non-native speaker teachers

In her research on teachers' foreign language anxiety, Horwitz (1996) claimed that anxiety and inferiority complexes in FL teachers are caused by the pursuit of an idealized level of proficiency set by a hard-to-attain native-speaker model. In a similar vein, several studies (e.g., Bateman, 2008) have illustrated non-native speaker teachers' insecurity about their FL proficiency and their ability to conduct the class in the FL, which in turn have had negative consequences on their self-efficacy. However, as Medgyes (2001) argued, non-native speaker teachers' role should not be compared to native speaker teachers, because the former provide learner models while the latter provide language models.¹ Their respective strengths and weaknesses often balance each other out, but only when non-native speaker teachers have high overall language proficiency. Thus, as Medgyes added "the most important professional duty that [non-native language teachers] have to perform is to make linguistic improvements in their [target language]" (p. 440). The "professional duty" advocated by Medgyes is often left to FL teachers' own discretion and it can be overshadowed by contingent situations such as lack of time or collaborative professional support. Practicing and maintaining FL proficiency over the course of one's career also involves teachers' intrinsic motivation. Central to understanding such motivation is the dynamic interaction of internal and contextual processes that shape engagement in learning, which is discussed next.

2.3. Teachers' motivation for L2 development

Dörnyei (2009) maintained: "[l]anguage learning is a sustained and often tedious process with lots of temporary ups and downs, and I felt that the secret of successful learners was their possession of a superordinate vision that kept them on track" (p. 25). Building on Markus and Nurius's (1986) possible selves theory, Dörnyei's (2005) model of L2 Motivational Self-System (L2MSS) is based on the motivational power of the vision of future self-guides. The possible selves' promotion (ideal self) or prevention (ought-to self) impetus is triggered by self-regulatory mechanisms. As explained by Higgins's (1987) Self-discrepancy Theory, the tension between individual's actual self and their future selves can transform motivation into action.

While L2MSS has become a widely used framework to investigate learners' motivation to engage in FL learning in different cultural contexts (e.g., Islam, Lamb, & Chambers, 2013; Papi, 2010), only a few researchers (e.g., Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Hiver, 2013; Kubanyiova, 2009; Kumazava, 2013) have used it to investigate teachers' motivation to pursue professional development. One example is Kubanyiova's (2009) study on in-service EFL teachers in Slovakia, in which the perceived

¹ The assertion that native speaker teachers provide language models is contentious in light of recent work on translanguaging and identity (e.g., Creese & Blackledge, 2015), which has called into question what constitutes a language model. Further, other applied linguists such as Davies (2003) and Ortega (2014) have interrogated the native speaker myth.

discrepancy between teachers' actual self and their ideal, ought-to or feared selves failed to trigger teachers' engagement in reform activities. Such activities contradicted what teachers perceived they ought-to be and were not perceived as a means of achieving the desired condition. Relatedly, Hiver's (2013) study on Korean in-service EFL teachers showed that teachers driven by ideal teacher selves conceived professional development as positive enhancement, while teachers driven by feared teacher selves perceived it as reparatory in nature and accompanied by negative emotions. Hiver's study also illustrated that for FL teachers maintaining their FL proficiency overlaps with their engagement in professional development. These studies showed that teaching is an emotionally charged vocation involving self-concept and aspects of personal and professional identity, and it is fair to assert that teachers' motivation and commitment undoubtedly affect their learners. Students look for role models who are committed and believe in what they do. Thus, the positive impact of good teachers may be attributed to the strength of their commitment towards the subject matter, which gives students a similar willingness to pursue knowledge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

Given the impact of FL teachers' proficiency and motivation on the quality of FL education, Chambless (2012) called for more empirical studies which investigate "what happens to teachers' proficiency level post-graduation [and whether] in-service teachers tend to maintain their [...] oral proficiency" (p. 157). Such empirical research is needed to fill the gap in research between pre-service and novice language teacher education and what FL teachers encounter over the course of their teaching career. When professional development is not compulsory and is expected to be teacher-initiated, it is essential to understand how initiation mechanisms work and how they can be triggered in order to examine FL teachers' needs in different school environments.

Further, and in line with Ushioda and Dörnyei's (2012) call for more qualitative methods of inquiry to complement the quantitative paradigm "in an effort to address the dynamic and situated complexity of L2 motivation" (p. 402), our investigation of teachers' engagement in professional development sought to unpack the possible reasons for teachers' engagement in maintaining their proficiency, which in Italy, where this study is situated, is set at a minimum of C1 (proficient user) based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). By means of semi-structured interviews, the present study delves into foreign language teachers' perception of their progress in language proficiency, its perceived impact on their in-class practices, and the nature and form of their commitment to maintain it. Interview data were analyzed with a grounded theory approach to let issues and possible trajectories for meaningful in-service teachers' professional development practices emerge from the analysis.

3. Research questions

Our study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do foreign language teachers think their foreign language proficiency changes during the course of their teaching career?
2. How can foreign language teachers' perceived proficiency shape their teaching?

4. Method

4.1. Participants and teaching context

4.1.1. The context

As noted, this study is situated in the Italian high school system, which comprises three types of high schools: college preparation, technical, and vocational. They differ from each other in terms of final language learning goals and levels, types of students, and teaching approaches. The high school system allows students to study a limited range of foreign languages, which are unevenly distributed: 97.8% of students study English, 26.7% French, 7.5% Spanish, and 5.8% German (Eurydice and Policy Support, 2012). The Italian Ministry of Education has set the final proficiency level for college preparation schools as B2+/C1 (MIUR, 2005) on the CEFR, and B2 for technical and vocational schools (INDIRE, 2010). Students in college preparation schools are generally more academically inclined and tend to continue their studies after graduation. Learning one or more foreign languages, in particular English, is for them part of a well-rounded education. Students in technical schools receive in-depth instruction in one specific area (e.g., chemistry, mechanics, business) and, depending on their future goals, they might see learning a foreign language as peripheral to their education. Students in vocational schools are more likely to take practical subjects and receive training designed to prepare them for vocations such as becoming a plumber, mechanic, and electrician. They often have variable academic performances and might have experienced behavioral issues during their previous schooling, thereby making language learning a challenging endeavor for them. In sum, the three school environments present teachers with very different challenges and may require different teaching approaches.

4.1.2. The teachers

Participants were nine Italian FL high school teachers (eight female and one male) who volunteered by answering an online invitation initially sent to former colleagues of the first author. The invitation spread and snowballed, and, as a result,

Table 1
Participants' information.

Teacher	Years taught	Language taught	Current type of school
1. Suzy	30	English	College preparation school
2. Gloria	30	English	College preparation school
3. Betty	27	English	College preparation school
4. Lucy	13	Spanish	College preparation school
5. Christy	15	English	Vocational school and College prep.
6. John	26	English	Vocational school
7. Tania	13	English	Vocational school
8. Stephanie	12	English	Vocational school
9. Julie	6	French	Vocational school

the nine teacher participants came from different high schools in two towns in northern Italy. With this inevitable convenience sampling, it would be fair to assume that our participants were teachers interested in the topic of professional development.² To ensure participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout this paper. Among the nine teachers, five had worked in different types of schools, one (John) had only worked in vocational schools and three (Lucy, Betty and Gloria) had worked only in college preparation schools. At the time of the interviews, four teachers were working in vocational schools, four in a college preparation school, and one had classes in both types of schools. Table 1 summarizes the main information about the participants.

4.2. Material and procedures

The data for this study are comprised of nine interviews with the nine Italian FL high school teachers. The interviews, face to face (eight) and on Skype (one), took place in June 2013 and were recorded, transcribed, and translated from Italian into English. Participants' informed consent was obtained with a consent form given in person or sent by email. Even though our focus was on the teachers' trajectories, our data collection process, which constituted one interview with each teacher, was not longitudinal in nature. Although the nine teachers in this study were keen to talk about their proficiency and professional development experiences, the everyday situation of K-12 teachers who are often overworked and under-supported, made it hard to have further interviews after the end of the school year. Further, and in the spirit of conducting ethical research (De Costa, 2016) and guided by Holliday's (2015) exhortation to (1) only collect data which address the research questions, and (2) be cognizant of the time allocated to interviews, we elected to conduct only one interview.

4.3. Applying grounded theory

Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) is a systematic inductive approach to inquiry which is iterative, comparative, and interactive (Charmaz, 2011). The interactive essence of this method requires the researcher to move through comparative levels of analysis of the data to develop codes, construct abstract categories that fit the data, and offer a conceptual analysis of them (Charmaz, 2006). Within a constructivist framework in which realities are multiple and the researcher is part of what is researched, data are co-constructed through the interaction between the researcher and the participants. In this study, grounded theory is used to analyze semi-structured interviews. In conceptualizing the research interview not just as a tool, but as a social practice (Talmy, 2010), the discourse between the interviewer and the interviewee is situated and historically and socially co-constructed. In other words, the research interview is a site for investigation itself, where the "voice" of the interlocutors is situationally contingent, and both the "what" (the content) and the "how" (the linguistic and interactional resources used) collaboratively generate the data. This was certainly the case in our study given that the first author, who conducted the interview, was herself a former foreign language teacher in an Italian high school. Thus, from this perspective, not only the data but also their analyses were collaboratively produced (Charmaz, 2006; Talmy, 2010) and "generalizations remain partial, conditional, and situated" (Charmaz, 2011, p. 366). Crucially, such a perspective informed our understanding of teacher proficiency as mediated on a local level by teachers within school contexts.

The grounded theory approach has been adopted in recent research (e.g., Mercer, 2011; Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009; Watze, 2007) to investigate FL teachers' concerns and experiences. In his longitudinal study on how nine novice high school FL teachers in the U.S. enhanced their pedagogical knowledge in the first two years of teaching, Watze (2007) explained that instead of studying individual participants, grounded theory analytical procedures "facilitated consideration of the data as a single unit and helped to develop an explanatory theoretical framework across participants" (p. 68). By using a grounded theory approach, our aim is therefore to go beyond single cases, and to consider common (or diverging) emergent trajectories participants took within the broader context. With this intent, the FL teachers in this study articulated issues surrounding proficiency and challenges in maintaining their proficiency during interviews. A comparative and interactive analysis of our interview data (axial coding) enabled us to enhance our understanding of the process of teachers' engagement in maintaining

² As pointed out by one reviewer, grounded theory is characterized by theoretical sampling. However, the practical reality of our study and the difficulties encountered in securing teacher participants resulted in our decision to opt for convenience sampling.

their proficiency, and to build a proposed model of the phenomenon. Within this theory-building framework, and aligned with [Bryant \(2013\)](#), we conceptualize theory as an interpretation of an underlying structure in the data that does not claim to be a criterion of truth, but rather envisage the possibility of changes in practice. In this view, the proposed model aims to advance our understanding of the role of the school environment in FL teachers' engagement in development.

4.4. Data analysis

Building on [Strauss and Corbin \(1998\)](#), we first analyzed the data with an open coding system followed by an axial coding system. Through recursive readings, we coded the interview data by circling and highlighting the participants' words and phrases related to recurrent topics that emerged. Subsequently, we identified the central phenomenon (the axis) and the different properties and dimensions around it, by making links between the codes to clarify the relations with the phenomenon (its causes and consequences, its context, and the strategies of those who are involved). The phenomenon is FL teachers' change in proficiency over time, and the related categories are challenges encountered in maintaining proficiency, activities to maintain proficiency, and the relationship between FL proficiency and FL teaching.

Within each category different patterns emerged: In particular, two teachers, Lucy and John, often had distant points of view about the challenges and changes they experienced in their proficiency due to their respective pedagogical contexts (the dimensions around the phenomenon). For example, while Lucy found professional development activities of teachers' organizations very useful, John found them useless for his own needs and aims. On the other hand, the other teachers, especially Tania, Stephanie, Christy, and Julie, had more nuanced positions regarding the differences between the two types of schools. This could be due to the fact that the latter were vocational-school teachers with experience in teaching at other types of schools, while Lucy and John had only taught in one type of school (college preparation school and vocational school, respectively). Lucy and John's long experience in a single school environment made their views representative of the two ends of the continuum of Italian high-school education system. In the interest of space, while the voices of all nine teachers are intertwined to construct a model of teacher engagement in L2 development, the longer quotations (excerpts) chosen for this study are taken mainly from Lucy's and John's interviews to give a clearer sense of how teachers' school environments can affect their FL proficiency and their engagement in activities to maintain it.

5. Findings

In this section, we first report the teachers' perceptions of how their FL proficiency changed and was challenged in their respective teaching contexts (research question 1). Next, we discuss how the teachers' school environment might have influenced their commitment to maintaining their proficiency, a topic which emerged from the data and evolved as a sub-question. In particular, the teacher participants talked about what they perceived to be useful activities to develop proficiency during their career according to the needs of their school environments. Finally, we report the teachers' reflections on the relationship between FL proficiency and FL teaching (research question 2).

5.1. Changes in FL teachers' proficiency in different school environments

Most of the interviewees set high proficiency standards for themselves and stated that their goal as learners was to become like a native speaker. Their identification of native-likeness as a goal for their ideal self ([Dörnyei, 2005](#); [Kubanyiova, 2009](#)) further suggested that the teacher participants were driven by life-long learning and interested in engaging in activities to maintain proficiency. All nine teachers acknowledged that their FL proficiency was good (or very good) at graduation, but once they started teaching, they nevertheless needed to develop a deeper understanding of the mechanical, pragmatic, and semantic aspects of the language together with other strategic skills related to their types of school and students. For example, Christy admitted that she “knew [she was] saying it right, but [she] couldn't explain the rule” and she “had to study the grammar [she] taught.” Lucy also said that she had to reflect on associations of words, synonyms and antonyms. She did not think about language in that way before, but she realized that “these things help learners to organize their information.” Moreover, coming from a literature background, they all had a rich vocabulary, but it fell short of the lexicon for the specific purposes they were supposed to teach in the technical and vocational schools. For example, Stephanie reported “learning words like ‘invoice’, ‘promissory notes’ or other specific business terms by teaching them.”

The two excerpts below show how teaching in different school settings affected teachers' proficiency in somewhat opposite directions. In Excerpt 1 Lucy, who after graduation spent years working abroad, reports how teaching in a college preparation school challenged her already high proficiency in Spanish. In contrast, Excerpt 2 shows how John, who never lived abroad and started teaching upon graduation, experienced a different type of challenge in teaching English for specific purposes in vocational schools.

Excerpt 1: Lucy

Then [...] I started teaching, I had to look at the language from the perspective of a teacher. [...] Learning and using the language is one thing, teaching it is another. I had to learn a lot of things... how to explain the rules, reflect on associations... I had to enrich my vocabulary with all the synonyms and opposites, these were things that I didn't need in my previous jobs. These things help learners to organize their information. Teaching has a different goal, so it needs different competences that you can develop with the experience and requirements of teaching.

Excerpt 2: John

I have no time for certain aspects of the language. Language is adapted to the usage ... to what I need it for. In class, I use an impoverished language, because what is most important is that I convey the content, and so I am less worried about grammar. Do you know CLLL [*content and language integrated learning*]? I cover business content through the language, and they understand me. I teach them about business principles through English so that students expand their language competencies while learning job-specific information. For example, we're talking about franchising, promissory notes, or other specific business contracts. They don't know about them in Italian either, and so they have to grasp these concepts in English. I can see that they are learning something, even though I don't talk specifically about grammar.

Lucy's and John's students had opposite needs and, as a consequence, teaching may have led to opposite changes in the two teachers' proficiency. For Lucy, teaching meant enriching her vocabulary in order to help her college-bound students learn synonyms and acquire the necessary metalinguistic knowledge to be able to explain the rules. On the other hand, teaching meant simplifying John's lexicon to make sure he used the "right words at the right level," to enable comprehension of new concepts and to avoid stirring his vocational students' frustration. For John (and some of the other teachers in vocational schools) the proficiency change was a trade-off, which meant sacrificing the development of vocabulary and grammar for comprehension and content. John and the teachers in vocational schools nevertheless perceived the change as a form of global growth, in which the neglected linguistic aspects were compensated by newly learned pedagogical skills necessary for their particular environment. This is clear when John commented: "If I lost some words, the flip side is that I can better manage the class [...] knowing the language is not enough to be a good teacher." Christy's experience was along a similar line when she said: "Teaching didn't give me a better FL competence, but from a pedagogical point of view I improved." The positive feeling of an on-going compensation process corroborates findings in previous research (e.g., [Berry, 1990](#); [Fraga-Cañadas, 2010](#)) which showed that teachers valued sound pedagogical practices as sine qua non for teaching and a way to compensate for a lack of linguistic knowledge.

Finally, all interviewees perceived proficiency changes as necessary and inevitable. As the language they teach changes, they have to keep up with it. This is clearly stated by Lucy when she said: "If I spoke as I used to when I graduated 20 years ago, I would sound like a book of the 18th century." Tania also had a similar concern and said: "I keep up with the changes in the language by watching recent movies." Moreover, as Lucy stated, "there is a change because there is always something new to learn [...] teaching helps learning [...] as we keep on growing, we keep on changing." Such a perspective is in keeping with linguistic variation and change as observed by sociolinguists (e.g., [Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert, & Leap, 2009](#)).

The analysis showed that changes in teachers' proficiency can take different trajectories (e.g., lexical enrichment, simplification, specialization) shaped by the needs that emerged in the different school environments, which influenced teachers' use of vocabulary, grammar, and pedagogies. Nevertheless, changes are overall perceived as growth and improvement as they helped to increase teachers' self-efficacy. This is in line with previous findings ([Bandura, 1997](#); [Yilmaz, 2011](#)) which demonstrated the relevance of teachers' language proficiency in relation to their perceived self-efficacy.

5.2. Activities to maintain proficiency: different needs in different school environments

The interviewees' concern about maintaining and developing their proficiency can be summarized by Tania's comment: "If you don't do anything, you'll lose it." The teachers listed several types of activities available to develop their FL proficiency. These activities included using the Internet, watching TV and movies in the FL, newsletters by teachers' organizations, books, summer and school trips abroad, and a nationwide FL teachers' organization, Language and New Didactics (LEND), which organized professional development activities for the different languages. When discussing the activities, however, the divide between the teachers in college preparation schools and the ones in vocational schools became increasingly evident. In Excerpt 3 Lucy paints an enthusiastic picture of a cohesive network of Spanish teachers who collaborate and share knowledge and meaningful experiences. In contrast, Excerpt 4 shows John's disappointment about the activities offered by the English section of the professional-development group LEND, and about his unsuccessful attempts over the years to set up meaningful professional development activities in his school.

Excerpt 3: Lucy

Ah, and then we go to the LEND meetings. Our coordinator is the national president for Spanish. The Spanish group is very good and cohesive. We're friends. There are teachers from different schools and we like to meet up every so often. Some of them are writing their own textbooks or sometimes they bring us new textbooks so we can have a look at them. We share a lot of information. We want to be up to date, to keep up with the language and culture. There is a common constructive attitude. I must say we've been lucky, it all comes down to people in the end.

Excerpt 4: John

I used to read more in the past than now [...] but I drifted away from literature because ... I didn't think it was useful. [At LEND] they are self-referential, a microcosm of literature. The distance is too big. Some schools are completely different worlds. But even where I am [in a vocational school], if you value some aspects you can do something positive. How can you even think about teaching literature in a vocational school? [...] So ... more recently ... for some years my colleagues and I, have invited the Scottish husband of one of the teachers, who teaches at university to come in the afternoons and practice conversations in English. I thought it was useful. I have never lived abroad, so I liked it. It went on for some time, but some colleagues never came because they didn't want to embarrass themselves. [...] For next year ... I don't know. The Internet is my main source of self-professional development. [...] Of course I'm missing the spoken part ... and listening... I'm missing communicating directly.

While Lucy seemed to have a rich network of relationships that provided plenty of opportunities for professional and language development, John's proactive attitude was not aligned with his colleagues' interests, and he was left alone to deal with what he called "aggiornamento autonomo" (self-professional development). The excerpts show two fundamental factors influencing teachers' engagement in professional-development activities: the impact of the teaching contexts and the role played by a supportive and collaborative environment. Although all interviewees were concerned about maintaining and developing their proficiency, their engagement in professional development was mainly driven and shaped by their teaching needs.

Only the teachers in college preparation schools seemed to consider the activities offered by LEND as a valuable resource, as they addressed their teaching needs. For example, Betty, who had always taught in a college preparation school, said: "I went to a lot of courses organized by LEND ... it was very useful because we shared our experiences, spoke in English, even though now there were just few of us." On the contrary, Stephanie (a vocational-school teacher) commented: "I know about them [LEND] but I don't have first-hand experience about it. I think it is more useful to speak among colleagues of the same school and share methods and content." In Excerpt 4 John underlined that the organization's strong inclination toward college-preparation-school teachers' needs and interests left no room for the needs of teachers from different school environments. He felt abandoned by the teachers' organization and by his own colleagues, who for different reasons did not want to participate in the activities he organized in his school. John described one of his colleagues' attitude: "He said he didn't want to waste his time with professional development. He said that the level [of his students] was so low that he didn't even need a degree for the English he was teaching [...]. The context is so demotivating." These data illustrate how the dissonance between the context and teachers' future L2 selves (ideal, ought-to, and feared) can trigger opposite reactions (Hiver, 2013; Kubanyiova, 2009). On the one hand, context dissonance can trigger development when (1) teachers feel there is a gap that needs to be bridged (i.e., a discrepancy between actual and possible selves, and/or dissonance between actual self and unfavorable context), and (2) their engagement in development matches their intrinsic aspirations. On the other hand, context dissonance can hinder development when there is no tension between actual and possible selves, and/or when the ought-to selves (their perceived external obligations and expectations) and ideal selves (identity goals and aspirations) contradict one another.

In the case of our nine teachers, development seems like a way to reconcile the actual selves with their ambitious goal to become "like native speakers", as well as a way to meet professional expectations. The latter is shown by Stephanie's comment: "[I have no time] I just do what is ethically correct." Tania also expressed an ethical concern about teachers' proficiency: "If teachers' proficiency is high, school will form better students and everybody will benefit from it." Both Stephanie's and Tania's concern with observing ethical teaching practices is consistent with those of the teachers, who were committed to social justice, described in Hafernik, Messerschmitt, and Vandrick (2002). Nevertheless, the professional development activities offered by LEND were not perceived by John and other vocational-school teachers as the way to bridge the gap between the actual and ideal L2 selves, and they chose to pursue alternative development activities which matched their teaching needs. In sum, the activities undertaken by the teachers to maintain their proficiency were contingent on the social and material resources available to them.

5.3. Relationship between teachers' FL proficiency and FL teaching

All teachers acknowledged that FL proficiency was a precondition for their job. This common ground is summarized by Lucy's statement: "If I don't know the language what am I doing there? I mean ... it is obvious." As noted by Stephanie, her FL proficiency is "a matter of personal pride", "gives [her] confidence and authority", and "is a warranty for the students." Nevertheless, some teachers acknowledged having to come to terms with their insecurities about their FL proficiency. Suzy, for example, at a college preparation school, admitted that in class she did not speak in the FL the whole time. Experience helped her to overcome her fear of making mistakes and also to "adopt methodologies that enabled [her] not to speak for the whole hour ... as one goes with what one feels stronger with." Stephanie encountered a similar experience and explained that at first she did not speak English in class because of her "immaturity" and inexperience, as she thought it was not natural to speak to students in the target language when they knew she was Italian. She reported "getting there little by little" by gaining authority and overcoming her sense of being an impostor. She also added that speaking well in the target language in the classroom served as a warning for the students that they could not get away with being lazy and speaking their L1 in class.

Excerpts 5 and 6 demonstrate how both Lucy and John, in their respective school contexts, conceived FL use in class as the foundation of their teaching practices and a crucial point for their students' learning process.

Excerpt 5: Lucy

For what I need to do, my proficiency level is ... I have an excellent proficiency. It is fundamental for the students because they need a role model. They also learn a little by imitating a model, not only by studying. And of course if they are continuously exposed to good models they learn more, without even realizing it. [...]

Excerpt 6: John

I put up skits, this makes you use simple words [...] the ones they know. You repeat them [the words they know] and you enhance their ability to communicate. [...] The native speaker tends to teach sentences that you're not able to generate over and over again. This way of teaching is limited. The non-native speaker suggests a mechanism of building and deconstructing the language, and this has more value. I put the student and his/her limits at the center. In order to do this, you have to have been a student yourself.

Both excerpts suggest that in the classroom FL teachers are role models for their students who can learn language and strategies from life-long learners. To be learner models (Medgyes, 2001), teachers first need to be confident about their proficiency and then to overcome the fear that the students do not understand everything or do not want to speak the foreign language with a non-native speaker. John underscored that the non-native speaker teacher can understand his/her students' needs and frustrations better and can provide them with more accessible language samples and strategies to use them. This is in line with Medgyes's (1994) observation that non-native speaker teachers, through self-awareness, develop empathy that enables them to adapt their output to the learners' level and needs. Similarly, Julie reported that students negatively commented on a very proficient teacher that could not connect to their needs by saying "since she is so good, she should have stayed at university." For learners, their teachers' perfect command of the FL is therefore not the main and only important characteristic (Cheung, 2007).

In keeping with Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam's (2009) observation that "native like ultimate attainment in adult learners is, in principle, nonexistent" (p. 499) discussed earlier, the teachers in this study admitted coming to terms with the unattainable native-speaker model as clarified by Betty's comment: "I don't feel inferior if I don't speak perfect English." Betty's disclosure is consistent with Piller's (2002) situated concept of proficiency which is more attainable. Further, the teachers also said that their perceived good proficiency directly affected their confidence in teaching and therefore their perceived professional self-efficacy. The interviewees disclosed that their efforts to improve their proficiency were twofold: they wanted to improve for themselves (to feel confident in class) and for their students' sake. In short, the teachers' ideal and ought-to selves both seem to exert the necessary emotional tension with teachers' actual selves, which in turn leads to self-initiated development.

6. Discussion

In this qualitative study, we focused on perceived changes in FL proficiency among nine FL teachers in two types of high schools (college preparation and vocational) in the Italian context. This focus is consistent with assumptions of grounded methods used to generate a theory that "evolves from the study of a phenomenon situated in one particular situational context" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 174). Our interview data afforded a crucial glimpse into how a small number of in-service high-school FL teachers maintained their FL proficiency.

In relation to our research questions that investigated teachers' experiences of and responses to self-perceived changes in proficiency in different school environments, we developed a model to advance our understanding of the underlying mechanisms of teachers' engagement in maintaining their proficiency. Our analysis of the data showed that teaching involves applying a different type of language knowledge and using the language according to the type of school teachers are at. This means that changes in proficiency are inherently part of teaching a language and are crucially determined by the teaching needs. These findings on the impact of different school environments on teachers' language development emerged from our analysis and were not an *a priori* category for analysis. Further, while some teachers (e.g., Lucy, Betty, and Tania) found groups and courses that matched their needs and allowed them to engage in development within a community, others (e.g., John, Julie, and Stephanie) did not find such a match and engaged in self-development activities. In both cases, however, teachers who engaged in any form of professional development activities felt their proficiency had improved. Significantly, our findings afford us a better understanding of FL teacher initiated mechanisms and how these mechanisms are triggered in different environments. Equally important are the insights on how these teachers came to terms with their FL insecurity (e.g., Suzy and Stephanie) and how they strategically found ways to serve as role models for their students (e.g., John and Lucy).

Based on the possible development trajectories teachers experienced, it is evident that regardless of teachers' initial proficiency, FL teaching inherently changes teachers' knowledge of and about the FL. The different school environments inform the changes, and this can lead to a plateauing of (or decrease in) proficiency or engagement in development, according to the emotional strength of the dissonance between teachers' actual and possible future selves. In other words, if teachers perceive the context as a challenge and also perceive their actual L2 self to be inadequate to take on this challenge, this discrepancy may trigger a search for activities to realize their possible L2 self (ideal or ought-to). This was illustrated with John's resourcefulness in inviting a colleague's Scottish husband to class (Excerpt 4). The same context, though, can affect teachers' choice to pursue development in opposite ways. This was the case with John's colleagues, who did not view the vocational school context as posing an adequate challenge to activating an emotional discrepancy between their actual teacher's self and what they could become.

Any change in proficiency can be perceived as a holistic form of growth when the development matches teachers' possible selves in terms of meeting their needs or the needs of their school environments. Teachers look for and engage

in FL development activities informed by the needs of their school. Once teachers decide to engage in professional development, the next important step entails creating a collaborative and supportive community. This finding was instantiated in the discussion of LEND meetings (Excerpt 3), which showed that teachers' development groups and courses are not just opportunities to access resources; rather, they also provide opportunities to share these resources in a constructive environment. However, the same resources (LEND meetings) were not equally helpful; while such meetings were valued by college preparation school teachers like Lucy and Betty, they lacked value for vocational school teachers like Stephanie and John. Although professional development can still be pursued individually in the absence of a collaborative community, if the primal drive is to realize one's ideal self (e.g., John), the data also suggest that teachers can benefit from collaborative communities which are created in accordance with the type of school teachers work in.

7. Conclusion

The findings of our study have implications for designing in-service professional development courses through a bottom-up approach which brought together three key constructs – FL proficiency, non-nativeness and motivation – through a possible language teacher self's lens. Such an approach addresses two key decision-making moments teachers often face: (1) deciding to engage in professional development activities; and (2) maintaining their engagement in professional development activities with or without a supportive community. As our study has shown, activated and aligned possible self-guides (ideal, ought-to and feared self) help foster teacher engagement. In order for motivation to maintain proficiency to be transformed into action, both contextual and individual factors (e.g., possible selves) need to interact in a mutually reinforcing manner.³

In light of these findings and the growing emphasis on teacher reflexivity (e.g., Edge, 2011), pre- and in-service development should work on raising teachers' awareness about their possible selves (personal goals, perceived obligations and responsibilities, and feared consequences) and on balancing them. Some researchers (e.g., Hock, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2006; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006) have designed activities for language learners with the aim of activating and sustaining their vision of a plausible ideal L2 self. Activities that raise learners' awareness of their abilities and skills have been used to create visions of their ideal self (e.g., a possible self tree with branches and other elements representing both desires and fears). Other activities such as guided imagery have been used to strengthen learners' vision. Such activities have been adapted and applied to encourage pre- and in-service FL teachers to activate plausible and sustainable L2 selves where goals and action plans are possible and desirable (see Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). At the same time however, these plans and goals need to be realistic in relation to their language progress within professional development programs. Relatedly, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) have argued that “self-perceptions are originally socially grounded [and]... emerge in a continuous interaction with the social environment” (p. 352), thereby underscoring the importance of investigating the school context and examining how the internalization of external influences is harmonized with the ideal self. Put simply, context matters and our data clearly demonstrated that the type of school a teacher is in ultimately determines his/her access to both social and material resources. In that respect, future work that adopts Markus and Nurius's (1986) *possible selves* theory needs to take into consideration structural inequalities encountered by teachers and the sociopolitical dimensions of teacher professional development (Edge, 2011). Additionally, a future application of *possible selves* theory to research on teachers ought to better account for emotional tensions such as a lack of professional self-confidence (Freeman, Katz, Burns, Johnson, & Nunan, 2015), the broader emotional turn in research on language teachers (e.g., Benesch, 2012; Kramsch, 2009), and the translanguaging practices that take place in real FL classrooms (Creese & Blackledge, 2015).

As showed by John's Excerpt, what was missing for some teachers in this study was a sense of community and a supportive network that could accompany them in their life-long journey to maintaining the proficiency. Our findings also suggest a need to take into account Horwitz's (1996) call for a supportive and nonjudgmental network of colleagues to alleviate teachers' feelings of FL anxiety. Finally, although some similarities exist in high school contexts across countries, this qualitative study was situated in an Italian context. Data from FL teachers from other countries would enable future researchers to paint a better picture of how FL teachers navigate the life-long experience of learning and maintaining a foreign language. The possibilities are exciting and immense.

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³ Since this research project ended, the teachers' organization, LEND, in the area where the participants work, has increased the variety of the activities offered for foreign language teachers' professional development, and has recently included specific sessions for teachers' language development.

Appendix

Questions for the semi-structured interview

1. What constitutes foreign language proficiency for you?
2. What is your experience as a learner of the target language? (in terms of years, institutions, outside classroom activities, motivations etc.)
3. What were your goals as a learner?
4. What is your experience as a teacher of the target language?
5. What are your goals as a foreign language teacher?
6. How important is it for you to achieve target language proficiency? And for your job? For your institution? And for your students?
7. How much effort are you willing to put into pursuing the maintenance of your language proficiency?
8. What activities do you think are useful/available to maintain your proficiency?
9. Do you think your proficiency is affected by teaching? If yes, how?
10. Do you think teaching affects/ed your proficiency? If yes, how?
11. In your opinion, what are the main challenges in teaching a foreign language?

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