

## “Great Expectations”: Understanding Hope Through EFL Teachers’ Narratives<sup>1</sup>

*Andréa Machado de Almeida Mattos*  
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

For yesterday is but a dream  
And tomorrow is only a vision;  
And today well-lived, makes  
Yesterday a dream of happiness  
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.  
Kalidasa

The Brazilian socio-economical situation does not seem to offer many promising options for undergraduate students who wish to pursue the EFL<sup>2</sup> teaching career. Given the dark picture of the teaching profession in Brazil, it would come at no surprise that young people starting their undergraduate studies would not choose teaching as their first choice of a promising profession. However, this seems not to be the case. Even in face of such an obscure situation they see ahead of them, in terms of their profession, as it will be discussed in this paper, the pre-service teachers who participated in this study seem to have ‘great expectations.’<sup>3</sup> Through narrative inquiry (see Clandinin and Connelly), this paper explores the stories of hope which

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented at the I ABRAPUI International Conference, as part of the symposium “Believing that it’s possible: the power of student and teacher narratives of hope”, organized by Larsen, D., Li, Y. & Mattos, A.

<sup>2</sup> English as a Foreign Language.

<sup>3</sup> The title of this paper is, of course, a reference to the classic work by Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*.

have supported teachers and teachers-to-be in their choice of becoming EFL teachers. Inspired by research conducted at the Hope Foundation, a research centre affiliated with the University of Alberta, Canada, and a registered non-profit organization dedicated to the study and enhancement of hope, this paper seeks to show the power of stories of hope in the life of a group of undergraduate EFL teachers, who participated in a course on language teacher education, in order to understand how participants find hope in the profession they have chosen.

## 1. Researching hope

According to Turner, some studies on hope date back to the 1960s: for example, those by Crumbaugh and Maholic, Stotland, and Lynch (Turner 509). Nowadays, there are studies on hope being conducted in several countries worldwide. Moreover, there are several studies on hope in such distinct areas as Psychology, Philosophy, Medical Care, and Nursing, but also in Sociology and Education. It's easy to see that interest in the study of hope has increased all over the world. In Brazil, however, studies on hope are scarce, if not completely absent.

Hope has become an important topic for research because we live in very dark times, as some authors have pointed out (West; Giroux). Throughout the world, societies of all kinds are facing war, terrorism, inequalities, starvation, disease, energy crisis, environmental disasters, and so many other threats to life and peace. In Brazil, we are only too familiar with the so-called "urban wars," especially in Rio and São Paulo, but also in other cities throughout the country. The teaching profession, specifically, has been facing permanent threats. Teachers in general, and public school teachers in particular, including language teachers, receive very low salaries, work long hours, endure poor working conditions, and are forced to tolerate disrespect from both their students and the society as a whole. For these reasons, teachers usually have low self-esteem and a growing number of them tend to be demotivated towards the tasks involved in teaching. These problems generally form a picture of the profession which is not very encouraging for those who are preparing to become teachers.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Gimenez (2005).

In face of this hostile picture, we need to look for sources of enlightenment. The challenge that is posed not only to educational researchers and theoreticians, but also to teacher educators in general and language teacher educators in particular, is to find ways to motivate the teachers and teachers-to-be to go on pursuing their professional ideals. We *need* hope.

## 2. Defining hope

Generally speaking, hope has been described as the ability to envision a future in which one wishes to participate (Larsen; Li and Mattos). Research overwhelmingly indicates that hope is a vital component of learning and successful change (Cheavens; Michael and Snyder). The energy and action that accompany hope help to make better futures possible both individually and collectively. Turner states that "hope has been studied rather extensively from philosophical, theological, psychological and sociological perspectives" (509). Some of these studies have used Discourse Analysis as a methodological tool (Elliott and Olver) and, in the area of language teaching and learning, Richards and Lockhart have mentioned the role of hope and expectations as part of the learner's belief system.

According to Dufault and Martocchio, hope is "a *multidimensional* dynamic life force characterized by a *confident* yet *uncertain* expectation of achieving a future *good* which, to the hoping person, is *realistically* possible and *personally significant*"<sup>5</sup> (379). Although there are several other ways in which hope has been described and conceptualized, many of these conceptualizations include a notion of hope as "an expectation that what is desired is also possible" (Turner 509). Among the main characteristics of hope present in the literature, hope is commonly described as futuristic, motivating, self-sustaining, pervasive and necessary to human life.

Wang affirms that hope is "a common human experience" (248), that is, it is universally lived. However, it is uniquely lived or experienced by each person. This means that, although it is possible to say that all humans have experienced hope in some way, this experience is always perceived and

---

<sup>5</sup> Italics in the original.

understood from a uniquely individual perspective. Many other researchers of hope in the areas of nursing and medical care have also shown that it is positively linked to health: hope promotes healing, facilitates coping processes and enhances the general quality of life.

According to Nekolaichuk, Jevne and Maguire, hope is action-oriented and may be linked to other positive indicators, such as self-esteem. The authors highlight the “qualitative experience of hope” (602), and agree with Wang in calling attention to the unique, dynamic nature of hope as a personal experience.

Turner describes hope as having several possible meanings to each individual. Her study aimed at understanding the meaning and essence of hope for the participants and was conducted through interviews which were dominated by the participants’ stories of hope. Two of the described meanings were especially important for the study reported in this paper: hope as “a driving force,” which represented the participants’ goals and dreams that formed the basis for hoping; and hope as “connecting and being connected,” which referred to the participants’ understanding of humans as social beings and a necessity to establish a connection with others.

As described in the following sections, a small-scale study was designed with the broad aim of eliciting stories and reflections on hope, in order to better understand the concept of hope as possibly experienced by teachers and student-teachers in Brazil. Let us listen to these stories.

### 3. Understanding hope

As mentioned above, this study was particularly inspired by the work of Turner. The context of the study was a 4-month course on EFL teacher education I was offering for the English major at the College of Letters, Federal University of Minas Gerais. The participants were the 18 undergraduate students enrolled in the course who explicitly consented to participate in the study.<sup>6</sup> Most of the participants were student-teachers with no experience in teaching, but some were already experienced teachers

---

<sup>6</sup> In this paper, participants’ identities will be preserved by concealing their names. Only their initials will be mentioned.

of English at local schools and language institutes. During the course, the students were assigned readings on themes related to teacher education and held seminars and discussions on the proposed texts, as well as on related topics proposed by the students themselves. The objective of the readings, seminars and discussions was to foster reflection and raise awareness of important themes related to the teaching profession as a whole, but especially relevant to teaching professionals in Brazil.

At the end of the course, students were assigned a final reflective activity. This activity contained reflective questions related to the course themes, but also three questions which were devised to collect the data for this study. These questions were based on the work of Miller and Larsen and were formulated to elicit participants' narratives (see Clandinin and Connelly) of hope as individually experienced and perceived by each of them. The questions were also formulated with the further objective of eliciting explicit hope-related language and ideas. The questions were the following:

1. What stories from your life experience give you hope for being a teacher? What experiences at the university help you have hope for being a teacher? What experiences support your hopes for teaching? What experiences threaten your hope?
2. Thinking about the topics that were discussed during the semester, what do you hope that being a teacher will mean to you and to your (future) students?
3. In face of all the problems that our country is going through nowadays, and also thinking about the problems specifically related to the teaching profession, how do you hope to contribute to your profession?

The participants in the study were not required to answer all the reflective questions. On the contrary, they were allowed to choose which questions they wanted to answer, but they were supposed to answer at least three of them. Many of the students in the course chose to answer the questions which were more related to the course content. Some of them, however, were willing to reflect on hope and were able to write rich accounts of their hope experiences. After collecting their final reflective activity and

upon reading their texts, I realized that what I had was a handful of stories which help us understand the meaning of hope for these teachers and teachers-to-be, and how they find hope for teaching. The stories that follow in the next section are only a small selection of the richness and hopefulness found in their accounts.

#### 4. Storying hope

In their answers to the reflective questions listed above, the participants shared with me their stories of hope. These stories generally referred to participants' life or university experiences that gave them hope for being a teacher. Some of the participants' stories yielded similar findings as the study by Turner, in that the meanings of hope underlying participants' stories were *hope as a driving force* and *hope as connecting and being connected to people*. Sometimes stories of hope come intermingled with stories of hopelessness, as Miller and Larsen have pointed out. The stories in this study are not different: some of the stories also referred to participants' life or university experiences that represented threats to their hopes. However, participants also talked about how they would turn these threats into more hope for their envisioned futures. Below, I will present some excerpts<sup>7</sup> from the stories these students so generously have offered me.

#### 5. Hope stories

One of the participants in the study, for instance, says she has had many experiences that support her hopes for being a teacher. The example she cites is full of emotion and passion. The excerpt below is only a small portion of this experienced teacher's story of hope and enthusiasm for her profession:

---

<sup>7</sup> The excerpts cited in this paper were only very slightly modified in order to avoid possible misunderstandings on the part of the reader. The symbol [ ] represents comments or words added by the researcher to clarify ambiguous sentences or phrases. The symbol (...) indicates that irrelevant words or phrases were omitted. All the excerpts were originally written in English.

In my life as an English teacher I have had countless experiences that have given me hope for being a teacher. When you teach beginners that do not know the *verb to be* and at the end of the first class you can see the glow in their eyes because they can say "*My name is ...*" or "*My teacher is ...*", there is not a better sensation, and that sensation of accomplishment comes every time you see a student leave your class knowing more about the language than he did when the class began. (M.V.)

As intended by the formulation of the reflective questions, this excerpt shows how hope is explicitly approached in this participant's story. However, some of the stories narrated by other participants tend to approach hope in a more implicit way, as it is the case in the following example from a less experienced student-teacher:

I had never thought of teaching until I started studying English and later, [I was] invited to become a tutor at the language institute [where] I studied. This opportunity made me see that teaching was a great area in which you share experiences and deal with human beings in the most different ways. You teach, but you also learn a lot. (R.P.)

Although this participant does not mention the word hope or any other related concept, it is possible to perceive through her story that the experience she recounts is an example of something that has given her hope for becoming a teacher.

## **6. Hope as connecting and being connected**

Many of the stories told by the participants share a common meaning with the stories told by the participants in Turner's study. The examples below show excerpts from some of these stories, in which participants refer to this sensation of connecting and being connected to other people, in this case, their own EFL students. Moreover, they all say that what supports their hopes for teaching is exactly this connection with their students.

I really enjoy being a teacher and I love the relationship I have with my students. They certainly contribute a lot in giving me hopes to continue with this job. (A.M.)

What gives me hope to go on teaching is the relationship I have with my students, their concern for me, to see them learning and to see that they are satisfied with their learning process. (L.I.)

What supports my hopes for teaching is knowing that I can help someone to learn. (D.A.)

## 7. Hope as a driving force

A second meaning found for hope in the participants' stories was *hope as a driving force*. This finding is also coherent with the findings in Turner.

(...) teachers must believe that we can do something for improving the teaching profession in our country. (D.A.)

Of course there are bad things too (...). But I am hopeful: I believe that there is always something that we can do. (D.A.)

It is hard to make changes in our country but we have to believe that it is possible to do something more and to turn our work and our classes more attractive and more respectable among the students. (F.O.)

In these excerpts, participants talk about the necessity of doing something to improve the educational environment in Brazil, a reality that they are all very aware of, either as students or as teachers. Although some of them do not use the word *hope* explicitly, we can perceive that there is always something that drives them in the direction of "believing that it is possible," that they need to cling to their hopes for a better future, both for themselves and for the generations to come.

## 8. Threats to hope

As I said, some of the stories also revealed hopelessness. One of the reflective questions was, indeed, formulated explicitly with the intention of fostering reflection on experiences that would in some way threaten participants' hopes. Their stories invariably referred to the chaotic situation of the teaching profession in Brazil. However, although they mentioned the low



salaries, the long work hours, and the ill-behavioral nature of students in general, what seems to be most important for these teachers is the fact that the teaching profession is not getting as much respect as they feel it deserves.

Teaching is becoming something very difficult in our country. Not only because students do not want to study hard or because of behavior problems in the classroom. Politically speaking, teaching is something really hard to do nowadays. The salary is not good and teachers, most of the times, have to work long hours to make some money. Besides, we are not respected as we would like to be, especially the foreign language teachers. (A.V.)

We live in a country which does not invest in education. Being a teacher in such a place is not easy. Teachers are not valued, but more serious yet is the fact that teachers themselves do not value their own profession and their work. (M.V.)

## 9. Threats becoming hope

Amazingly, the participants in this study do not show signs of despair. On the contrary, they seem to believe it is possible to do a good job as a teacher in Brazil, even in face of the dark situation they see ahead of them. Some of the stories they wrote reflect this belief in a better future. Moreover, these stories show that participants believe that the possibility of changing the current situation is in their very hands. Brazilians are said to be generally hopeful. The excerpt below is an example of how hopeful this teacher can be, and how she turns the dark reality into a driving force that only gives her more hope for clinging on.

The fact that we have a problematic situation in Brazil, in relation to the low value that the teaching profession receives, only makes me feel more determinate in doing my best in order to change this situation. (...) I hope always to improve my teaching and then show to the society the importance of teachers in the process of changing the precarious condition of Brazilian education. I really believe things can be changed. (C.A.)

## 10. Final remarks

As the discussion in this paper shows, research on hope is extensive and expanding in several academic areas all around the world, but not in Brazil. So, this is probably the first report on hope research in the area of language teaching in Brazil, and maybe also in other areas. Obviously enough, it would be difficult to draw conclusions from such an incipient field of study in our country. However, some final remarks are relevant.

The study reported in this paper shows that language teachers are generally hopeful towards their profession, although they recognize that the teaching environment in Brazil is not very promising. The participants in this study also reveal that they find it important to go on believing in their ideals. Not only do they refuse to accommodate to the situation, but they also reveal, through their hopeful stories, that they have faith in a better future.

Miller and Larsen state that talking about hope, that is, using the language of hope intentionally, helps to foster hope in people. Several other researchers agree that hope stories and conversations may elicit hope in difficult situations. The challenge that we, Brazilian researchers and teacher educators, face is to bring hope into our courses and classrooms and thus help to enhance hope in the lives of our pre-service and in-service teachers.

According to Dalton-Puffer, discourse may create community. As such, participants in a discourse community work towards shared cognitive and affective states. In a hopeful discourse community, therefore, participants would all become more hopeful. This is the challenge that this paper reveals to us: to start talking about hope in our contexts and help to construct a hopeful environment for ourselves and for those around us.

## References

- Cheavens, J. S., S. T. Michael and C. R. Snyder. "The Correlates of Hope: Psychological and Physiological Benefits." Ed. J. A. Elliott. *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Hope*. Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science, 2005. 119-32.
- Clandinin, D. and J. Connelly. *Narrative Inquiry*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.
- Dalton-Puffer, C. "Negotiating Interpersonal Meanings in Naturalistic Classroom Discourse: Directives in Content-and-language-integrated Classrooms." *Journal of Pragmatics* 37 (2005): 1275-93.

Dufault, K. and B. C. Martocchio. "Hope: Its Spheres and Dimensions." *Nursing Clinics of North America* 20 (1985): 379-91.

Elliott, J. and I. Olver. "The Discursive Properties of 'Hope': A Qualitative Analysis of Cancer Patients' Speech." *Qualitative Health Research* 12 (2002): 173-93.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Hope and Hoping in the Talk of Dying Cancer Patients." *Social Science & Medicine* 64 (2006): 138-49.

Jimenez, T. "Currículo e identidade profissional nos cursos de Letras / Inglês." *A interculturalidade no ensino de inglês*. Eds. L. Tomitch et al. Florianópolis: UFSC / ABRAPUI, 2005. 331-43.

Giroux, H. A. *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*. 2nd ed. New York and London: Routledge, 2005.

Larsen, D., Y. Li and A. M. A. Mattos. "Believing That It's Possible: The Power of Student and Teacher Narratives of Hope." Book of Abstracts: First International ABRAPUI Conference, Belo Horizonte, 3-6 June 2007. 41-3.

Miller, D. and D. Larsen. "Hearing it Slant: Hopeful Stories From Teacher Educators and Counseling Educators." Book of Abstracts: Narrative Matters 3. Wolfville-NS, Canada, 24-27 May 2006. 50.

Nekolaichuk, C. L., R. F. Jevne and T. O. Maguire. "Structuring the Meaning of Hope in Health and Illness." *Social Science and Medicine* 48 (1999): 591-605.

Richards, J. C. and C. Lockhart. *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1994.

Turner, S. "Hope Seen Through the Eyes of 10 Australian Young People." *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 52 (2005): 508-17.

Wang, C. H. "Developing a Concept of Hope from a Human Science Perspective." *Nursing Science Quarterly* 13 (2000): 248-51.

West, C. "Finding Hope in Dark Times." *Tikkun* 19 (2004): 18-20.10 April 2007. <<http://www.tikkun.org>>.