

# Language Teacher Immunity: A Double-Edged Sword

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In this paper we introduce a new concept termed “teacher immunity”. We propose that this immunity emerges from the accrued experiences of coping with disturbances and problems in stressful teaching environments, and that it functions as an indispensable protective armor allowing language teachers to survive the unavoidable hassles of classroom practice. We draw parallels with biological immunity and established constructs in psychology, while describing the development of this emergent immunity through the framework of self-organization from complexity theory. We further argue that, similar to biological immunity, teacher immunity can have potential negative consequences if it develops into a maladaptive form that is associated with a rigid and conservative practice as well as a general resistance to methodological change or innovation. Therefore, the article concludes by outlining how counterproductive teacher immunity can be “rebooted” through a three-step sequence that involves triggering the process through awareness raising, familiarizing teachers with productive coping strategies, and encouraging the formation of appropriate narratives that stabilize the transformation.

Teaching may truly be the most important profession: teachers are in charge of training the next generation of citizens, and have the ability to shape the course of their students’ future, for better or worse. Teachers, in a sense, are the architects of society. Clearly, finding and retaining the most effective teachers is an imperative for any society investing in its own continued future growth. This is, however, complicated by the adverse psychological climate characterizing many educational environments worldwide (Saha and Dworkin 2009). Language educators are not exempt from these challenges, and many L2 teachers, particularly those who work in the K-12 sector where English is a core curriculum subject, confront institutional constraints and conflicts that have a marginalizing or disempowering effect (Holliday 2005; Benesch 2012; Park 2012; Shin 2012; Gu and Benson 2014). Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) report that studies of L2 teacher motivation typically reveal similarities with conditions in the teaching profession at large. There are pressures from multiple constituencies (i.e. educational authorities, school managers, and parents); increasing restrictions on teaching autonomy, combined with accountability for mandated targets; challenges for language teachers to

constantly increase their knowledge and command of the subject without the support mechanisms to do so; and demands from large groups of learners who not only pose academic challenges, but also import the turbulences of their personal lives into the social setting of school (Kelchtermans 2011).

Characterizations of L2 practitioners given nearly two decades ago highlight how survival is often prioritized over pedagogic concerns (Holliday 1994; Crookes 1997). In unpacking the more prevalent teaching practices of L2 teachers, Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) draw parallels between the anxiety and conflict inherent to language teachers' and medical professionals' lives, noting the defensive behavioral mechanisms exhibited in practices such as developing detachment and cynical attitudes, relying on ritualized standard operating procedures for task performance, and avoiding change in existing systems—what others term a threat rigidity response (Olsen and Sexton 2009). There are many exceptions to such a broad generalization, but it may be fair to say that a large segment of the language teaching profession worldwide is characterized by a certain amount of deep-rooted conservatism and resistance to novelty, innovation, and change (Littlewood 2007; Wedell 2009; Kim 2011; Tribble 2012). This opposition to change is not a function of a lack of sufficient motivation—given that most teachers start out with heightened motivation and a vivid vision of being called to teach (Bullough and Hall-Kenyon 2011)—but emerges gradually as a defense mechanism against the unusually high level of stress inherent to their work. This may shed light on the pervasiveness of teacher burnout and unprecedented rates of teacher attrition: in some contexts a staggering 40 per cent of teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Borman and Dowling 2008). Thus, if teaching is the core profession in our global knowledge society, it is also clearly a profession in crisis—and, as mentioned above, language education is no exception to this trend.

Mainstream educational research has developed, of late, a preoccupation with notions of teacher quality (Hanushek and Rivkin 2006; Harris and Sass 2011). Issues of teacher agency, emotions and beliefs, engagement and commitment, self-efficacy, and adaptivity to professional demands have begun to receive major attention as key ingredients within this discourse of teacher effectiveness and stability (Kennedy 2010; Day and Gu 2014). There is now growing recognition that professional identity is a key determinant of teachers' enthusiasm and effort, motivation and commitment, instructional effectiveness, psychological well-being, and persistence in the profession (Day *et al.* 2006; Beauchamp and Thomas 2009). Existing work on language teacher identity has tackled the field-specific link between L2 teachers' experience and cognitions, and their socioculturally embedded practices (Morgan 2004; Tsang 2004; Varghese *et al.* 2005; Borg 2006; Tsui 2007). What has not yet been fully addressed in studies of language teacher identity are the ways in which intrapersonal factors of teacher identity intersect with contextual and organizational factors in building that identity. Bridging these strands of professional identity formation may provide promising insights into the

mechanisms that allow practitioners to maintain high levels of engagement and efficacy over their careers (Richardson *et al.* 2014).

In this article, we set out to propose a novel concept—*language teacher immunity*—that we believe draws attention to this important, and until now neglected, dimension of L2 teacher motivation and identity. From an initial case study (Hiver 2015) designed to explore the self-concept and motivational stability of four L2 teachers working across various sectors, we identified this novel concept which implicated a coalition of factors including resilience from teaching pressures, burnout, attrition on the one hand, and teaching efficacy, motivation to teach, psychological well-being, and openness to change on the other. This led us to conduct a more comprehensive study with 350 South Korean teachers of English (K-12) working in the state sector—the setting in which the majority of language learning takes place worldwide—in order to establish a robust empirical foundation for this new phenomenological construct (Hiver, in preparation). Drawing on a sequence of focus group data ( $N=44$ ), survey data ( $N=293$ ), and serial in-depth interviews ( $N=18$ ) in this validation study, we explored precisely what constitutes this L2 teacher immunity, and analyzed the distinct features of its various manifestations.

In this conceptual article, we build on our initial investigations by outlining the theoretical features of language teacher immunity and discussing its contribution in understanding L2 teachers' sense of self and identity. Given what our empirical findings reveal about how language teacher immunity materializes, we examine its formation through the lens of self-organization from the framework of complexity theory (CT)—in line with recent calls from both general and language education for a more developmental orientation of studies of teacher identity and motivation (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011; Richardson *et al.* 2014). We believe that, as it bridges individual concerns with wider contextual considerations, this concept is a central factor at the heart of some of the key concerns in the language teaching profession: whether it can produce a body of professionals who are adaptive to changes in the face of the rapid development of knowledge and society (Freeman 2002; Farrell 2008); whether it can retain teachers who are enthusiastic and committed; and whether, against the odds, language teachers can function at the peak of their effectiveness and thrive in a classroom (Breen *et al.* 2001; Cummings Hlas and Hlas 2012).

## DEFINITION OF IMMUNITY

Immunity originates from the Latin *immunis* and refers to the condition of resistance to (e.g. viral immunity) or exemption from something (e.g. diplomatic immunity; judicial immunity). Across various fields, immunity can be broadly defined as a defense system that protects the organism against the negative, undesirable, or harmful impact of the external environment.

The most familiar understanding of immunity is a biological one—often closely associated with the field of medicine—which specifies the system responsible for shielding the body from external attack and fighting off

infection. Innate immunity provides the first line of defense that prevents and minimizes infection through biochemical reactions that mark and target pathogens for removal or destruction (Janeway *et al.* 2005). Its complement system activates naturally occurring antibodies, and generates and regulates the normal inflammatory response to invading microbes through a process known as *tolerance* (Folds 2008). In addition to the all-purpose defense of innate immunity, a robust *acquired immunity* is characterized by:

- memory of past experiences to formulate responses that become more rapid and powerful on subsequent exposures to pathogens;
- specificity in its ability to recognize, differentiate, and tailor responses to individual pathogens;
- durability of the long-term protection that is gradually developed against repeated exposures to a virus (Chiappelli and Liu 2000).

The acquired immune response occurs both locally and system-wide, as it maintains an adaptive equilibrium in the human body (i.e. homeostasis), allowing the central nervous system to focus on higher-order functioning.

### Counterproductive immunity

While immunity is normally considered to be an essential aspect of the human organism (e.g. when a person displays immunodeficiency or is immunocompromised, they require prompt treatment), immunity also has its dark side with a damaging aspect. Hyperactive immune responses include allergic reactions to harmless foreign particles and autoimmune reactions which reject new material, internal or external to the body, that the body needs to heal itself or to thrive, thus threatening the survival of the host (Chiappelli and Liu 2000). Ordinarily, the built-in mechanism of tolerance regulates the *allostatic* load—the psychophysiological burden of inappropriate immunologic responses—and distinguishes self from other; tolerization, thus, corrects for the prolonged elevation of immune responses that might overtax an immune system (Janeway *et al.* 2005) or that are directed against the self (Rose 2008). However, an imbalance in some regulatory components can initiate an immune response that either does not recognize essential healthy tissue and thus begins to attack it (i.e. autoimmunity), or that is an excessively robust response to innocuous stimuli (i.e. allergy) (Kay 2000). Maladaptive expressions of human immunity such as anaphylaxis to nuts or dairy products, or tissue rejection in the case of an implanted foreign organ, can have a detrimental effect on the well-being of the entire system or even be fatal.

In choosing to source this conceptual metaphor from the medical domain, we acknowledge the need for caution: over-relying on a single metaphor may illuminate and obscure in equal proportion. However, as we hope to show below, the metaphor of immunity more appropriately characterizes the phenomenological reality of the construct we seek to elucidate here. We use the metaphor of immunity mindfully in the L2 teaching context to indicate that the protective

mechanism which L2 teachers develop, distinct from a lay definition of invulnerability, is a powerful asset, but one that can mistakenly jeopardize L2 teachers' functioning by manifesting itself in abnormal and aberrant ways.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL PARALLELS TO IMMUNITY

Evidence for enhancing individual well-being has been a central concern of the field of psychology since the 1970s. This has resulted in studies on constructs such as stress and *coping*—techniques that either remedy stressors or change how the stressful situation is perceived (Somerfield and McCrae 2000); *burnout*—a psychological syndrome resulting from the experience of prolonged chronic stress (Maslach and Jackson 1981); *hardiness*—a personality disposition thought to buffer the effects of stress on performance (Maddi 2004); *buoyancy*—self-perceptions of individuals' ability to successfully overcome everyday anxieties (Martin and Marsh 2008); and *resilience*—the capacity to recover from experiences of adversity or maintain effective functioning despite traumatic circumstances (Masten 2001). Many of these concepts feature prominently in mainstream educational psychology research, but there has been limited crossover to the applied linguistics literature or to language teacher research.

The construct of language teacher immunity aggregates the above concerns with others, and while we review these in detail elsewhere (Hiver, in preparation), resilience provides what is perhaps the most comprehensive picture of individual qualities that enable an individual to survive and function effectively despite extreme hardship and risk. The consensus in most current theorizing is that the development of this self-righting capacity is the result of fundamental systems for human development and adaptation operating normally, and that may be found in every human to varying degrees at varying times in one's life span (Reich *et al.* 2010). Teacher resilience is defined as using all the resources available in a productive way to achieve learning success with the students in the face of adversity and detrimental conditions (Day and Gu 2014). Scholars focusing on preservice or novice teachers argue that, given the varying levels of preparation and competence of beginning teachers, resilience is a crucial contributor to career preparation, teaching effectiveness, and persistence in the profession past the first few years (Howard and Johnson 2004; Tait 2008; Johnson *et al.* 2014). Others have investigated whether teachers can practice resilience and thus develop or engineer it through intervention. Clearly, despite the increased pressures and deteriorating conditions in contemporary teaching contexts worldwide, the majority of teachers do survive which suggests that a form of psychological invulnerability may be a key factor in teachers' teaching effectiveness and long-term commitment to the profession (Mansfield *et al.* 2012; Gibbs and Miller 2014).

This psychological perspective contributes to our quest to better understand the makeup of the productive outcome of language teacher immunity: it is indeed composed of, among other factors, adaptive coping-with-hardship techniques that generate elevated levels of teacher self-efficacy which then

reciprocate by providing a measure of resilience to psychological upheaval and burnout (Hiver, in preparation). However, the language teacher immunity construct is distinct from resilience with regard to:

- the self-organized (i.e. spontaneously coordinated), adaptive process of its formation;
- the dual nature of the protective configuration developed—at times, serving a necessary armoring purpose, but at others, threatening the very functioning of the individual by mounting resistance to change;
- its integration in the more global scheme of professional identity formation.

While much of the research has argued for the multidimensional nature of resilience, it has not foregrounded the developmental process (Luthar *et al.* 2000), and, to the best of our knowledge, resilience has not been implicated explicitly in professional identity formation or as part of the self-concept. Resilience, furthermore, does not promote resistance to change. In order to take a more nuanced and balanced appraisal of this capacity, the metaphor of *language teacher immunity* is preferred.

## NARRATIVE FORMATION

We have indicated that language teacher immunity is a protective mechanism that develops in response to exposure to adverse experiences, but this characterization only partially explains what the construct of immunity constitutes—in reality, what develops is much less attribute-like than it is a part of individual identity construction. Identity and the self are central to who individuals think they are, and who they act as in social contexts. Recent work has framed the self as a highly situated and dynamic process of construction, in which identity is part multifaceted product and part architecture (Morf and Mischel 2012; Mercer 2014). Some processes in identity construction are deliberate and conscious, while others—such as narrative formation—are more implicit (McAdams 2008). Narratives have gained increased popularity in applied linguistics because scholars are realizing how much more they are than simple verbal descriptions of things (Pavlenko 2002, 2007; Kalaja *et al.* 2008; Ryan and Irie 2014; Dörnyei and Ryan 2015). There is a growing literature to support the notion that we structure our perceptions and experiences largely in the form of narratives, selectively internalizing components of our life stories, which allows us to establish a stable core sense of identity that will in turn determine our well-being and purpose, and shape our behavior (McAdams 2001; Bauer *et al.* 2008). From this perspective, narratives are so powerful that, in effect, we become the narratives that we construct about our lives. In the struggle to safeguard the coherence of one's narrative identity, individuals—including language teachers—often use *autobiographical reasoning*, that is, reasoning which seeks to gain understanding of why things happened the way they did and affirm general meaning or purpose from episodic

experiences (Singer 2004; McAdams 2006). Thus, language teacher immunity is bound up in identity formation through narratives.

For teachers, making sense of the uncertainty and adversity that is part of their experience and gaining positive insight from these events is a crucial factor in acquiring a professional identity (Golombek and Johnson 2004). At times, this autobiographical reasoning is displayed in a repertoire of stock attributions produced to explain stressful stimuli or put things into a perspective of personal continuity (e.g. 'I am doing my best, but I am not super-human'; 'Every class is mixed-ability, so I just teach to the middle of the class'; or 'You can't save every student, so it's not worth losing any sleep over it'). Experiences can be processed in a number of ways, and the specific way in which L2 teachers self-narrate their immunization process into their identity will affect the outcome of immunity that develops. If a teacher embraces and reflects on negative experiences, is open to learning and changing from them, and actively works toward resolution, they can ensure a sense of closure and positive restoration, while incorporating these events into their narrative and maintaining continued coherence in their identity (Helsing 2007). This pathway corresponds with the robust productive teacher immunity outcome. However, struggles with challenges can just as easily result in maladapted narrative outcomes, and there are times when individuals construct faulty narratives that actively inhibit development and growth in their professional identity (Pals 2006). When teachers form narratives that do not allow for benefit-finding from adversity, they may in effect doom themselves to randomness and meaninglessness in their professional life (Geijsel and Meijers 2005). This would account for the maladaptive immunity outcome. Thus, narratives are particularly pertinent to our conceptualization of language teacher immunity because we see them as the layer which determines the precise configuration around which the development stabilizes—they, therefore, act as the interface between the underlying developmental process, outlined below, and the phenomenological reality of things.

## THE EMERGENCE OF LANGUAGE TEACHER IMMUNITY

Having surveyed some important background concepts, let us now address the issue of immunity formation. How systems adapt to their environment in order to remain robust and functioning is a compelling concern in the field of applied linguistics (Larsen-Freeman 2012). Because CT serves as a rigorous aid to thinking and theorizing about the forces of change in systems social and human, a growing number of studies have used the framework of CT to investigate second language learning phenomena in ways that prioritize adaptive and developmental processes across various timescales (Larsen-Freeman 2006; de Bot *et al.* 2007; MacIntyre and Legatto 2011; Gregersen *et al.* 2014; Dörnyei *et al.* 2015). Our developmental blueprint is informed by the notions of *self-organization* (i.e. the spontaneous process by which higher-level order emerges from the local interaction of disordered components) and *emergence* (i.e. the

rise of salient, novel outcomes or configurations that are coherent at a macro level) from a CT framework. Existing empirical findings (Hiver 2015, in preparation) show four main phases in the dynamic development pattern: *triggering*, *linking*, *realignment*, and *stabilization*. As a brief summary of these, let us outline the key theoretical aspects of each of the stages.

### Triggering stage

One of the key tenets of self-organization is that if the components of a system are to reconfigure and adapt themselves, a destabilizing event is needed to interrupt the stable functioning of that system and send it into a state of disequilibrium (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008). The types of events<sup>1</sup> which trigger the formation of language teacher immunity are high-intensity threats such as managing destructive student behavior and delinquency, or punitive evaluations and accountability measures that determine a teacher's continued employment. Instances of adversity capable of triggering this process of formation are not isolated events in K-12 language teaching contexts. In CT, such upheavals are termed *perturbations*, and these events or stimuli have close parallels with the notion of *dissonance* (Kubanyiova 2012). As with biological immunity, language teachers may not initially experience significant disruption when they come under attack from these disturbances. Positive feedback loops must amplify a perturbation to the desirable threshold to trigger the restructuring required for the self-organizing process (Larsen-Freeman 1997). However, if left to accumulate, these triggers would rapidly lead to exhaustion, cynicism, and burnout, and thus result in large adaptive challenges for an individual.

### Linking stage

Once destabilized, open systems adaptively reconfigure themselves in increasingly complex and productive configurations (Banzhaf 2009). They achieve this through *coupling*—formation of linked relationships that mediate the interaction between system components (e.g. a free trade agreement). Thus, following the triggering impetus, language teachers employ coping strategies that link to specific disturbances. To continue with the illustrative example from above, the L2 practitioners faced with measures of contractual accountability might 'game' the system of evaluation through attempts to ingratiate themselves with their students. Gradually, L2 teachers develop a coping repertoire which screens out undesirable and disturbing stimuli from the environment and helps them focus on the productive aspects of their practice. In CT terms, linking allows system components to exchange energy and learn new things in order to synchronize the behavior of the system. Thus, as a result of the linking stage, the individual elements—here the disturbances and strategic coping responses—can no longer operate independently of each other, and the established constructive ties begin to nudge the system back in the direction of equilibrium (Holland 1995).

## Realignment stage

In the realignment stage, the symbiotic relationship developed between the disturbances and explicit response options allows language teachers to progressively return to productivity, despite the uncertainty and adversity they continue to experience. These linked components contribute a concentrated measure of self-efficacy, such that L2 teachers recapture a sense of equilibrium by getting a handle on the teaching-specific upheavals to which they were previously vulnerable. For instance, the L2 teacher in our example would begin to think and act as if she had succeeded in achieving optimal results on her teaching evaluations. Through the cumulative impact, the dynamics of the system pass a certain threshold—a point of no return—restoring a measure of synchronization and leading to a newfound coherence in the system. In CT, this transition to a qualitatively distinct outcome is termed a major *phase change* (Goldstein 2011). In the realignment stage, the emergent stability can be seen as a function of the accumulated experiences of weathering adversity, revealing the beginnings of resilience in language teachers' recovery from demonstrable risk. However, the current developmental process is not cyclical; rather, the emergent stability is assembled *in vivo* and is prone to adjustment as a response to contextual interests and demands.

## Stabilization stage

The final stage of the process—stabilization—involves L2 teachers solidifying the emergent outcome as a component of their professional identity through the formation of powerful episodic narratives. Through this analytical narrative formation, the developmental process settles into a robust *attractor state*—a critical outcome in which a system may stabilize—of teacher immunity. Whether language teachers evolve a positive or a counterproductive immunity is contingent on the initial stages (e.g. through the choice of maladaptive rather than transformative coping strategies); however, because it must be narrated into the language teacher's identity, ultimately the narrative dimension of the stabilization stage determines the precise solution into which it settles. Specific episodic narratives are directed toward particular instances of vulnerability a teacher has encountered, and a fully immunized language teacher also manages to pull these together into an umbrella narrative for their whole professional teaching persona (Connelly and Clandinin 1990). Thus, we may witness the L2 teachers account for their performance through an episodic narrative of how they were participants in what was ultimately a biased system of evaluation, with an umbrella narrative of victimhood in response to higher performance demands.

## THE 'IMMUNIZED' L2 TEACHER

Thus far, our argument for the appropriacy of the 'language teacher immunity' metaphor has revolved around three aspects. First, both biological and teacher

immunity develop as part of a defensive reaction to instances of crisis. Just as the important safeguarding purpose of biological immunity is indispensable for a living organism, language teachers may not last long in the profession without some form of protective immunity. Secondly, language teacher immunity, like the acquired immune response, evolves into part of the organism itself—here the teacher’s professional identity—in order to shield against future attacks. The analogy between the two spheres of immunity can be taken even further by considering that immunity in both cases falls into two main global types: productive immunity and maladaptive immunity. In the language teaching context, productive immunity not only safeguards against the hazards of the profession, it may also facilitate sound teaching practice and maximum teaching effectiveness. Maladaptive immunity, on the other hand, concerns the outcome of immunity that reduces teaching effectiveness and hinders teacher reflection and development.

### **Productive immunity**

A robust, productive variant of language teacher immunity is an adaptive outcome which affords both an all-purpose, substantive immunity against the chronic demands of the L2 teaching profession (e.g. the oppressive workloads imposed; professional relationships characterized by hostility and bullying), as well as a specifically tailored episodic immunity to acute situated experiences (e.g. the threat of a lawsuit; managing a student’s substance abuse). In this regard, the cumulative protection of language teacher immunity parallels the biological immune system, which includes the specific local immune responses to certain diseases (e.g. as a result of vaccinations) but also refers to the robustness of the general system as a whole.

As we conceptualize it, a productive teacher immune system has the following characteristics:

- *Specificity*: teacher immunity provides language teachers with the means to recognize, differentiate, and gear an appropriate response to particular episodic disturbances or instances of vulnerability that they encounter through the repertoire of coping strategies developed (e.g. a L2 teacher de-escalates the threat of a lawsuit from a parent incensed at his/her child’s poor achievement on a high-stakes exam by inviting the parent to observe and participate in the learning environment).
- *Memory*: teacher immunity capitalizes on prior experiences of upheaval mastery to inform the language teacher’s response options to subsequent disturbances intelligently, and—through the increase of teacher-efficacy—eventually becomes anticipatory so as to self-regulate and modulate the teacher’s equilibrium over time (e.g. a L2 teacher uses journaling with his/her students to help them acknowledge and resolve recurrent incidents of classroom aggression and violence).
- *Adaptability*: teacher immunity contains a facet of resilience that evolves and adjusts constructively in response to changes in order to ensure that the language teacher can bounce back from adversity and can function

optimally despite a barrage of ‘attacks’ (e.g. a L2 teacher functions positively and successfully in the classroom despite being notified that he/she will be let go by the school at the end of the semester).

- *Durability*: because it is solidified into the professional identity through narrative reasoning, teacher immunity sustains its protective armoring capacity against stress, failure, and burnout in spite of recurrent threats to the language teacher’s well-being and classroom effectiveness (e.g. a L2 teacher is consistently effective at addressing the broad spectrum of student needs in class despite yearly curriculum changes and shifting objectives of educational reforms).

We conceive of language teacher immunity, not as a built-in trait or disposition, but as a situated construct which emerges in relation to conflicts specific to the teaching environment and is activated in the L2 teacher’s classroom behavior.

### **Maladaptive immunity**

Throughout previous sections, we have implied that teacher immunity does not serve the language teaching profession well if the residue of experience solidifies into permanent and maladaptive rigidity or resistance. Although maladaptive immunity closely mirrors its productive alter ego with regards to global function, it generates a skewed defense mechanism through the embedded coping responses to incongruence threats to the self-concept. Typical examples of defensive responses would be when language teachers develop extreme risk-avoidance, evade innovative methodologies, exercise mechanical control routines, and in general display inertia and fossilization. While defensive coping may be beneficial in self-regulating against stressors in the short-term, it is insufficient for long-term adaptation to upheaval and thus often becomes debilitating (Carver *et al.* 1989). In teachers’ self-regulatory efforts to reassert control over conditions of uncertainty or stress, one particularly toxic coping strategy is the tendency to fall back on defensive attributions of control—those that lead to illusions of control and efficacy (Presson and Benassi 1996). This false sense of efficacy is closely tied to the distorted and faulty narratives teachers construct which cement the maladaptive outcome in their professional identity. Over time, this strain of immunity manifests itself in distinct archetypes of cynicism, indifference, or resignedness (Hiver, in preparation). Affected teachers may also appear jaded and seem to have lost their zeal and sense of wonder (Hiver 2015). We believe that such well-known and easily recognizable characteristics of a segment of the L2 teaching profession can be seen to some extent as unintended consequences of maladaptive teacher immunity.

A warped teacher immunity, parallel to the aberrant responses from biological immunity, can have crippling consequences when it produces a response to eradicate things which are not harmful or which are necessary for continued survival. Occasionally, language teachers who receive input, feedback, or advice that is intended to increase their effectiveness interpret this as a threat to their survival and choose consciously and intentionally to resist

change or innovation. Resistance to change is a central theme of the teacher change literature and has been examined from the filter of one's apprenticeship of observation (Lortie 1975), and more explicitly in response to reform input (Gregoire 2003; Kubanyiova 2012). Individuals confronted by threats that undermine a prevailing view of self become preoccupied with avoidance strivings in order to protect the self-concept, and this is exacerbated the higher the personal stakes (Sedikides 2012). When construals of a language teacher's professional identity are challenged, the insecurity associated with restructuring the self-concept inhibits growth. Ultimately, this well-documented aversion to change may interfere significantly with the language teacher's ability to meaningfully reflect on their practice and develop as a professional, with potentially detrimental consequences for learners they come in contact with (Cole 1997). Within the developmental framework of CT, it is evident that excessive stability impedes further self-organization (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008). Therefore, although the attractor state of maladaptive immunity may appear synchronized and cohesive on the surface, like the biological manifestations of allergy and autoimmunity, it can become a professional liability and lead to such symptoms in L2 teachers as callousness, apathy, and conservatism in pedagogy. We now concern ourselves with redressing this imbalance.

## REBOOTING LANGUAGE TEACHER IMMUNITY

The central theme of this article has been the double-edged nature of language teacher immunity: while immunity is an indispensable defense shield, the potential danger exists for it to become overprotective and lead to rigidity and conservatism, thereby inhibiting change and growth. Therefore, the critical concern is how to 'reboot'—a term used in immunology to describe the resetting of an organism's natural immune function—the outcome characterized by inertia and fossilization so that it forms into the desirable safeguard of productive immunity. Here, let us address a potentially contradictory theoretical issue: if the emergence of immunity is indeed the function of self-organization, how can we possibly hope to direct this process? While the essence of self-organization is its spontaneity, the most valid way of intervening in the system dynamics is through 'playing around' (Goldstein 2011: 97) with the parameters and imposing new inputs. Thus, there is a good chance that tweaking the system by modifying its internal parameters will result in the system incorporating these and self-organizing in the desired direction.

Recent models of teacher conceptual change, both theoretically motivated (Gregoire 2003) and empirically grounded (Kubanyiova 2012) are implicit that the impetus for change can only transpire if the current, prevailing state of affairs is seen as wanting—in line with the principle from CT, suggesting that an initial equilibrium must be disrupted for a system to self-organize into a qualitatively new state. This is also one of the cornerstones of Kubanyiova's (2012) recent theory of Language Teacher Conceptual Change (LTCC), which offers powerful insights within a teacher cognition framework about how to

induce transformational change in teachers' educational beliefs and practices. The model suggests that at least three ingredients are needed to initiate any meaningful and lasting change in teachers' approaches: first, creating a *positive vision* with resonance for the individual that helps them engage more deeply with the message of change; secondly, introducing some sort of a *dissonance* to dislodge the teachers from their comfort zone and prove that change is needed; and thirdly, providing goals and *procedural guidelines* supported by a safety net of *hope* that can help teachers to achieve change (Dörnyei and Kubanyiova 2014). Restructuring the developmental cycle of teacher immunity, we believe, capitalizes on similar principles to LTCC and follows a related sequence. While some of the details will need to be fine-tuned by future research, we would suggest that rebooting the system involves three necessary components:

- 1 Triggering dissonance in the process through *awareness-raising* of the fact that the existing form of immunity is counterproductive.
- 2 Making available a repertoire of alternative *coping strategies* that might provide teachers with possible new answers to old questions.
- 3 Lastly, assisting in the creation of *narratives of resolution* that teachers can subscribe to and personalize in order to stabilize the new identity.

### **Awareness raising**

One preeminent danger of maladaptive immunity is its stealth. Most language teachers are unlikely to be aware of its existence, its importance, or its capacity to backfire as a fossilized, callous resistance. Therefore, drawing attention to its counterproductive features through awareness-raising is critical to rebooting immunity formation. Awareness-raising can act as a trigger that launches a new iteration of the developmental process; metaphorically this is like hitting 'CTRL-ALT-DEL' in the immunity formation process. The viability of this stage reflects recent moves to foreground awareness-raising in several areas of second language acquisition (SLA) (Sanz and Leow 2011), and the actual discussion could be accomplished as part of in-service seminars or teacher-development workshops. It is true that micro-engineering all aspects of an emergent, self-organized outcome such as language teacher immunity may not be possible, but resetting the controls in the framework to default is likely to be the most sensible way to grease the wheels of immunity formation and set them into motion again.

### **Transformative coping strategies**

Once the system has been dislodged, positive alternatives to traditional response patterns are needed. This stage requires new strategy links to be made. Counterproductive coping strategies embedded within maladaptive immunity typically include avoidance-oriented behaviors such as repression and denial, self-handicapping, and self-isolation to avoid change or taking responsibility.

Although regrettably there is no ‘silver bullet’ that will solve all of the problems a L2 teacher encounters, healthy coping behaviors help teachers to view life events as controllable, to see a sense of challenge in them rather than an imminent threat, and to tolerate or adjust to the negative events when all else fails. Core strategies that well-adjusted teachers use include (Gold and Roth 2005):

- *Get involved*: be proactive—repressing or avoiding problems can often make them spiral out of control.
- *Don’t panic*: stay patient and do not give up trying multiple approaches to resolve the conflict.
- *Enlist others’ support*: you cannot solve every problem alone, so seek professional support from others to fall back on.
- *Develop an outlet*: have or do something that allows you to vent any built-up physical or emotional negativity.
- *Keep your distance*: step back and look at the big picture objectively—it will help you put a healthy distance between the problem and the rest of your life.

An important corollary from the learning strategy research in SLA is that the behaviors implied as being more effective or desirable should not be forced on the subject, but rather offered as attractive choices for self-generated discovery and learning (Dörnyei and Ryan 2015). Thus, the initial awareness-raising discussion of the triggering stage could be followed by teachers identifying and evaluating their previously used coping strategies, best practices, and role models to pick and choose from.

### Re-narrating immunity

Integrating identity-challenging experiences into one’s life narrative constructively is a necessity for benefit-finding from adversity—scholarly work on narrative identity is unequivocal on this point. Likewise, in order to solidify a new practice, L2 teachers will need new, productive narratives to subscribe to and draw on. Such narratives will inevitably be highly situated, but we can outline three broad narrative dimensions:

- *Tolerance narratives*: Tolerance is the intentional failure to mount an immune response to an antigen, through which the organism can avoid hazardous allergic responses and rejections of transplanted tissue. Similarly, it is chiefly openness and tolerance of ambiguity that allows individuals to reason that change is an opportunity for growth and development rather than a threat. The inconvenience of risk-taking is a natural and inevitable part of development for teachers, but the payoff looming in the end may make the possible hardships worthwhile. Thus, from a cost–benefit perspective, it is not only possible but also beneficial to ride the storm. A classic example from conflict resolution in group dynamics is the conflict-ridden, yet necessary, ‘storming’ phase of the group maturational process (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003).

- *Congruence narratives*: Teaching is often associated with a sense of calling, and indeed many language teachers enter the profession with an idealistic vision (Dörnyei and Kubanyiova 2014). Undoubtedly, some aspects of this vision are often quickly shattered by the shock of reality, but if teachers can build a narrative of congruence for their actual selves which reduces the discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves, and reincorporate elements that originally inspired them to enter the profession, this may lead to greater meaning and purpose.
- *Exploratory narratives*: The third potential angle for positive narrative construction would be stimulating language teachers' desire to explore pathways for development by appealing to their ideal self-image as a practitioner (Hiver 2013). Most teachers aspire to be the best they can in order to make a real difference in the lives of their students. Admittedly, the discourse of increasing one's professionalism can be problematic as it too often involves external imperatives (sometimes disguised as standards or targets) and a diminished sense of agency. Clearly, this angle of positive narrative construction must relate to the more intrinsic, ethical, and moral desire to pursue a higher level of exploration and depth of understanding about one's teaching practice.

Rebooting the self-organization process and replacing some of the faulty components in the system is likely to result in a new state of affairs. This new outcome is unlikely to be the perfect ideal state and therefore occasional reiterations of the process might be beneficial. In this sense, ongoing teacher development might be perceived—similar to reflective teaching—as recurring awareness-raising of current states and brainstorming further options and strategies in order to give the system a chance to find the most productive yet comfortable position to settle in.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Language teaching, as with teaching more generally, is not for the faint of heart. It is a task that for many is fraught with vulnerabilities, conflicts, and hardship. All schools and teaching contexts present their own particular challenges, suggesting that a teacher without an appropriate protective shield may be prone to developing a condition of general dysfunction, and succumbing to exhaustion, inefficacy, and cynicism. Thus, developing some form of immunity is a necessity for L2 teachers to maintain a form of professional equilibrium. Such an immunity, however, carries the danger of a substantial backlash, and therefore it can be argued that one of the key issues that the language teaching profession currently faces is what we would call the 'immunity challenge'. While, language teacher immunity is a useful defense mechanism that allows L2 teachers to function in a hopeful and constructive way, maladaptive immunity may be a leading factor which inhibits teacher change and growth, and contributes to the pervasive conservatism and rigidity in the language teaching profession. In response to this challenge, this article suggests that through raising consciousness, making available transformative strategies,

and providing attractive alternative narratives, we might reboot the immunity system so that it redevelops into a productive dimension which is compatible with change, growth, and reflective practice.

Our goal has been to introduce the concept of language teacher immunity as a useful metaphor in understanding L2 teachers' cognitions, experiences, and identities, and the initial ideas will undoubtedly need fine-tuning by further research. Such efforts may be justifiable, because if a robust, productive teacher immunity does indeed imbue language teachers with resilience, enthusiasm, and hope, the carryover effect on student learning may be profound. No longer focused on defensive teaching and self-preservation, productively immunized teachers are instead more likely to strive to build environments conducive to language development, inspire students they work with, and achieve optimal growth and performance as professionals.

## NOTE

- 1 All examples in this and following sections taken from Hiver 2015, in preparation.

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