Changing English
Studies in Culture and Education

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: 1358-684X (Print) 1469-3585 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ccen20

# Teaching across Language and Identity: The Lived Experiences of Three EMI Lecturers in Italy

Michela Gronchi

**To cite this article:** Michela Gronchi (02 Sep 2025): Teaching across Language and Identity: The Lived Experiences of Three EMI Lecturers in Italy, Changing English, DOI: 10.1080/1358684X.2025.2545866

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2025.2545866

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

View supplementary material

Published online: 02 Sep 2025.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 408

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=ccen20

CHANGING ENGLISH
https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2025.2545866

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

# Teaching across Language and Identity: The Lived Experiences of Three EMI Lecturers in Italy

Michela Gronchi

International Education and Life Long Learning Institute, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK

**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the lived experiences of three Educational Linguistics lecturers navigating English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Italy. Far from a neutral pedagogical shift, EMI emerges as a site of emotional tensions, linguistic self-surveillance, and identity reconfiguration. Using a phenomenological lens, the study explores how these lecturers negotiate their professional selves amid persistent native-speakerist ideologies shaping perceptions of competence and legitimacy. Their narratives reveal a deep entanglement between language and emotion: pride, anxiety, resilience, and doubt surface not as contradictions but as constitutive elements of teaching through English. A central tension lies in the incommensurability between their identities in English and Italian, an unresolved dissonance that becomes a space of learning, discomfort, and transformation. Situated in a field historically aligned with Anglophone norms, these reflections invite a rethinking of Educational Linguistics, foregrounding how linguistic ideologies in EMI are not only taught or resisted, but *felt*, embodied, and lived.

**KEYWORDS**

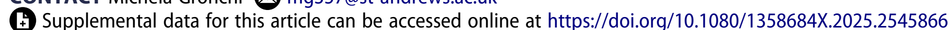
English medium instruction; teacher identity; multilingual higher education; educational linguistics

## Introduction

> [Becoming an EMI teacher] has been demanding because I had to prepare myself for an emotional state in which the language that I use is other than mine [. . .] therefore my confidence isn't the same as the one [I have when I teach] in Italian. (Adele)

These were the words of one of the three lecturers I spoke with during this study, a quiet confession, offered not as a complaint, but as a conscious statement. Teaching in English had become their daily reality, yet it was not a seamless shift. It touched something deeper: professional identity, legitimacy, authority, and even their being. In this study, I explore what it means to *be* a lecturer, emotionally, professionally, and ideologically, in a context where English is not the mother tongue, but the required medium of instruction. The setting is Italy; the discipline is Educational Linguistics; the context is English Medium Instruction (EMI). My aim is not simply to report findings, but to think with and through the voices of these educators, to understand what it means to live and teach *through* English, and what that does to one's sense of self.

**CONTACT** Michela Gronchi mg357@st-andrews.ac.uk


Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2025.2545866

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

In Italy, as across much of Europe, EMI (English Medium Instruction) has become an increasingly dominant mode of delivery in Higher Education (HE). Prompted by the Bologna (European Ministers of Education 1999) and a broader internationalisation agenda, this trend reflects wider shifts in the academic landscape. EMI, defined as the use of English to teach academic subjects in countries where English is not the official or dominant language (Pecorari 2020), is often promoted as an empowering tool: a way to attract international students, elevate institutional prestige, and foster global collaboration (Ackerley, Guarda, and Helm 2017; Broggini and Costa 2017). And yet, for those who teach through English in such contexts, the shift is rarely neutral.

For the three Italian lecturers involved in this study, EMI entails more than adjusting pedagogical strategies or brushing up on fluency. It brings about a redefinition of professional identity, heightened emotional tensions, and a subtle recalibration of professional legitimacy. These shifts often result in a cry for help that often goes unheard (Helm and Guarda 2015), a struggle that mirrors the experience of the majority of EMI educators and is, in many ways, no different (Airey 2012; Dafouz 2018; Macaro et al. 2018). This condition might be especially poignant for lecturers in Educational Linguistics, a field that, despite its interdisciplinary and applied ethos (Hult 2008), remains shaped by Anglophone norms and native-speakerist ideologies (Anderson 2024).

This study explores the experiences of three Educational Linguistics lecturers teaching through English in Italy. I focus not only on what they say, but on how they make sense of their experiences and construct their professional identity as EMI educators. Through their narratives, I consider what it means to be a professional self *through English*, how EMI affects their *being-in-the-world* as educators and linguists. The aim is not simply to describe lived experiences, but to unpack the existential weight of teaching through English in a system that subtly rewards linguistic conformity while marginalising hybridity (Flores and Rosa 2023).

To guide this exploration, I draw on principles of phenomenological inquiry (Moustakas 1994; Van Manen 1990), approaching each narrative as a window into lived experience. In making space for these narratives, I hope to challenge prevailing notions of linguistic competence in Educational Linguistics and EMI, and invite a more expansive, more humane understanding of voice and value in EMI.

## A call to listen beyond pre-defined questions

Scholars have explored the emotional and linguistic labour of EMI in depth. Gkonou and Mercer (2017), for instance, highlight how emotional vulnerability and institutional pressure intersect in multilingual teaching environments. Similarly, Aguilar (2015) and Airey (2012) describe how EMI can provoke insecurity and self-doubt, especially when language competence is equated with professional value. At the heart of this body of research lies the fundamental aim of exploring lecturers' perspectives by asking: *How do you feel?* This question underpins studies of emotional labour in EMI (Hopkyns and Gkonou 2023; Sah 2023), where teachers' affective responses are interpreted as reflections of broader institutional demands. But these responses are often filtered through pre-existing frameworks, which risk flattening emotion into a theoretical category rather than listening to it as lived and felt.

Another question is equally present in EMI identity research: *Where do you stand?* This second question is more spatial, more structural. It underlies the many poststructural accounts of identity that draw on positioning theory (Davies and Harré 1990), which treat identity as something continually negotiated in discourse, always *becoming*, always *contingent*. This view has helped us understand how power and discourse shape professional subjectivities in EMI spaces (e.g. Block 2022; Block and Moncada-Comas 2019).

Yet both questions, *how do you feel?* and *where do you stand?*, tend to be answered on the researcher's terms. Lived experiences are often retrofitted to existing theories, rather than allowed to emerge in their own words, in their own shape. What gets lost are the less theorised voices, voices that reveal the tangled and sometimes contradictory ways EMI lecturers come to understand themselves and their work. My intention in this study has been to make space for those voices: to listen differently, without rushing to classify or interpret, and to attend to how lecturers speak not just about teaching, but about *being* in relation to English.

The question of disciplinary identity complicates things further. While EMI research often centres on STEM fields (Block 2021; Jin, Talbot, and Stephen 2021), where linguistic reflection may be peripheral, my participants are Educational Linguists, people trained to analyse language, but who must also *live* with it, *teach* through it, and be *judged* by it. And here lies a paradox: even within a field that champions multilingualism and linguistic inclusivity, Anglophone norms continue to cast long shadows (Anderson 2024). The ideal of the *native speaker*, still largely imagined as monolingual, white, and Western, remains a powerful benchmark for legitimacy (Flores and Rosa 2023).

These tensions led me to pursue a different methodological path. Much of the literature on EMI teacher identity draws on sociocultural or post-structural perspectives, which remain valuable. However, I found myself returning repeatedly to two fundamental questions: *How do you feel?* And *where do you stand?* And I began to wonder what might happen if I set aside predefined questions altogether and simply listened.

## How I approached listening to the lived experiences

Phenomenology offered a way in. Grounded in the work of Husserl (via Zahavi 2018) and carried forward by Moustakas (1994) and Giorgi (2009), transcendental phenomenology as a research method invites us to pause, bracket assumptions, and listen to how individuals make sense of their own *lifeworlds*. This orientation allowed me to attend more closely to the lecturers' own meaning-making and to treat their words not as data, but as insights.

To understand how professional identities are constructed, research must delve beyond surface accounts to engage with the fullness of lived experience. Phenomenology, with its attentiveness to subjectivity, offers a compelling framework for such inquiry (Van Manen 2014). In approaching this research, I was initially guided by Van Manen's (2014) phenomenological sensibility, the idea that by attending closely to lived experience, we may begin to glimpse the essence of a phenomenon, capturing, as he puts it, the 'very nature of things' (Van Manen 1990, 177). At the heart of this type of inquiry is a belief that experience is always conscious, always directed towards something in the world, and that meaning arises not from abstract theorising but from dwelling

attentively in what people have lived through. While van Manen's work is often aligned with hermeneutic phenomenology, with its emphasis on interpretation, my own approach leaned more towards the transcendental tradition: not to explain or decode, but to describe. I was less concerned with imposing meaning than with allowing it to emerge, through listening, through reflection, and through the careful gathering of insights from those who have all, in some form, lived this phenomenon themselves. This approach enabled me to have a deeper engagement with how lecturers experience their roles, relationships, and evolving positions within the shifting landscapes of higher education.

Although phenomenology is well-established in educational research for its capacity to illuminate personal and professional lifeworlds (Perez Cavana 2019; Volkman and Anderson 1998), it has been largely overlooked in EMI identity research, where case studies and ethnographies dominate (Costa 2013; Dafouz 2018; Diert-Boté and Moncada-Comas 2023; Jin, Talbot, and Stephen 2021). These approaches offer valuable insights but often stop short of accessing the more layered, affective, and existential dimensions of identity. In response, I adopted a Husserlian phenomenological approach (Giorgi, Barabara, and Joseph 2017), drawing on in-depth interviews that align closely with phenomenological aims (Appendix B) (Bevan 2014; Englander 2012).

Yet, even interviews, though central to phenomenological research, can miss the shifting, emotionally textured nature of identity. Drawing again from Van Manen's (2014) emphasis on uncovering the meaning within lived experience, I asked each participant to create fortune lines (Appendix A) to facilitate a more holistic and embodied engagement with lived time. These visual timelines, presented on Cartesian axes, allowed participants to map significant emotional highs and lows along their academic and linguistic paths (Hall and Wall 2019). Functioning as both a stimulus and a scaffold for reflective dialogue (Baumfield, Hall, and Wall 2013; Wall 2017), fortune lines support phenomenological sensibility, enabling participants to externalise and reflect upon the subjective flow of their identity and to narrate change, uncertainty, and growth in more dynamic and embodied ways, thereby enriching the experiential descriptions central to phenomenological inquiry.

## Three Italian lecturers, one thread of English

I chose to focus on three Italian lecturers of Educational Linguistics, Carla, Adele, and Olivia, whose paths into EMI teaching are distinct yet gently interwoven. Each of them has taken a different route into this complex terrain, marked by professional negotiation, linguistic shift, and quiet resilience. Rather than striving for breadth or representativeness, I sought depth: the kind of understanding that can only emerge through sustained attention to individual lives. It was a conscious decision to linger with their voices, to follow their stories where they led, trusting that the specificity of their experiences would yield broader insight.

Carla and Adele both teach within the Italian university system, where EMI is often layered onto existing structures rather than integrated seamlessly. Their work unfolds in hybrid classrooms, where Italian-speaking students and international cohorts converge, and where English becomes a medium not only of instruction but also of identity negotiation. Olivia, by contrast, works abroad, learning new local languages, navigating

unfamiliar academic cultures, and recalibrating her identity across borders, and yet still uses English as her work language. Taken together, their narratives map a terrain of belonging, displacement, and professional redefinition. What emerged was not a static portrait of teacher identity, but a sense of movement of identity being crafted, stretched, and reassembled in real time.

The semi-structured interviews, or *conversations*, as I prefer to think of them (Appendix B and online supplemental materials), began with participants describing their Fortune Lines. This initial act of reflection opened a space for meaning to emerge, grounding the discussion in personal experience before moving into broader themes. The Fortune Lines became important, not just as visuals, but as temporal maps that helped me see how their sense of identity shifted over time. Turning points, high and low, began to echo across the different accounts (see Figures A2, A3, and A4 in Appendix C). This simple act of drawing, marking moments of pride, struggle, and change, opened windows into feelings and memories that might otherwise remain hidden. Following the fortune lines, the *conversations* allowed participants to narrate and interpret those moments in their own words. These *conversations* were less about ticking boxes or confirming hypotheses and more about making space for authentic expression, giving shape to experience as it is lived and felt.

Throughout, I was mindful of my role as listener and interpreter, striving to bracket my assumptions and resist imposing theoretical frames that might flatten or distort these stories. Participants had the opportunity to review and respond to my interpretations, ensuring that their voices remained central and true. This approach is not about producing definitive answers but about opening up a dialogue where the nuances of identity, emotion, and language can breathe and resonate.

## Making sense of experience: a phenomenological way of listening

Transcribing and analysing the conversations I had with Carla, Adele, and Olivia was not a matter of categorising what they said, but of trying to hear them as clearly as possible. I turned to transcendental phenomenology, not as a formula, but as a way of being with the data, and attending to the meanings that emerged from their stories (Giorgi, Barabara, and Joseph 2017).

The analytical process unfolded in stages. I began by keeping a reflexive journal (Giorgi 2009), where I noted not only methodological choices but also my reactions, doubts, and moments of connection or dissonance. This practice helped me remain aware of my positionality, as someone with entanglements in EMI and Educational Linguistics, and to step back when needed, to allow the participants' voices to lead.

During the *conversations* (Appendix B and online supplemental materials), I occasionally asked what phenomenology calls *imaginative variation* questions (Bevan 2014), inviting the participants to explore how they might have felt or acted if their circumstances had been different. These moments often sparked unexpected insights, revealing deeper layers of how they saw themselves in relation to English, academia, and their students.

Reading through the transcripts for the first time, I tried to let their words wash over me, an *impressionistic reading*, without analysis, just apprehending the words (Bevan 2014). In line with Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method, I began by

identifying meaning units within the interview data, segments marked by shifts in how participants articulated their experiences of EMI teaching and identity (see Tables S1–S3 in the online supplemental materials for a full breakdown). These units were then carefully transformed into phenomenological expressions, allowing the lived texture of participants' accounts to come into sharper relief. Rather than coding towards predefined categories, the analytic process aimed to stay close to the language and rhythm of participants' own sense-making. Two core concepts guided this interpretive movement: *intentionality*, understood as the directedness of consciousness towards particular phenomena (Moustakas 1994), and *being-in-the-world*, which speaks to the embedded, relational nature of identity within linguistic and social contexts (Heidegger [1927] 2010). These ideas did not dictate the analysis but served as orienting principles, helping to frame the presentation of findings and to bring forth the essence of what it means to be an EMI teacher, as lived by the participants.

Finally, I tried to weave these threads into a composite account: not a single narrative, but a textured description of what it feels like to be an educational linguist, a lecturer, a non-native English speaker, and a professional, all at once, within EMI. This account does not claim objectivity but rather offers a resonant picture of how identity is lived and made in a space shaped by language, ideology, and emotions.

## Navigating identity with Carla, Adele and Olivia

> I have an undeniable feeling of frustration, of being unable to reach certain goals, but I also feel that I belong to a niche when I teach these special [EMI] modules. (Adele)

The voices of Carla, Adele, and Olivia offer intimate access into the lived terrain of EMI teaching within Italian higher education. As they recount moments of challenge, adaptation, and redefinition, their experiences unfold not merely as accounts of linguistic negotiation but as stories of profound professional and personal transformation (Online supplemental materials). Below, the reader can find the phenomenological expressions derived from the analysis of these *conversations*, which serve to foreground the essence of their lived experiences.

### *Lived experiences and linguistic self-awareness*

Across their narratives, a heightened awareness of linguistic competence emerges, not only in how they perceive themselves but also in how they imagine others perceive them. Carla, for instance, exercises constant vigilance over her language choices: '*I never speak as if I were talking to a colleague; it's always controlled language*.' This deliberate calibration exemplifies the phenomenological notion of *intentionality*, the directedness of consciousness towards an object, where clarity becomes a conscious, purposeful act rather than spontaneous fluency.

Yet, this self-awareness is not seamless; it often brings into focus a sense of incommensurability between who they are in their first language and who they appear to be in English. This gap is not merely linguistic but ontological, a dissonance between internal expertise and external performance. Adele locates her struggle within the specialised language of her module: '*My difficulties aren't*

*just about language, but the language related to the context of the module*.' Together, Carla's and Adele's experiences signal a profound shift where linguistic self-awareness becomes central to professional confidence, even as it unsettles their natural ease.

This heightened awareness of language and its emotional weight reaches a turning point for Adele. As her fortune line suggests, a moment of relative uplift occurs not through external change but through a reframing of her internal experience: '*I felt a bit more positive when I started to study the literature on teacher well-being*'. Immersing herself in research allowed her to see her struggles, particularly anxiety and perfectionism, not as personal failings but as shared features of the early teaching experience: '*I found that anxiety and frustration [. . .] was a common state, a phase that teachers experience in their first five years [of teaching]*'. By beginning to *rationalise* her stress, as she puts it, Adele not only made sense of her emotional responses but also softened the grip of self-doubt. This act of meaning-making, of narrating one's own discomfort through the language of research, became a form of self-preservation and, ultimately, a step towards self-efficacy. It reminds us that linguistic self-awareness is not merely about speech or comprehension, but about how we interpret our place in the classroom and the expectations we place on ourselves.

And yet, English is not always experienced as a limitation. Olivia, working abroad and navigating a more multilingual context, describes English as a liberating force: '*English is the language that helped me start [my career], that boosted my evolution in the last few years*.' This sense of becoming, of English as a pathway rather than a constraint, reveals how intentionality towards teaching is shaped not solely by language proficiency but by the meanings attributed to it in context.

## *Intentionality toward self-efficacy and teaching methodology*

This linguistic awareness deeply informs how participants relate to their teaching methodologies and sense of self-efficacy. Carla shares, '*If I teach in my first language, I don't worry that people will understand. In English, I adopt strategies to check comprehension*'. Adele notes, '*In English, teaching techniques aren't as successful because of our limited skills*', a statement that positions language not as a neutral vehicle but as an active agent shaping pedagogical agency. Olivia, however, offers a counterpoint: '*If I used my mother tongue, I would still convey the same teaching experience. Only the medium changes*.' Her comment reveals a form of linguistic detachment from efficacy, suggesting that identity as a teacher can persist beyond the language used, even if the terrain feels altered.

Yet this relationship between language, self-efficacy, and methodology is not static; it unfolds over time. The Fortune Lines reveal how participants moved through early phases of linguistic and pedagogical insecurity towards a more grounded sense of agency. Carla's trajectory, for instance, captures a gradual consolidation of her EMI practice: '*In the second year, the situation improved because I had learned from the first year's experiences [. . .] I had made my own materials. I had already reflected on which activities had worked*'. By the third year, her reflections had materialised into confidence and preparedness: '*I already had a series of materials, resources that I had tested the previous years*'. Here, methodological intentionality is not only about linguistic strategy, but about experience accumulated, re-evaluated, and transformed into competence.

For Adele, this journey began with greater turbulence: *'It was my first experience at university, my first module, and it was the first time that module had been taught [. . .] this was a challenge compounded with language anxiety'*. Her early fortune line reflects a sharp dip, underlining the emotional intensity of stepping into EMI with little precedent. Still, her narrative, like Carla's, suggests movement. Over time, her sense of what 'works' as a teacher becomes more internally driven, rooted less in linguistic uncertainty and more in pedagogical adaptation.

### Emotional impact on professional identity

The emotional undercurrent of these experiences cannot be understated. All three participants spoke of moments of frustration, self-doubt, and eventual self-affirmation, emotions that pulse beneath their narratives and shape their evolving sense of self as EMI lecturers. Carla remarks, *'I prefer teaching in English to my first language [. . .] It's a challenge that makes me proud'*, while Adele reflects more openly on the toll it has taken: *'Teaching in another language was emotionally challenging, but I now feel proud to be part of it [. . .] I'm proud to be part of a niche of teachers training students who choose a specific curriculum'*. This tension, caught between pride and pressure, illustrates the emotional balancing act at the heart of EMI identity: a constant negotiation between vulnerability and professional belonging.

Olivia adds yet another layer: *'English opened doors of my mind'*, she says, but those doors required her to step into unfamiliar territory, triggering what Heidegger ([1927] 2010) might describe as a reorientation of *being-in-the-world*, a shifting of one's coordinates in both linguistic and professional landscapes.

What is especially revealing is how each participant chose to represent their journey visually through the fortune lines. Adele plotted hers through emotions, *'worried'*, *'hopeful'*, *'balanced'*, inviting a reading of EMI as an affective terrain marked by mood and internal struggle. Carla, in contrast, charted her path through degrees of pedagogical control, with her line rising steadily as her ability to *'adapt [her] speech'* and manage classroom dynamics strengthened. Olivia's timeline followed the external contours of her career, transitions across institutions, countries, and roles, suggesting a view of identity shaped by mobility and structural change.

These different articulations suggest that each participant navigates a layered self, one shaped by emotional memory, career stage, and linguistic belonging. The fluctuations in their timelines point to moments where identities in English and Italian are not neatly aligned but diverge. This misalignment becomes a site of friction, but also of insight, a space where identity is made visible through its instability. Whether through emotional resonance, teaching mastery, or career progression, their fortune lines become artefacts of selfhood, capturing not only what happened, but how it *felt* to move through it.

### Being-in-the-world and linguistic identity

Teaching in English reconfigures not only the language of instruction but the language of identity. For Carla, English is more than a tool, it is a space of belonging and desire: *'If I had to choose between English and my first language, I'd choose English [. . .] as I don't live in an anglophone country, but I love its*

*language so much, it's the only way to be immersed in the language'*. This immersion is not just linguistic but existential, an example of how *being-in-the-world* is reshaped through affective, chosen alignments. Her Fortune Line reflects this orientation: a steady, upward trajectory anchored by increasing confidence. At one point, she writes, *'I know exactly how to deal with students and [. . .] adapt my speech'*, signalling a sense of control and comfort that has been gradually earned through experience.

Adele, on the other hand, occupies a more precarious position. She, too, sees English as dialogic: *'Teaching in English means interacting with international students, exchanging methodologies and traditions'*. But her current institutional context introduces new pressures. A recent policy requiring EMI lecturers to become certified has unsettled her already delicate balance: *'[My university decided that] all EMI teachers need to be certified [. . .] This motivates me to take the [English] course [. . .] but this commitment adds to my already busy schedule'*. Her fortune line captures this rupture: a sharp descent at the point when institutional expectations begin to clash with her personal and professional bandwidth. Her linguistic identity is not fixed but negotiated moment by moment, influenced as much by emotional labour as by pedagogical goals.

Olivia offers yet another inflexion, framing English as a kind of hinge, a gateway not just to international education, but to a broader linguistic ecology: *'English is the language of opportunities; it helped me open my mind and use other languages'*. Her narrative resists the idea of English as an endpoint and instead situates it within a layered, multilingual self. Across all three accounts, identity emerges as situated, mobile, and often ambivalent. The fortune lines allow us to see this movement not only in language but in feeling, capturing how linguistic identity is lived in peaks and troughs, pressures and pleasures, a continuous becoming within the demands of EMI.

What emerges, then, is not a single, unified account of EMI teacher identity but a shared orientation towards transformation. Participants continuously negotiate between limitation and liberation, between self-doubt and empowerment. The essence of their experience lies in this tension, a constant recalibration of language, self, and teaching. This identity is marked by a phenomenological structure of intentionality, the conscious direction of attention towards language as both medium and object of reflection, that renders each teaching act not simply as content delivery, but as a negotiation of meaning, power, and presence. It is also defined by *being-in-the-world*, a condition in which language functions as more than a communicative tool; it becomes a space of belonging and becoming.

For Carla, Adele, and Olivia, EMI teaching is not a neutral academic exercise. It is an existential practice of self-articulation within and across languages. It is a process of finding voice amid constraint and building a professional self within shifting linguistic and institutional landscapes. And yet, across these narratives, a quiet but persistent tension emerges: an awareness that the professional self-expressed in English is never entirely commensurate with the one shaped in their first language. This incommensurability is not a defect but a lived experience of dual inhabitation, of being professionally fluent yet personally estranged. Ultimately, their stories offer insight into the intricate interplay between language, identity, and emotion, a phenomenological invitation to rethink what it means to teach between linguistic worlds. In what follows, I offer a phenomenological synthesis of these lived experiences, an attempt to listen carefully

to the meanings that surfaced through their stories and to articulate the essence of what it means to teach through English in these conditions.

## Entangled in the weight of linguistic ideology

> English is the language that helped me start [my career], that boosted the evolution I've had in the last years. It's the language that takes all the other languages by hand. (Olivia)

The teachers in this study remind us, gently, painfully and emotionally, that EMI is a site where language becomes deeply personal. It becomes effective, ideological, and even existential. What their experiences reveal is that language competence, particularly in English, is never a neutral objective terrain. It is mapped against the ever-lingering silhouette of the native speaker, a figure that continues to shape professional legitimacy, even when explicitly critiqued (Balfour 1999; Llurda and Calvet Terré 2024). Native-speakerism is not only a theoretical construct here; it is a lived horizon against which these lecturers gauge their authority, their sense of legitimacy, their pride, and their fears.

It is striking how emotionally charged this terrain is. Olivia speaks of English as the language that gave her wings; her words are laced with a kind of cosmopolitan optimism. Adele, by contrast, describes a subtle erosion, a disconnect from the linguistic self she once knew. And between them, we sense a shared experience of tension, of always teaching under an invisible gaze: *Whose voice am I using*? And *what does it say about who I am*?

What these reflections make visible is the emotional labour of EMI and its entanglement with identity (Hopkyns and Gkonou 2023). This is not simply about how well one teaches, but about whether one *belongs* to the language, to the institution, to the professional community. Even when teachers succeed in the classroom, native-speakerist norms continue to whisper doubts (Aguilar 2015; Airey 2012).

Of course, none of this occurs in a vacuum. These are lecturers in Educational Linguistics, a field that has historically aligned itself, perhaps covertly, with Anglophone norms. As Anderson (2024) notes, the influence of Chomskyan paradigms persists in shaping how we think about competence. And the native speaker, despite being problematised in scholarship, remains the unspoken standard.

But this is not a matter of theory alone. Teaching resources still prioritise standard varieties (Chen 2024; Takahashi 2017). Institutional policies still reward native-like fluency. And teacher evaluations, whether formal or informal, are still shaped by expectations of ideal English. Adele, reflecting on her experience, captures this pressure in concrete terms: '*[My university decided that] all EMI teachers need to be certified [. . .] This motivates me to take the [English] course [. . .] but this commitment adds to my already busy schedule.*' Her comment underscores how language ideology materialises not just in abstract expectations but in policies that shape teachers' time, energy, and professional development.

This burden is compounded by how teacher performance is evaluated, especially in language-related fields. As Adele notes, '*I teach in a Foreign Languages department, therefore it's different from teaching in an Economics or Biology department*'. In Educational Linguistics, the expectation for linguistic precision often becomes a proxy for pedagogical competence, placing additional pressure on EMI teachers to meet native-

like standards. In such contexts, language is not merely a medium of instruction but a marker of legitimacy. The fact that all this appears normal, that we barely notice it, is precisely the problem. Native-speakerism operates as an *invisible centre*, regulating not only who gets to speak, but who gets to feel legitimate.

This, then, is not merely a study about EMI in Italy. It is a study about how ideology becomes embodied. It shows how language ideologies are not abstract discourses but emotional economies, shaping how teachers feel and act (Moncada-Comas 2022). As Heidegger's ([1927] 1962) concept of *being-in-the-world* suggests, these teachers are not simply operating in a linguistic landscape, they are *situated* in it, with all the vulnerability and complexity that entails.

Importantly, participants' narratives suggest that their identities in English and Italian were not entirely commensurable; there is often a sense of slippage or dissonance between them. Yet phenomenologically, this incommensurability can be understood not as a breakdown, but as a site of perception and growth. When Adele speaks of emotional difficulty, or Carla of exerting more control in English, they are not simply articulating a linguistic challenge; they are navigating an existential tension that invites new forms of awareness. These sites of incoherence, where the self does not fully translate, open space for reflection, vulnerability, and the reshaping of pedagogical identity. The discomfort of this tension is real, but it is also generative. It creates an opening for new *intentionalities*, for becoming rather than merely preserving.

Holliday's (2025) call for a cosmopolitan ethos, a rejection of native-speakerism in favour of hybridity, is timely. The incommensurability described by participants is not a failure to be resolved, but a condition to be inhabited, a space in which new forms of professional and linguistic becoming can emerge. But as this study suggests, such change cannot be policy-led alone. It must begin with deeper listening: to the affective narratives of teachers, to the silent hierarchies embedded in our disciplines, and to how language shapes *who we are as teachers.*

## Teaching, language, and the edges of the self: a closing reflection

This was never meant to be a study just about pedagogy. It was, from the outset, a study about being, about what it means to teach in a language that is not quite one's own, in a field that quietly demands proximity to an idealised standard. At its heart lie three voices, each negotiating their place within a system that celebrates multilingualism on paper but often enacts it as a deficit in practice. In Educational Linguistics, where language is not just the subject but the *currency* of legitimacy, constructing identity was particularly intense. Olivia's optimism, Adele's honesty, Carla's strategic reflection: together they suggest that identity is not something teachers passively inherit, but something they perform and reimagine. What emerges, then, is not a unified portrait of EMI identity, but one marked by dissonance, by the felt sense that identity in English does not always reconcile with identity in Italian. This incommensurability is not failure, but the very texture of what it means to teach across linguistic borders.

This work does not generalise. It does not attempt to. But in listening closely to a few voices, it reveals larger patterns. It asks: What language ideologies shape how we feel about ourselves as professionals? And how do those ideologies live on, not just in syllabi, but in the silences and hesitations of everyday teaching? To answer these questions, we

need not only new policies but new stories. We need scholarship that honours plurality, and that takes emotion as seriously as structure. Only then can we begin to imagine an EMI that is grounded in the plural, messy, hopeful realities of teaching across languages and identities.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Carla, Adele, and Olivia, whose generosity, openness, and trust made this research possible. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewer of this manuscript, whose insightful and generous feedback helped me see through the stories more clearly and surface dimensions I had not initially perceived.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Notes on contributor

*Michela Gronchi* is an adjunct professor in Educational Linguistics at Ca' Foscari University in Italy and a research fellow for the EU-funded EcoStories CLIL training project. Currently pursuing a doctoral degree at the University of St Andrews, Michela focuses on exploring EMI teacher identity, an area that bridges socio-psycholinguistics and education. Her research interests encompass teacher identity and development, CLIL, and the sociolinguistics of EMI settings. Passionate about advancing knowledge in Educational Linguistics, Michela engages in participatory and creative research and has a strong commitment to supporting EMI teachers navigating multilingual classroom environments.

## ORCID

Michela Gronchi http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9676-7673

## AI use statement

This paper includes the use of ChatGPT (OpenAI) to support aspects of the writing process, including refining clarity and phrasing suggestions. The author retained full responsibility for the selection, interpretation, and final expression of all content. No generative AI tools were used to conduct or analyse the research itself. Use of AI complied with the ethical guidelines outlined by Taylor & Francis, and all critical decisions, arguments, and conclusions reflect the author's original intellectual work.

## References

Ackerley, K., M. Guarda, and F. Helm. 2017. *Sharing Perspectives on English-Medium Instruction*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Aguilar, M. 2015. "Engineering Lecturer's View on CLIL and EMI." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 20 (6): 722–735. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2015.1073664.

Airey, J. 2012. “I Don’t Teach Language. The Linguistic Attitudes of Physics Lecturers in Sweden.” *AILA Review* 25:64–79. https://doi.org/10.1075/aila.25.05air.
Anderson, J. 2024. “Reimagining Educational Linguistics: A Post-Competence Perspective.” *Educational Linguistics* 3 (2): 258–285. https://doi.org/10.1515/eduling-2023-0009.
Balfour, R. J. 1999. “Naming the Father: Re-Examining the Role of English as a Medium of Instruction in South African Education.” *Changing English* 6 (1): 103–113. https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684990060109.
Baumfield, V., E. Hall, and K. Wall. 2013. *Action Research in Education: Learning Through Practitioner Enquiry*. London: SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526402240.
Bevan, M. 2014. “A Method of Phenomenological Interviewing.” *The Qualitative Health Research* 24 (1): 136–144. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732313519710.
Block, D. 2021. “Emergent STEM Lecturer Identities: The Shaping Effects of EMI in Action in an Internationalised and Englishised HE Context.” *Language Teaching* 54 (3): 388–406. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444820000221.
Block, D. 2022. “Seeking Methodological Rigour in Language and Identity Research: Applying a Version of Positioning Theory to a Research Interview Excerpt.” In *Multilingualism and Identity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by W. Ayres-Bennett and L. Fisher, 181–200. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Block, D., and B. Moncada-Comas. 2019. “CLIL-ised EMI in Practice: Issues Arising.” *Language Learning Journal* 49 (6): 686–698. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2019.1660704.
Broggini, S., and F. Costa. 2017. “A Survey of English-Medium Instruction in Italian Higher Education: An Updated Perspective from 2012 to 2015.” *Journal of Immersion and content-Based Language Education* 5 (2): 238–264. https://doi.org/10.1075/jicb.5.2.04bro.
Cavana Perez, M. L. 2019. “‘When I Am Teaching German, I Put on a Persona’: Exploring Lived Experiences of Teaching a Foreign Language.” In *Negotiating Identity in Modern Foreign Language*, edited by M. Gallardo, 69–90. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Chen, F. W. 2024. “Who is Teaching English in English Language Learning Applications? Investigating the Native-Speakerism in the Mobile Learning Age.” *Changing English*: 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2024.2431012.
Costa, F. 2013. “Dealing with the Language Aspect? Personally, No. Content lecturers’ Views on Teaching Through English in a ICLHE Context.” In *Content and Language Integrated Learning in Europe*, edited by S. Breidbach and B. Viebrock, 117–127. Frankfurt am Mein: Peter Lang.
Dafouz, E. 2018. “English-Medium Instruction and Teacher Education Programmes in Higher Education: Ideological Forces and Imagined Identities at Work.” *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 21 (5): 540–552. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2018.1487926.
Davies, B., and R. Harré. 1990. “Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves.” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 20 (1): 43–63. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5914.1990.tb00174.x.
Diert-Boté, I., and B. Moncada-Comas. 2023. “Analyzing EMI Lecturer Perceptions About the Self: Insights into Their Professional Identities and Self-Concepts.” In *Handbook of Research on Language Teacher Identity*, edited by S. Karpava, 131–153. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
Englander, M. 2012. “The Interview: Data Collection in Descriptive Phenomenological Human Scientific Research.” *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 43: 13–35. https://doi.org/10.1163/156916212X632943.
European Ministers of Education. 1999. *The European Higher Education Area: Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education Convened in Bologna on the 19th of June 1999*. Bologna, Italy: European Ministers of Education.
Flores, N., and J. Rosa. 2023. “Undoing Competence: Coloniality, Homogeneity, and the Overrepresentation of Whiteness in Applied Linguistics.” *Language Learning* 73:268–295. https://doi.org/10.1111/lang.12528.
Giorgi, A. 2009. *The Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology: A Modified Husserlian Approach*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
Giorgi, A., G. Barabara, and M. Joseph. 2017. “The Descriptive Phenomenological Method.” In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, edited by C. Willig and W. Stainton-Rogers, 176–192. London: SAGE.

Gkonou, C., and S. Mercer. 2017. *Understanding Emotional and Social Intelligence Among English Language Teachers*. London: British Council.
Hall, E., and K. Wall. 2019. *Research Methods for Understanding Professional Learning*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
Heidegger, M. (1927) 1962. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh, revised by Dennis J. Schmidt. Albany: SUNY Press. (Original work published 1927).
Heidegger, M. (1927) 2010. *Being and Time* (J. Stambaugh, Translated by; revised by D. J. Schmidt). New York: SUNY Press. (Original work published 1927.
Helm, F., and M. Guarda. 2015. "'Improvisation is Not Allowed in a Second Language': A Survey of Italian Lecturers' Concerns About Teaching Their Subjects Through English." *Language Learning in Higher Education* 5 (2): 353–373. https://doi.org/10.1515/cercles-2015-0017.
Holliday, A. 2025. "A Critical Cosmopolitan Understanding of English as an International Language Teacher Identity." In *The Routledge Handbook of Teaching English as an International Language*, edited by N. Galloway and A. F. Selvi, 411–423. London: Routledge.
Hopkyns, S., and C. Gkonou. 2023. "Sites of Belonging: Fluctuating and Entangled Emotions at a UAE English-Medium University." *Linguistics & Education* 75:101148. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2023.101148.
Hult, F. 2008. *Handbook of Educational Linguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Jin, J., K. R. Talbot, and M. Stephen. 2021. "3 EMI Teacher Identity, Language Use and Reported Behaviours in Austrian Higher Education." In *The Psychological Experience of Integrating Content and Language*, edited by K. Talbot, M. Gruber, and R. Nishida, 33–54. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781788924306-008.
Llurda, E., and J. Calvet Terré. 2024. "Native-Speakerism and Non-Native Second Language Teachers: A Research Agenda." *Language Teaching* 57 (2): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444822000271.
Macaro, E., S. Curle, J. Pun, J. An, and J. Dearden. 2018. "A Systematic Review of English Medium Instruction in Higher Education." *Language Teaching* 51 (1): 36–76. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444817000350.
Moncada-Comas, B. 2022. "The Role of the L1 in EMI Classroom Practices: Exploring Identity Shifts Through Language Choice." *CLIL: Journal of Innovation and Research in Plurilingual and Pluricultural Education* 5 (2): 23–36. https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/clil.84.
Moustakas, C. E. 1994. *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
Pecorari, D. 2020. "English Medium Instruction: Disintegrating Language and Content?" In *Integrating Content and Language in Multilingual Universities*, edited by S. Dimova and J. Kling, 15–36. Cham: Springer.
Sah, P. 2023. "Emotions as Entanglements: Unpacking Teachers' Emotion Management and Policy Negotiation in English-Medium Instruction Programmes." *Language Learning Journal* 51 (5): 607–620. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2023.2243954.
Takahashi, R. 2017. "Attitudes of Japanese Learners and Teachers of English Towards Non-Standard English in Coursebooks." *Changing English* 24 (1): 42–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2016.1228444.
Van Manen, M. 1990. *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
Van Manen, M. 2014. *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
Volkman, M. J., and M. A. Anderson. 1998. "Creating Professional Identity: Dilemmas and Metaphors of a Firstyear Chemistry Teacher." *Science Education* 82 (3): 293–310.
Wall, K. 2017. "Exploring the Ethical Issues Related to Visual Methodology When Including Young children's Voice in Wider Research Samples." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 21 (3): 316–331. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1260845.
Zahavi, D. 2018. *Phenomenology: The Basics*. London: Routledge.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### *Fortune lines prompt*

Think about your professional identity as a university instructor who uses English as the language medium. Think about your experiences from when you started up until now. Then complete the fortune line axes by drawing a line and annotating any relevant details as in the example below (Figure A1). Please add as many periods as necessary to better describe your experience.

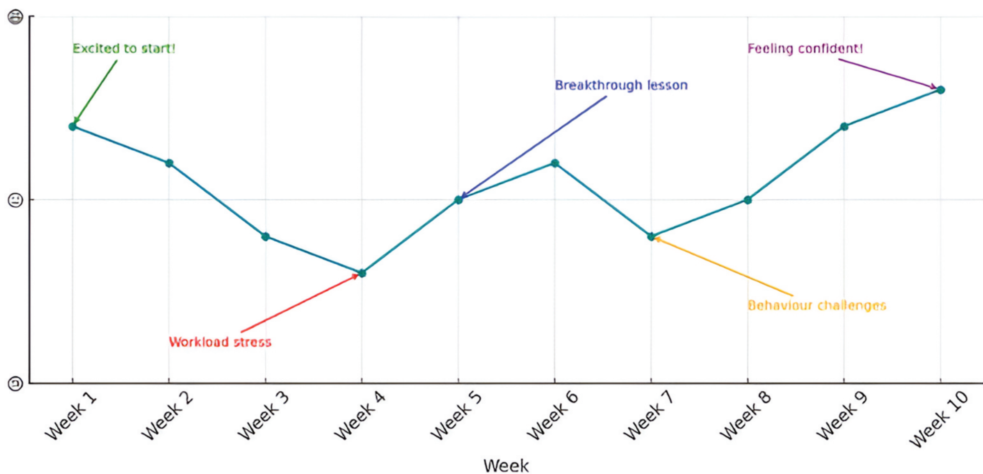



**Figure A1.** Example of annotated fortune lines (adapted from Hall and Wall 2019).

## Appendix B

### *Interview protocol*

Bevan's framework consists of three main domains, which are all undertaken in the phenomenological reduction by the author: contextualisation, apprehending the phenomenon and clarifying the phenomenon. In the present study, the following interview protocol was followed.

(1) Contextualisation: *can you describe to me about becoming an EMI teacher?* This phase aims to build a significant narrative about places, events, actions and activities.
(2) Apprehending the phenomenon: *can you describe aspects of your professional identity as an EMI lecturer? Can you describe what you mean by . . . ? Can you describe what you do when.?* This phase is characterised by two types of questions: the initial descriptive question aims to understand the participants' experiences of the phenomenon; the following questions directly derive from the response to the initial question and aim to show how individuals structure their experiences. This is the result of adopting a phenomenological reduction: the researcher

should not accept concepts at their face value as in so doing they would rely on natural attitude interpretations (Bevan 2014).

(3) Clarifying the phenomenon: *what would happen if you were teaching in your L1? Can you describe how X would change Y?* This phase is undertaken with the use of imaginative variation, which is normally used in the analysis phase (Giorgi, Barabara, and Joseph 2017). This process purposefully varies the structural components of the phenomenon as they emerge from the interview, to reveal the invariant parts and the essential structure of the experience.

Extra questions added after the piloting stage.

Contextualisation: *Can you describe to me about teaching in English as opposed to teaching in your first language?*

Clarifying the phenomenon: *What would happen if you were given the choice to use the language you prefer?*

## Appendix C

### *Participants' fortune lines*

Figures A2, A3, and A4 present the fortune lines of Carla, Adele, and Olivia, respectively.

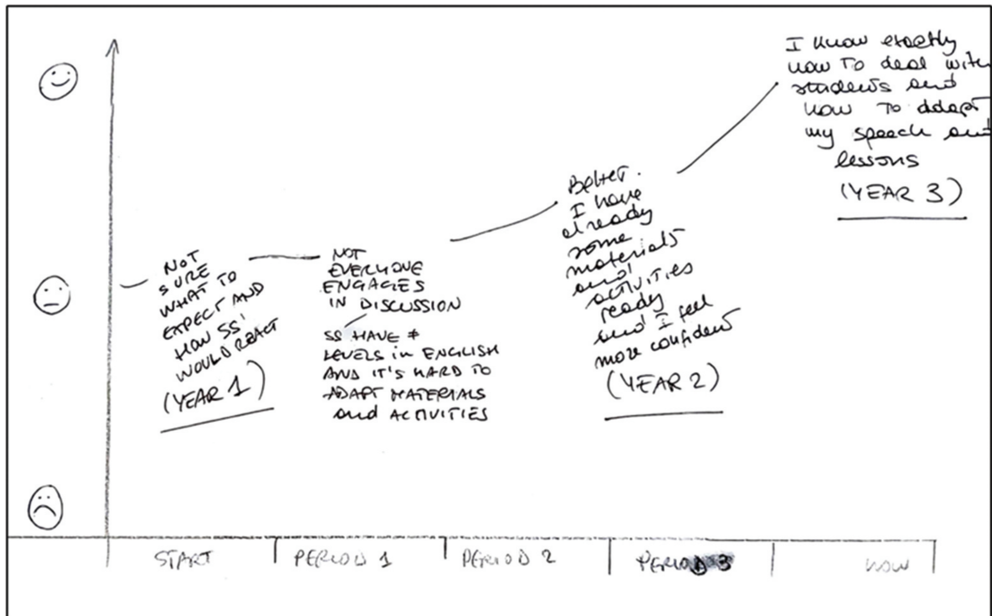



Figure A2. Carla's fortune line.

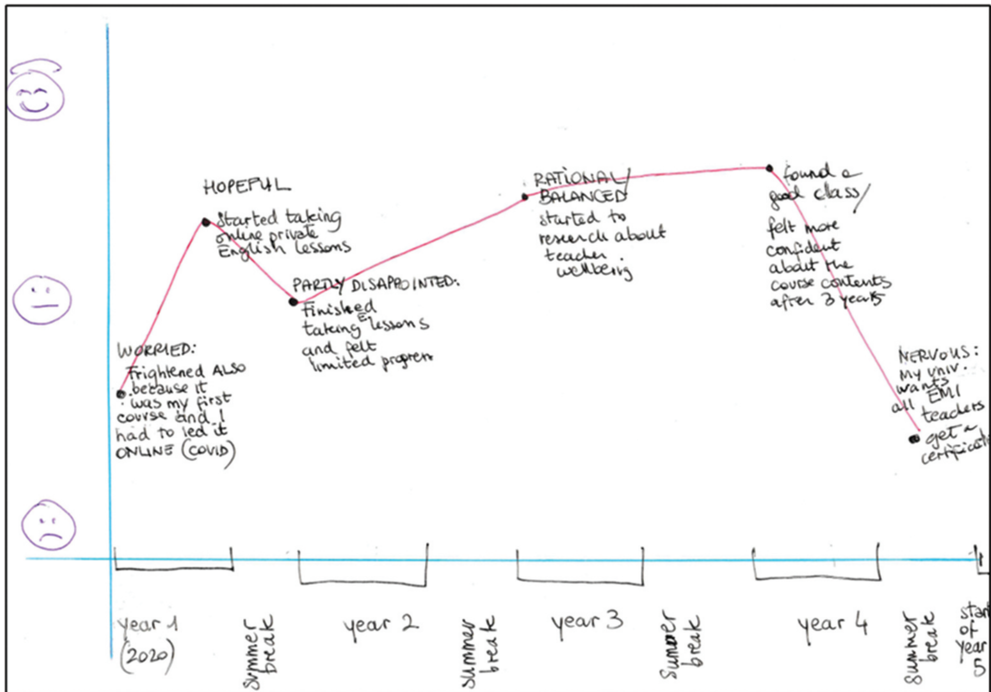



**Figure A3.** Adele's fortune line.

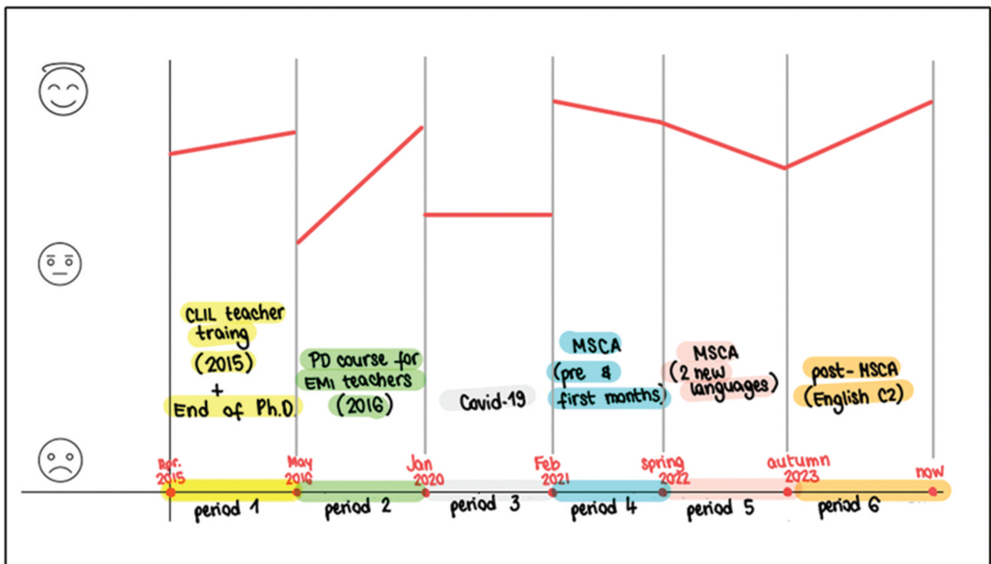



**Figure A4.** Olivia's fortune line.