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An exploratory study into the use of the take-home timeline activity for teacher professional development

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' experiences of a novel teacher education tool: the take-home timeline activity. A total of 25 English language teachers from four countries were invited to produce a visual timeline of how their beliefs and practices had changed over time. They were then asked to present and discuss their timelines with the researchers. A qualitative, exploratory methodological approach was adopted as part of an interpretivist philosophical framework. After presenting their timelines, participants were invited to reflect on their experiences in a semi-structured interview. Data were analysed inductively using a thematic analytical approach. The study found that most participants' experiences of the timeline activity were positive. Firstly, teachers reported that the timeline had helped them develop increased understandings of their professional selves, thus facilitating reflection on how they might 'become' better teachers in the future. Secondly, many teachers reported that timeline activity had provided an uplifting and even therapeutic emotional experience, thus helping them to 'feel' better about themselves as teachers. Although certain limitations and challenges of the timeline tool are discussed, the findings suggest that timelines may be a useful addition to reflective practice in teacher education.

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Introduction

In this article, we examine English language teachers' experiences of a novel teacher education tool: the *take-home timeline* activity. This activity involves teachers taking their own time, at home, to produce a visual timeline of the main events that have happened in their professional lives, with the aim of helping them reflect on past, current, and future beliefs and teaching practices. Although timelines have been used to facilitate reflection in other disciplines (e.g. Sheridan et al., 2011; Kolar et al., 2015; Rimkeviciene et al., 2016; Chen, 2018; Söderström, 2020), to our knowledge, very little is known about the potential of timelines in the field of education. The timeline activity is a creative, visual method of reflective practice, involving a retrospective reflection of past experiences – both areas that tend to be significantly underrepresented in the field of reflective practice (Bolton, 2018; Farrell, 2017). This study offers an important contribution to the field because it explores the potential uses of the timeline activity in this underrepresented area.

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The interest and potential need for timelines in teacher education emerged from the first author's work into timelines for 'life history' research (Bremner, 2020). Life history research is a qualitative methodological tradition that uses written and oral methods to allow participants to examine how their lives have developed over time (Goodson & Sikes, 2017). Previously, the author had utilised timelines *not* with the intention of creating a positive impact on teachers' professional development, but rather to enhance the trustworthiness of the research findings. However, after conducting the timeline activity with a small number of English language teachers, it emerged that there were benefits that went beyond merely timelines as a research tool. In this study, we implemented the timeline activity with a larger sample of 25 English language teachers, and document how the activity was perceived to impact upon their professional development.

In the two sections that follow, we provide an overview of key literature in the areas of a) TESOL reflective practice and b) life history and timelines. Through this review of existing literature, it becomes clear that creative, visual approaches to reflective practice, as well as those incorporating a retrospective component, are relatively underrepresented in TESOL teacher education, thus strengthening the case for further exploration into potential affordances of timelines for professional development.

Reflective practice in TESOL

Over the last few decades, there has been considerable interest in reflective practice (RP) in the area of TESOL and language teacher education (Farrell, 2017; Mann & Walsh, 2017). Indeed, so much has the interest in RP been that forms of reflection have almost become the orthodoxy for teacher education programmes. RP is generally viewed positively; for example, Farrell (2017), after reviewing 138 peer-reviewed journal articles on RP in TESOL, concluded that the results of the review were 'overwhelming positive regarding the transformative potential and developmental benefits of encouraging TESOL teachers to engage in reflective practice' (p. 130).

Despite this generally positive outlook, RP research and practice has been the subject of extensive critical discussion. For example, Farrell (2017) stresses that it is still somewhat unclear whether and how reflection might lead to any changes in teachers' practices. Moreover, he points out that there are inherent challenges, and a lack of research, on what RP might actually look like 'in practice' (p. 6). This echoes the arguments made by Mann and Walsh (2017), who indicate that there is a general lack of research on how RP 'gets done' (p. 246).

In an influential paper critiquing the current state of RP in TESOL, Mann and Walsh (2013) identified a number of issues with RP practices, including:

- A general lack of variety and appropriate tools for reflection (see also Farrell, 2015; Freeman, 2016);
- A lack of practical guidance of 'how to' facilitate reflection with teachers (see also Farrell & Kennedy, 2019);
- The tendency for RP not to be evidence-based and/or data-led (see also Walsh & Mann, 2015);
- Issues around how reflection can or should be assessed;
- Teacher educators not 'practising what they preach' in terms of their own RP;
- Too much of a focus on written reflection as opposed to potentially useful spoken forms;
- Too much of a focus on reflection as an individual process (see also Godínez, 2022).

One of the main reasons Mann and Walsh stress these points is to avoid RP becoming prescriptive, mechanical, or even ritualised, and thus becoming 'an institutionalized requirement that then encourages superficial engagement or inauthentic reflection' (2017, p. 20). They emphasise the importance of the development of more appropriate reflection tools, and for more research to be carried out to test and compare alternative approaches to reflection.

These recommendations would seem to resonate with scholars interested in RP in broader disciplines, who have advocated more creative and visual methods to facilitate meaningful reflection (e.g. Bilous et al., 2018; Bolton, 2018; McIntosh, 2010). For example, Bolton (2018) provides examples of methods of RP from the arts and other media, including drama, dance, photography, film, letter writing, metaphor, storytelling, repertory grids, concept mapping and creative writing, among others. In the TESOL field,

Farrell's (2017) review of 138 articles listed a total of 37 different reflective instruments. The review found that that most forms of RP consisted of discussion, followed by writing, classroom observations and action research, with three or fewer examples of 'cases, portfolios, team teaching, peer coaching, and critical friend/incident transcript' (p. 105).

It is worth noting that most of the tools identified by Farrell in his review appear to have been designed to elicit participants' reflections on current or recent events (for example, reflecting on a week's teaching, or immediately after a particular lesson observation). Even regular journal or portfolio entries appear to have been 'longitudinal' in nature, i.e. regular entries at points in time over an extended period. What appears to be absent are tools that encourage retrospective reflection over an extended period of time. This gap is also reflected in Barnard and Ryan (2017) edited book, which contains many illuminating case studies of 'voices from the field' in language education. Here, although the chapters explicitly highlight many examples of 'reflection-on-action' (i.e. reflection that occurs in the aftermath of particular events), there are limited case studies which seem to have engaged participants in a detailed exploration of their (educational) life histories over longer periods of time.

In sum, in the RP literature, there seems to be a clear gap in terms of creative, visual techniques and those that involve a retrospective element, such as visual timelines. In the following section, we examine life history research in more detail, and specifically, how timelines have been utilised within the life history research approach.

Life history and timelines

The qualitative tradition of 'life history' has become an increasingly popular way of researching the way people's thoughts, emotions and behaviours are perceived to have changed over time (Goodson & Sikes, 2017). For example, in TESOL, several studies have utilised life history to illuminate English language teachers' lives over time (e.g. Bremner, 2019; Hayes, 2010; Liu & Xu, 2011). The ways in which participants are often encouraged to express their life history narratives are through extended oral interviews or extended pieces of writing (Goodson & Sikes, 2017). However, in more recent years, visual timelines, produced either by hand or using a computer, have begun to be used as a useful way of facilitating life history reflection. In other words, timelines have become another tool in the life historian's methodological repertoire.

Timelines, by their very nature, provide visual representations of events over time, typically chronicling salient life events in sequential order (Berends, 2011; Pell et al., 2020). The application of this method boasts significant flexibility. It may stand alone to gather narrative data (e.g. Garcia-Iglesias et al., 2023) or serve as a supplementary visual tool for interviews (e.g. Monico et al., 2020). Participants are able to create these timelines independently during their own time (e.g. Garcia-Iglesias et al., 2023), or with the researcher's guidance (e.g. Sankaran et al., 2019).

The adoption of visual timelines is increasingly recognised as a technique for enhancing trustworthiness in qualitative research, particularly within the realms of medical, social, and psychological studies. Timeline studies have covered diverse areas such as patients' illness journeys (e.g. Chen, 2018), substance use and treatment research (e.g. Garcia-Iglesias et al., 2023; Hurtubise et al., 2021; Joslin et al., 2023; Monico et al., 2020), studies centred on youth (e.g. Looman et al., 2022), and examinations of women's lived experiences (e.g. Pell et al., 2020; Sankaran et al., 2019). A recurrent theme is that timelines aid participants in articulating and introspectively examining their experiences with added depth and nuance (Bagnoli, 2009; Garcia-Iglesias et al., 2023). Timelines are reported to have aided participants' memory recall, thereby providing a lucid chronological comprehension of their life experiences (Van der Vaart, 2004; Sankaran et al., 2019). Moreover, timelines have been shown to increase the rapport between the participant and researcher (Kolar et al., 2015; Nelson, 2010). Finally, some scholars have argued that the act of participants generating their own timelines may mitigate power disparities during data collection, empowering participants with a stronger sense of agency over their narratives (Adriansen, 2012; Pell et al., 2020).

The aforementioned benefits all relate to the use of timelines as a life history research tool, but it is also important to point out that such approaches may also have certain 'secondary' benefits. In different disciplines, timeline-based studies have been reported as 'therapeutic' (e.g. Sheridan et al., 2011;

D'Amico et al., 2016; Hurtubise et al., 2021; Kolar et al., 2015). For example, Kolar and colleagues' study on resilience on marginalised groups found that many participants found it positive to reflect on their 'future timelines', setting goals for themselves and thus bringing a degree of positive closure to their reflections. Sheridan et al. (2011) utilised timelines to help participants explore weight loss over time, and found the timelines a powerful tool for reflection:

> The systematic agglomeration of data onto the timeline allows participants to contemplate the life (re)presented, to gain insights into their experiences, to explore dimensions of continuity and change in their lives and often to see things from new perspectives. In so doing, participants can effectively become researchers of their own lives. (pp. 565–566)

It is clear, then, that the potential benefits of life history research may extend further than simply facilitating the validity or trustworthiness of a research process. As mentioned earlier, this led us to contemplate whether these benefits might be transferred to teachers' reflective practice and professional development. Given that, to our knowledge, no timeline-based research has been formally reported with TESOL teachers or even within the broader field of education, the present study sought to explore whether these teachers may find value in a timeline activity, not merely as a tool to improve life history research, but in order to enhance their professional development.

Finally, as noted by whilst numerous benefits of timelines emerge from the aforementioned studies, these advantages are primarily discerned through the lens of the researchers, not the participants themselves (Garcia-Iglesias et al., 2023). Thus, the present exploratory study seeks to examine the experiences of language teachers employing this innovative instrument as a form of reflective practice.

Methods

Aims and overall methodological approach

The overall aim of this study was to explore how the timeline activity might be used as a tool for (English language) teacher professional development. The specific research questions of the study were as follows:

RQ1: What are teachers' experiences of the timeline activity?

RQ2: What might be the future uses of the timeline activity in participants' own contexts?

To address these research questions, we sought to examine the lived experiences of 25 English language teachers who volunteered to take part in the timeline activity. The study was qualitative and exploratory in nature, consistent with interpretivist epistemological principles. It was therefore not our intention to generalise (for example, that the timeline activity may have been effective or non-effective) but rather to better understand the process of participants' experiences of this form of reflective practice, and to provide explanations regarding the reasons behind their perspectives. This would provide us with a tentative idea of the potential value of the timeline activity, but would clearly not provide unequivocal answers about its effectiveness for all teachers. This exploratory, qualitative study may provide a springboard to further larger-scale research examining the effectiveness of the timeline activity.

Sampling strategy and participant information

A purposive sampling strategy was employed in the study. Participants needed to be English language teachers with at least one year of full-time teaching experience, as in this case we felt that in-service teachers with at least some teaching experience would have more experience to draw upon and thus more likely to find benefit from the activity. We invited participants from four different countries (the UK, China, Mexico and Colombia), as we were hoping to gather a wide range of views of English language teachers from diverse contexts. To recruit participants, we used our own professional contacts to send a group email to language schools and universities in the UK, China, Mexico and Colombia. Participation was on an opt-in basis only – teachers were requested to email the researchers directly if they were interested in taking part in the study.

Consistent with the principles of sampling in small-scale naturalistic research (Armstrong, 2010), we did not plan for a particular sample size, but rather we continued to increase the pool of participants until we had reached 'theoretical saturation' (Sandelowski, 2008); i.e. when the same or very similar themes continued to emerge in the data. In terms of how this worked in practice, several interested teachers contacted us over a period of several months. We continued to schedule timeline activities and post-timeline interviews in a staggered fashion for around six months, but we began to transcribe and analyse the post-timeline interview data as soon as it was completed. We perceived that very few 'new' ideas were emerging after around 15 interviews – however, by this time, we had already begun the process with several other participants. At this stage we therefore ceased beginning the timeline activity process with any new participants, but continued until all 25 participants had completed the process. Eventually, 25 English teachers completed the research. Key information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

Data collection and analysis

There were four main stages to the data collection process, as explained below:

1. *Awareness-raising and gathering of informed consent.*
   After receiving communications from interested participants, we began by arranging individual videocalls using Microsoft Teams, to explain what we would be asking participants to do. Here, participants had the opportunity to ask any questions and it was at this point that we gathered participants' written informed consent. In Figure 1, we summarise the instructions and guidance provided to each participant. The instructions were delivered orally using a PowerPoint presentation, but have been paraphrased in Figure 1 due to limitations of space. As mentioned in the Discussion, we are especially interested in providing these instructions so that readers are transparently aware of the procedures we took, and thus may choose to implement (an adapted version of) the activity with teachers in their own contexts.
2. *Participants produce the timelines in their own time.*
   After being given the instructions above, participants were then given approximately 2 to 4 weeks to produce their timelines at home. Although we did provide a suggested set structure to help participants get started, we gave them considerable freedom and flexibility regarding how they would go

Table 1. Summary of key information about the participants.

Participant name (pseudonym)	Gender	Nationality	Years of language teaching experience	Current teaching context
Dingxiang	F	Chinese	2–5	Vocational college, China
Lianwen	F	Chinese	2–5	Private secondary school, China
Manxing	M	Chinese	2–5	Higher education, UK
Maoyin	F	Chinese	2–5	Public secondary school, China
Muxun	F	Chinese	2–5	Vocational college, China
Wenying	F	Chinese	2–5	Private secondary school, China
Yangyang	M	Chinese	2–5	Private tutoring, China
Yuan	F	Chinese	2–5	Public secondary school, China
Xingyun	F	Chinese	5–10	Higher education, UK
Zeyun	M	Chinese	5–10	Public secondary school, China
Edith	F	UK	5–10	Higher education, UK
Marc	M	UK	10–15	Private language institute, UK
Kate	F	UK	15–20	Private language institute, UK
Sam	M	UK	10–15	Private language institute, UK
Susan	F	UK	2–5	Private language institute, UK
Elizabeth	F	Mexican	15–20	Higher education, Mexico
Isabella	F	Mexican	20–25	Higher education, Mexico
Jairo	M	Mexican	20–25	Public secondary school, Mexico
Jess	F	Mexican	30–35	Higher education, Mexico
Miguel	M	Mexican	10–15	Higher education, Mexico
Rebecca	F	Mexican	25–30	Higher education, Mexico
Ricardo	M	Mexican	25–30	Higher education, Mexico
Ana	F	Colombian	2–5	Higher education
Joaquin	F	Colombian	5–10	Public secondary school
Liliana	F	Colombian	2–5	Higher education

We invite you to explore how your beliefs and practices about English language teaching have changed over time, and what might be the reasons for any changes.

It's totally up to you how you produce the timeline and what to include in your timeline. We will use it as a stimulus for a discussion about your professional journey, so as long as you understand what is on it, that will be enough detail in order for us to have a discussion. You might want to start by drawing a line in the middle of the page (horizontally or vertically). On this line, you could begin by putting some of the key events that you feel have had an impact on your beliefs and practices (about English language teaching). We don't need every detail – only those you feel are important.

It is not obligatory, but if you feel it is useful, at certain points on your timeline you could write:

In **GREEN** – how your beliefs changed at that point;

In **BLUE** – how your practices changed at that point;

In **RED** – any obstacles to putting your beliefs into practice at that point.

Finally, at certain points on your timeline you may find it interesting to score your "self-efficacy" out of 10 – this means "how good a teacher you felt you were" (1 = worst teacher ever, 10 = best teacher ever). This could be seen from two different perspectives:

At the time – how you felt at the time – e.g. "at the time, I felt like an *x*"

Retrospectively – what score you'd give your past self now – e.g. "looking back, I'd rate myself as a *y*".

If you do decide to include these numbers, don't worry about the exact number as we will not be comparing these numbers with any other participant - the interesting part will be the discussions that ensue from them.

At the end of the timeline, you may wish to provide a future timeline. Given all of your past experiences, where do you see yourself going in the short and medium term?

Don't worry if you can't remember, and please don't feel pressured to include any aspect of your past that you don't feel comfortable discussing. We would normally expect this activity to take between 2 and 4 weeks, but do let us know if you need extra time.

Figure 1. Summary of instruction and guideline provided to participants.

about producing their timelines. Given teachers' busy schedules, it was important not to be overly prescriptive to participants or to pressure them to finish the activity in a set time. With participants' permission, a selection of anonymised timelines have been included as Supplementary Material.

3. *Timeline discussion.*
After participants had completed their timelines, we conducted another online videocall to discuss their timelines. The focus was on exploring how participants' beliefs and practices about language

teaching had developed over time, and the reasons for any changes. These discussions consisted of the researcher asking participants to elaborate what they had produced on the timeline, and asking supplementary probing questions. The timeline discussions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. We took the decision not to record the timeline discussions, nor to analyse the data of the timelines themselves. Firstly, we did not feel that analysing this data would be essential to answering our research questions; after all, the aim of this research was to examine participants' overall experiences of the timeline activity, not the contents of each individual timeline. Secondly, we felt that not recording the timeline discussions would enable the participants to feel as comfortable as possible during the interview process.

4. *Post-timeline interview*.
   We conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant up to 10 days after the timeline discussion in order to examine their experiences of participation. A list of prompting questions were sent to participants beforehand to better prepare them for the interview. These questions formed an overall guiding structure, but we allowed participants freedom to ask additional questions, request clarification and respond to emerging issues:.

   - What were your experiences of the take-home timeline activity in general?
   - To what extent do you feel the take-home timeline activity was beneficial, or not beneficial, to your professional development? Why?
   - To what extent do you think other teachers in your context(s) would be interested in participating this activity? Why?
   - If you were to conduct the activity, what changes might you make?

Interviews with each individual participants were conducted on Microsoft Teams, using either English or participants' L1 as they preferred (only one participant chose to use their L1; their interview was transcribed and translated immediately by the second researcher). Interview sessions lasted 30 minutes on an average and were audio-recorded with participants' permission. After collecting the post-timeline interviews, we transcribed them using the Microsoft Teams automatic captioning functionality, followed by manual post-editing. We then utilised QSR NVivo to conduct an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the findings. Following Saldaña's (2021) qualitative data coding protocols, the first author conducted a preliminary analysis of the themes, and these themes were then reviewed by the second researcher. Where there were inconsistencies or irregularities, both researchers engaged in a constructive dialogue until they reached agreement on the final themes and codes. The themes emerging from the study are presented in the following section, accompanied by a selection of illustrative examples for each theme. For reasons of anonymity, the real names of the participants have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Maximising trustworthiness

The trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the data collection process was increased through a number of strategies. In terms of *credibility*, firstly, we attempted to achieve 'triangulation of sources' (Patton, 2001) by collecting data from teachers in four different contexts until we reached 'theoretical saturation' (Sandelowski, 2008). Secondly, we achieved 'referential adequacy' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) through the ongoing process of data collection: after the initial cases were analysed, the preliminary findings served as a framework by which the further cases were analysed. Thirdly, we conducted 'negative or deviant case analysis' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in which data that differed from the majority of the findings were taken into account. Fourth, we conducted 'analyst triangulation' (Patton, 2001) as both researchers analysed the data to highlight any different interpretations and/or potential blind spots. Fifth, we carried out 'member checking' by giving participants the opportunity to comment on the transcriptions of their post-timeline interviews. Sixth, we engaged in a process of 'peer debriefing' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in which we discussed the write-up of the paper with a disinterested, experienced peer at our institution. Although we did not conduct an 'external audit', a possible way of increasing the *dependability* of the study, we feel that this 'peer debriefing' process helped review the overall methodological process and the extent to which the findings and conclusions were supported by the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In terms of *transferability,* within word limit constraints, we have provided some information regarding the participants of the study (see Table 1) and provided a selection of detailed examples in the Findings section that follow. Although the findings are clearly not generalisable to all contexts, the reader may decide to what extent the experiences and characteristics of the participants resonate with the likely experiences of participants in their own contexts. Finally, in terms of *confirmability*, in addition to the 'analyst triangulation' mentioned above, it is important to address the criterion of 'reflexivity' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by examining our researcher positionality. We approached the study both from a teacher educator and researcher perspective. Both researchers are TESOL teachers that are currently working in a variety of teaching and teacher training roles, but also with a significant proportion of time dedicated to research. We both have an inherent interest in developing more effective approaches to teacher training, and we had both had positive experiences with timelines, albeit with relatively small numbers of participants (e.g. Bremner, 2020). This meant that, assuming the role of teacher trainers, we were positively disposed towards the activity and we were expecting, and hoping, that the activity would be positively received by the participants. However, assuming the role of researchers, we strived to be as neutral as possible when exploring the potential value of the tool, for example by avoiding leading questions and by giving participants the opportunity to highlight negative experiences as well as positive ones.

Findings

RQ1. Teachers' experiences of the timeline activity

Increased understandings of self, facilitated by the timeline

The vast majority of the experiences reported by participants of the timeline activity were positive. One of the most commonly cited themes that emerged was that participants developed an increased understanding of their professional selves, including their strengths and weaknesses:

> **Jairo:** It was a good exercise for me, because from the very first moment it made me reflect on my teaching, on what I have done, on my strengths and weaknesses, and what I have done right or wrong.

> **Rebecca**: It was an opportunity to realise what I had been doing throughout this period of time, and I gained some awareness on the changes I had gone through as a teacher. […] It was an exercise for raising my awareness on my teaching itself, and how I developed, how I changed.

Several participants highlighted comparisons between the longer retrospective elements of the timeline and more immediate reflection tools that they were more used to taking part in:

> **Maoyin:** In comparison to other [forms of reflective practice], it [the timeline] enables you to you see the entire framework. […] It enabled me to understand my past experience - the *entire* experience.

This would seem to have allowed most participants to bring together a more 'holistic' view of themselves and their development:

> **Yuan:** In the timeline, it brings everything together as a whole, giving my experience a sense of cohesion, and allows me to actually view my own development over time, how my thoughts or behaviours or beliefs have changed over time, and why I have changed in this way, just putting everything in perspective, and gazing at myself from that perspective also gives me some new thoughts about myself.

> **Xingyun:** I found that this activity allows me to view my developmental process from a long-term perspective, and this has actually helped me to expand my understanding of my own teacher identity.

Many participants highlighted that the timeline had provided a structure which had enabled them to visualise and organise their ideas. Several participants explicitly highlighted that the structure provided by the timeline had helped them to remember details in their past that they may not have otherwise recalled. As Marc's example below shows, the process of creating the timeline helped unlock certain memories, which, in turn, led to deeper and more complex reflections:

> **Marc:** I think I needed that time to reflect on the areas that were quite important but hadn't come up immediately. That immediate kind of recall wasn't there. It was seeing it laid out and going 'I remember that!'

It is also important to note that the perceived benefits of the timeline activity do not appear to have been solely due to the individual process of creating a timeline, but also the process of discussing it with someone else:

Isabella: I don't think [the benefit] was immediate until we had that conversation afterwards, when I had to explain every little bit. That's when I was like 'You know? I've done a lot!'

Manxing: I think that the discussion is more intense and actually more useful compared to producing the timeline, because there is a lot of discussion involved in that part and it is those discussions that actually helped me to deeply review my past and retell my story.

Looking to the past, to facilitate changes in the future

As illustrated in the previous section, many participants expressed that the timeline activity had helped them achieve an enhanced understanding of their professional selves. But would this actually lead to any changes in their practices? In this sense, most participants anticipated that taking part in the timeline activity would lead to changes in their practices:

Jairo: This timeline has, or will have, a positive effect on my teaching […] There are lots of mistakes I have made, and there are also things that I have improved, and I want to improve. […] So, that is what I liked about this timeline, because it made me reflect on my everyday process.

Yuan: This timeline made me articulate my perception of my teaching: what I like about it, what I don't, what I think is useful and what I think is not. All this understanding would allow me to better prepare myself for my ongoing process and I do believe that I will definitely benefit from it in my future teaching practice.

In comparison to the previous examples, it was interesting to note that some participants did not utilise the timeline so much as a tool to improve their future teaching *practices* per se, but rather as a way of planning their future career prospects:

Joaquin: I think it is important to see what you have done and what you should do next. It helps you to be more organised, and the things you do in life professionally […] so this is a great exercise to think carefully about new goals or how to achieve your goals.

Marc: I think it's probably come at just the right moment where now I don't just want [to work in] mainstream language schools. […] I needed something different. It's coming at the point where I'm yearning for that.

Researcher: So from what you said, the main outcome has almost been as a career planner, a realisation of 'who I am and what I where I want to go'.

Marc: Yes.

In Marc's case above, the timeline activity almost became career counselling or even career therapy. This links to the final main positive theme, in which many participants viewed the timeline activity as a positive emotional experience.

Looking to the past, to feel better about the future

Several participants reported that carrying out the timeline activity had helped to highlight their achievements, with some actually expressing their surprise at having achieved so much:

Lianwen: After I finished the timeline and looked at it, I found that I have actually done so many things during my entire journey.

Kate: You're like 'oh I've done this!' and 'I've done that!', and then it's a kind of excitement because you think 'I've done so much!'

In many instances, this realisation led to a further therapeutic effect in terms of sense of achievement and professional motivation:

Wenying: I could see in the beginning of my career how I was struggling and frustrated, and I could see how I became more experienced step by step. I could see that I have made progress. […] I have more sense of achievement.

Sam: Part of me is going 'I haven't done a lot', and then part of me is going 'Oh, I've done quite a lot'. […] It's nice to think about what you're doing in your job, and I think at the end of the day, I do want to feel like I'm, to some extent, worthwhile in the world!

In Isabella's case, she reported that the timeline had made her more confident and assertive, which was similar to Edith who saw her work 'validated' by her reflections:

Isabella: I've done a lot. It doesn't seem like it, and not everybody knows about it. So I feel good about it […]. It's kind of made me more assertive to have confidence in myself.

Edith: I think it's been beneficial in the sense of making me feel a bit more validated and my awareness of how I've developed over time. […] I think understanding why and then and being able to *own* it a little bit more and go 'actually there is a reason why I believe this' […] and feeling like I know who I am a bit more.

The participants who most found the timeline activity to be an emotional experience were Marc and Liliana. In Marc's case, the timeline helped him clarify in his mind where he would like to work, or not work, in the future:

Marc: I think it showed me what I've done and what I can do, and what I should be doing, and I think the timeline just kind of raised that. It made me very aware that I am worth more.

Finally, Liliana likened the timeline activity to 'therapy', which gave her an opportunity to express herself and ultimately experience an uplifting emotional feeling:

Liliana: For me it was very beneficial because I felt that it was a way of expressing many things. It was a therapy for me because it allowed me to remember many things I wanted to do and put it into practice now.

It should be recognised that although most participants' overall experiences were very positive, there were also some negative themes which emerged over the 25 interviews. We examine some of these experiences in the following section.

Negative emotions

For three participants (Liliana, Marc and Ana), the creation and discussion of the timeline involved a certain degree of negative emotions, although it should be stressed that the overall experience was still positive for them. Liliana, for example, recalled some particularly difficult times during her school and university years:

Liliana: The challenges were related to, for example, when I had to remember some aspects in terms of my school years. […] For example, I remember because I wore glasses and at that time we didn't know that people talked about us in a bad way […]. It was also challenging when I was talking about the Master's because I had a very personal, sad experience that changed my life a lot. […] It was very challenging because I was thinking about the pain that I was suffering at that time.

Both Liliana and Marc also felt that the timeline activity had brought to the fore some of the mistakes they had made in their past and their regrets. Marc, for example, expressed:

Marc: I did feel a bit down at some point when I thought 'Ah, God - haven't I screwed it up!'. I meant my career. So I was like 'If I'd done that then … ', 'If I could have moved my degree to there … '. I know we shouldn't regret things, but it did make me go 'Oh … '

A final point was that both Marc and Ana talked about their future aspirations in the teaching profession with a somewhat depressing outlook. This was exemplified by Ana, who found that reflecting on the various places she had worked really brought to light the challenging working conditions, at least in the contexts where she had worked:

Ana: It makes me feel depressed. Sometimes I feel like I should be trying to find a different job. Because for me it is annoying that sometimes you do a lot, you give a lot, and you receive nothing. […] It kind of made me feel like I need to find some other place to work.

The final quote is particularly interesting, as presumably, the last thing schools and institutes would want is for their teachers to carry out the timeline activity and end up leaving their current employers or even the profession.

RQ2. Future uses of the timeline activity

After discussing teachers' individual experiences of the timeline activity, the final set of questions asked their views on the potential use of the timeline activity for other teachers. In particular, we were interested in their perspectives regarding 1) what might be the obstacles or challenges to teachers taking part, and 2) what changes they might make if they were to run the activity with teachers in their own contexts.

General positivity, but depends on individual teachers and contexts

When asked whether participants' teaching colleagues might be interested in the timeline activity, they were understandably reluctant to speak for all of their fellow teachers, especially given many of them worked in multiple contexts. However, the general consensus was that many teachers would be interested. Liliana, for instance, suggested that many teachers would appreciate the chance to be 'listened to':

> **Liliana:** In those contexts where I have worked, I think there are teachers that need to be listened to […]. I think there's a lack of listening to others. I know our students are very important for us, but what happens sometimes with teachers?

It is important to note that many participants also highlighted that it would depend on the individual characteristics of the teachers in terms of their willingness to take part. For example, although Miguel and Lianwen suggested that many experienced colleagues in their context would potentially be interested in the activity, Zeyun suggested that older, more traditional teachers in Chinese public school contexts might be more reluctant to participate, perhaps as it might lead them to 'lose face':

> **Zeyun:** It's very different from teacher to teacher […] especially some very senior teachers I know, they would be very reluctant to include that level of detail to disclose with the other teachers because they want to have a certain level of authority. If others know too much about them, they think it would be threatening their status of being the senior teacher in a group.

Moreover, a few participants highlighted that the timeline activity may not be for certain types of people and personalities. Rebecca, for example, highlighted that although it worked for her as a 'visual' person, it may not work for everyone. Finally, Jairo suggested that some teachers might be reluctant to express themselves, especially in English, whereas Susan indicated that perhaps teachers might not want to be seen to 'brag' about their achievements:

> **Susan:** I don't think it would have necessarily been such a positive reflection [if implemented as a group activity], maybe because of modesty, kind of not wanting to brag about achievements and stuff. It might have become a little bit more awkward.

External challenges

In the previous sub-section, we explored some of the individual level factors that may cause certain people to be less likely to participate in the activity. In this section, we focus on some of the more external challenges. Here, by far the most commonly cited issue was time:

> **Edith:** I think the main obstacle is finding the time to do it and understanding the reason what you're doing in the first place. Because some people are very willing to take that step back and set an hour mapping stuff out, but other people are so pressed for time that unless they see some tangible outcome from it, they might not want to.

In Edith's quote she mentions the importance of making the perceived benefits clear to participants. Indeed, the extent to which the activity's benefits were shown and promoted, was a theme mentioned by several other participants:

> **Wenying:** If they do not receive any information regarding what influence this activity could bring to their teaching, any concrete influence, or any instant effect, or if this is rather time-consuming and if they have too much teaching load, they might be more resistant.

Admittedly, clear benefits and incentives to participate were one of the key suggestions for adapting the activity to make it more appealing. We examine these suggestions now.

Suggestions for changes

There were a range of different suggestions from the participants. Elizabeth highlighted the importance of adapting specific aspects of the activity depending on whether she was working with more or less experienced teachers, and this seems to have been reflected by the range of suggestions from different teaching contexts. For instance, a few participants suggested that the activity could be concluded more quickly, with tighter deadlines, whilst a few other participants suggested that, in fact, more time was needed in order to do justice to the activity.

Participants considered a wide range of tweaks to the process, in which the most commonly cited suggestion was to incorporate an increased degree of collaboration. A few participants suggested that a more immediate process, in which the timeline was created 'there and then' in the presence of the researcher may have been more beneficial, although this was not the view of the majority of participants, who valued the 'take-home' element of the timeline activity. However, many participants proposed that an additional round of collaboration may have complemented the timeline activity, in order for participants to have the opportunity to share their ideas with others:

> **Jess:** I would work it out personally and I would share it and have somebody else do their own and compare and see if there are any points or ideas that coincide.

> **Yuan:** I would do what you did in the briefing, and let them take home and draw their own timelines in their own time, but instead of giving them 2 to 4 weeks, I might make it longer [...]. And after a month in another workshop, I would have them discuss their timeline with each other, so they can exchange ideas and possibly learn from each other.

In order to enhance the collaborative aspect of the timeline activity, participants highlighted that an appropriate time and space for collaboration would be needed. Indeed, several participants highlighted the importance of there being a specifically context or occasion for the activity to take place, or for it to be integrated within existing teacher training structures:

> **Xingyun:** It would be related to whether there would be such an opportunity or occasion where they could do this. For example, if they are in a teacher training session and a lot of teachers are doing this together, I would think that most of them will be very interested.

> **Yangyang:** I guess asking them to do this activity alone out of the blue is going to be super challenging; I can imagine how reluctant they will be. However, I did mention that in our programme, in the first quarter, we did have a lesson or a graduate level class teaching you how to teach, right? So, I believe adding this timeline activity is going to be a super beneficial addition to that curriculum.

Discussion

This study provides evidence of the perceived use of the timeline activity as a tool for reflective practice. As pointed out earlier, there are limited examples of reflective practice activities that incorporate a longer-term retrospective component (Barnard & Ryan, 2017; Farrell, 2017), and despite increasing interest in using life history research to explore teachers' professional lives (Bremner, 2019; Hayes, 2010; Liu & Xu, 2011), there are surprisingly limited studies in which visual timelines were utilised to help researchers collect in-depth and comprehensive life history data. The significance of reflective practice in ELT has been well-documented, with many scholars emphasising its role in enhancing teaching efficacy and responsiveness to student needs (Akbari, 2007; Farrell, 2008; Richards & Farrell, 2005). The findings of our study resonate with this body of work, suggesting that visual timelines can be a valuable addition to the reflective tools available to English language teachers.

According to the multiple positive responses from the teacher participants, this study is the first of its kind to suggest that there may be several positive benefits of the timeline activity in terms of teacher professional development. Similar to what Berends (2011) and Adriansen (2012) found in their studies, the use of timelines helped participants visualise their experiences and, in some cases, discover (unexpected) links between events in their lives, which led them to gain an increased understanding of themselves, as well as new ideas and thoughts in terms of their future practices and careers. The participants of this study explicitly highlighted that these new understandings would be extremely useful to help

them continuously develop their teaching practices, especially given the inherently challenging and changing nature of the teaching profession.

Another key finding of the study was that the timeline activity not only helped teachers reflect on *how* to be better teachers, but, in many cases, helped them *feel* better as teachers. English language teachers face a myriad of challenges, from adapting to the diverse linguistic backgrounds of learners to staying updated with the ever-evolving pedagogical approaches. The timeline activity, as our study suggests, can offer teachers a space to reflect on these challenges and potentially find innovative solutions. In addition, the potential therapeutic benefits of timelines have been documented in other social science disciplines, for example in research on marginalised groups (e.g. Kolar et al., 2015) and particular health conditions (e.g. Chen, 2018; Gramling & Carr, 2004). In our study, after reviewing their professional journeys, several participants began to place increased value on their professional selves, feeling a sense of pride on their many achievements, often for the first time.

It should be noted that the emotional effects of producing the timeline were not always positive, and researchers need to bear in mind possible side effects of the timeline activity on the participants, especially when examining sensitive topics (Rimkeviciene et al., 2016). The emotional landscapes of English language teachers have been a focal point of research, especially in the context of stress, motivation, and teacher attrition (Benesch & Prior, 2023; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Richards, 2022). Our findings, which highlight both the positive and negative emotional impacts of the timeline activity, contribute to this discourse, suggesting avenues for supporting teacher well-being. Despite a few participants experiencing negative emotions during the activity, it must be stressed that most of them seemed to treat this as an opportunity for catharsis and ended up feeling positive, because the timeline reminded them of their achievement in managing to overcome these various challenges. Two participants (Marc and Ana), despite their general positive feeling of the timeline activity, expressed that the timeline reflection made them feel rather negative about their current working situation and was therefore thinking of leaving either their current job or the profession as a whole. The sample number and length of this study are not adequate to suggest whether this is representative of other teachers; hence, we suggest further longitudinal research to monitor this, and thus better identify how timelines may be able to enhance teachers' positive feelings towards the profession – an important consideration given the importance of teacher retention.

In terms of the possible future uses of the timeline activity, most participants held generally positive views about its potential to be implemented to other teachers. Understandably, many participants highlighted that the activity would not be appropriate for everyone, and would depend on individual teacher interest, motivation, and personality. Moreover, time, or lack of it, was seen as an important obstacle for teachers to take part in the timeline activity. Here, an important suggestion was for the timeline to form part of an especially arranged event or context, for example, through a teacher training programme or official professional development activity. This would appear to be an important consideration; if teachers are to engage in meaningful and deep reflection, it is reasonable to suggest that they need the time and space to do so. Indeed, if the timeline activity is deemed to be worth implementing, we would argue that such time and space should be set apart in teachers' (already very busy) teaching workloads, so that more teachers might be able to participate. The landscape of professional development in ELT is vast, with a growing emphasis on fostering teacher autonomy through more interactive approaches (Borg, 2015; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016). The potential of the timeline activity to be integrated into formal professional development, programmes, as our study suggests, aligns with these evolving paradigms. Although this would imply a certain cost to programmes and education systems, it would surely be money well spent if teachers emerge more motivated and with fresh ideas to improve their teaching.

The main suggestion for improvement of the timeline activity was to have increased degree of collaboration after the activity, echoing the arguments for reflective practice to be less individual and more dialogic (Mann & Walsh, 2013). Here, although the majority of participants valued the 'take-home' element of the activity, many highlighted that it was actually the discussions with the researchers after creating their timelines that brought their reflections to life and enabled them to find meaning in the activity. In fact, some participants proposed that a further round of collaboration might be useful, for example to enable them to share ideas with other teachers and to explore mutual solutions to

commonly cited issues. A more interactive, collaborative approach to timeline creation and discussion may be an interesting avenue of exploration for those interested in pursuing timelines in teacher education or professional development. The power of collaborative reflection in ELT has been explored in various contexts, from peer observation to collaborative action research (Bailey et al., 2001; Burns & Richards, 2009) and has been shown to be particularly effective in fostering a sense of community and shared problem-solving among teachers (Farrell & Baecher, 2017). Our participants' emphasis on the value of post-activity discussions and potential group reflections echoes these findings, underscoring the importance of collective wisdom in the reflective process.

Limitations and recommendations for Further research

There were certain methodological limitations to the study. Due to its highly exploratory, in-depth, qualitative nature, the study was confined to a purposive sample of 25 teachers from four different countries, meaning it is inappropriate to generalise to all contexts. Further research could implement the timeline activity with larger samples across a wider range of countries in order to see if the experiences of the 25 teachers in this study are broadly consistent.

Participants were not offered any monetary incentives, meaning that there may have been a possibility of findings being skewed towards positive findings, given that those inherently interested in the study were presumably more likely to volunteer. To a certain extent this is an inevitable component of research exploring an innovative tool or pedagogy with voluntary participants. However, given that the timeline activity is likely to become a *non-compulsory* activity when applied in practical future settings, we do not consider this to be a considerable problem, given that future teachers choosing to take part in the activity are likely to be those interested in it anyway.

A further limitation of the study is that it gathered participants' perspectives only a relatively short period of time after taking part in the activity. Although many participants indicated that they predicted the activity would have an impact on their practices, we currently do not have concrete evidence that the activity will actually change any future practices, an issue that has repeatedly emerged in research on teacher reflective practice (Farrell, 2017). Future research may seek to address this by increasing the gap between the activity and the post-timeline interview and/or by collecting further data at further longitudinal intervals; however, it may still be problematic to infer links between the timeline and any changes in practice due to the complex number of events that may have happened in the elapsed time. Admittedly, this may be less of an issue in terms of the 'therapeutic' benefits of the timeline activity, given that the focus is less on what changes (in terms of participants' practices) and more on teachers' general sense of positive emotions, which are more instantaneous, if not necessarily long-lasting.

Conclusion

The present study reported teachers' perceptions of using the novel take-home timeline activity as a tool for teacher reflective practice. As evidenced in the participants' feedback, the activity was seen as highly beneficial for the participants' professional development, as it provided an opportunity for a concrete and comprehensive reflection on their past, present, and future. The activity helped most participants reflect about *how* they could be a better teacher, but also helped most of them *feel* better about teaching. If the timeline activity were offered more widely, these benefits could potentially be extended to a wider range of teachers and thus enhance a larger number of teachers' professional development.

The timeline activity may not be for all teachers, and there are certain obstacles such as a lack of time that must be addressed if more interested teachers are to take part. Moreover, stakeholders in different contexts are clearly in the best position to decide which aspects of the activity are more feasible than others, and thus how the activity might be adapted to best fit local needs, for example by incorporating more of a sharing, collaborative component. Nevertheless, given the largely positive experiences of the 25 participants reported in this study, we hope future educational researchers and teacher educators might be inspired to explore and adapt this novel methodological tool in the field of (teacher) education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s). For the purpose of open access, the authors have applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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