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DEVELOPING TEACHER PRESENCE: NATURE OR NURTURE?

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Abstract

As a teacher trainer, the question of what *teacher presence* is and whether it can be taught has been with me for a long time. This is because the classroom presence of a teacher plays a major role in the success (or otherwise) of a language lesson. At the same time, *presence* is rarely dealt with explicitly in the initial training of English teachers.

All of this has motivated a project to investigate the meaning and manifestations of *teacher presence* and the extent to which such presence can be taught. The project started with a video-based investigation into observable presence features in six EFL teacher trainees during their teaching practice in Hungary and some background reading. This was followed by a series of conference workshops with EFL teachers to see how the project's preliminary findings resonated with their experiences and views. In this article, I will share some key insights from these professional activities and how they have informed changes in my own thinking and practice as a teacher educator.

Keywords: teacher persona, classroom presence, improvisation, teacher education

1 Introduction

Language teaching is often seen as a mix of craft and applied science. This is certainly true if we consider the linguistic and pedagogical background knowledge as well as the broad professional skills base needed to teach well. In other words, competent and confident EFL teachers know *what to do* in the classroom because they can rely on experience, methodological and content knowledge, as well as on a wide repertoire of subject-specific skills. But highlighting the closeness of teacher expertise to performative art, educationalists like Schön (1987), Almond (2019), and Sorensen (2023) remind us that teacher expertise is fundamentally improvisatory and that teachers also have a very special way of *being* in the classroom. One could say they have a personal kind of energy or *presence*, which creates a "unique psychological atmosphere" around them (Underhill 1987).

Trainees and novice teachers, on the other hand, are often not sure what their classroom presence is like, why it matters, and how it might be strengthened. In addition, formal teacher education programmes tend to devote only scant attention to this component of a teacher's performative competence and rarely offer practical help (cf. Rodgers and Raider-Roth 2006; Meijer *et al*. 2009; Almond 2019, 68).

Reasons for this might be that presence in a teacher is easily recognised but hard to define and highly individualised. In addition, teacher trainees seem to have relatively fixed mindsets about how changeable their abilities are and which competences they can consciously develop. For example, according to Haukås and Mercer (2022), pre-service teachers view personality-type-related competences, such as being confident and emotionally grounded, as less open to conscious development than pedagogical and linguistic competences.

Considering all this, I will first offer some useful ways of conceptualising *presence*. Then, the key insights from the lesson observation phase of the project will be presented and illustrated by some of the observed trainees' perceptions. This is followed by a short summary of how the findings from the classroom observation phase were shared with the participants of three conference workshops. This was done to further enhance my understanding of teacher presence and sound out some ideas for how it might be nurtured in practice.

Finally, I will outline how all of this has informed the design of a new methodology lecture on the subject, an accompanying seminar, and plans for designing a classroom observation instrument in the framework of English teacher training at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary.

2 What Exactly Is Presence?
2.1 Personal Energy

For professional performers – actors, presenters and teachers – presence is often equated with a kind of natural gift or charisma that some simply have, and others do not. But voice coach and theatre director Patsy Rodenberg is convinced that presence first and foremost

means to have present *energy*, "clear, whole and attentive energy" which, rather than the gift of a few, is "an energy we all have" (Rodenberg 2009, xi). This suggests that presence is not so much developed as *found* in oneself as a manifestation of an authentic persona. This assumption is particularly relevant in the context of initial teacher education, but also relevant to teachers' professional development in general.

2.2   Being and Feeling Connected

Presence has also been defined as "a state of alert awareness, receptivity and connected-ness to the mental, emotional and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step" (Rogers and Raider-Roth 2006, 266). Here, presence is seen as a holistic awareness of individual students as well as acute attention to the whole group, which enables a teacher to take roughly tuned but appropriate classroom action in the moment.

2.3   A Firm *and* Light Touch

But there is another important, almost paradoxical side to presence which Underhill (1997) calls "relaxed alertness". More specifically, as Hayes (2002, 120) points out, a teacher who has presence can" hold the class strongly enough to provide structure, firmly enough to nurture emotional confidence, yet lightly enough to allow personal freedom, choice, in-tellectual independence, movement and growth".

It is this combination of firmness and a light touch that student teachers often find so dif-ficult to acquire. In the classroom, their presence is often either not strong enough or overbearing. To illustrate this problem, Rodenberg's three circles of energy are a helpful conceptualisation (Rodenberg 2009, 16-27). She posits three basic ways in which human energy moves through one's body, breath, voice, the way we listen, think, and feel. This flow of energy is felt by us and those around us, too:

- *First circle:* the circle of self and withdrawal - focusing inward and useful when you want to be reflective or do not want to be noticed, but a hindrance in teach-ing mode. In this circle, "you are not missed when you leave the room" (De Ruyter 2024).
- *Second circle:* the energy of fully connecting – focused, giving, and receiving ener-gy. As a result, "you are noticed, heard, remembered and powerful … you touch and influence … rather than impress or impose" (Rodenberg, ibid., 21).
- *Third circle:* the circle of bluff and force - non-targeted, outward moving energy; "You are spraying your energy out to the world with an aerosol can" (Rodenberg, ibid., 19). There is a loose connection that attracts attention but lacks intimacy and remains impersonal.

3 Classroom Observation and Discussion Using Video-Stimulated Recall

The project started in 2023 with a video-based investigation into the meaning and manifestations of *presence* among six teacher trainees during their teaching practice in Hungary. One of the main aims of this phase was to further my understanding of the concept by identifying observable features of presence. For each of the trainees, one language class was observed, recorded, and discussed using video-stimulated recall (VSR). This is a well-established training and development tool in teacher education because it facilitates memory recall and reflection (Calderhead 1981; Tochon 2008; Zhai, X. *et al.* 2024). Each of the recorded lessons was watched by the teacher and two observers/trainers immediately after class. The replay was stopped whenever the teacher or the observers felt prompted to do so by something noteworthy they saw or heard. The ensuing spontaneous discussion was also recorded, and the most salient comments from the transcripts were grouped thematically. Here are the main categories and some examples of the trainee reflections prompted by the recordings.

3.1 Classroom Space

This is about how a teacher uses the space available to them. Often, trainees subconsciously try 'not to be seen' or hide behind something, for example, a desk or some material. Others are uncertain about how close to get to their students, e.g., when monitoring or leaning in to respond to a student's question.

> *"I'm still behind a desk, you know, behind the defensive stuff and everything…I'm still behind the desk organizing my notes. As you can see, I have everything I put out, the printed sheets and my lesson plan and everything because that kind of gives me the feeling that, OK, we have this under control."*

> *"I was a bit worried whether I was standing too close to the students. Some of them might feel intimidated or shy. Usually, I don't stand that close to them, unless I really want to be able to see what they are writing, you know, the answers or things like that."*

As Almond (2019, 154) points out, conventional classroom arrangements may restrict the space for the teacher (and the students) to move around in. But even then, a teacher can vary their position in the classroom and consider the effect such proximity variations have on their rapport with their students and the dynamics of a lesson.

3.2 Body Posture

This feature of presence is an important indication of the *personal status* a teacher communicates: how important and confident they feel in a classroom interaction and how they define the relationship with their students. The way a teacher stands or whether they decide to sit, for example, sends a message about their status in relation to that of the students, i.e., how distant or formal they think they should be.

"My father is a teacher as well. And when I was a high school student, he told me that there is a kind of hierarchy…he said if the teacher stands, the student will sit. If the teacher sits down, students will lie on the desks…"

"The school administration told us that when you teach, you're not supposed to sit down. Even if the students are working, let's say on a reading or writing task, you still have to stand somewhere from where you will be able to monitor them."

It has been argued that, to be authentic, teachers should vary their status purposefully and that student teachers should experiment with different statuses in a training situation (Almond 2019, 49). In the reality of teaching, though, as the two quotes show, teachers are likely to be influenced by inherited assumptions and the implicit or explicit boundaries to such authenticity set by the institutional or wider educational culture (Scrivener 2012, 37).

3.3 Gestures, Eye Contact and Facial Expressions

In the classroom, like elsewhere, non-verbal communication has considerable power. Students are very good at detecting "when a teacher dislikes a subject by the way they communicate or by the gestures or delivery of the content" (Buley *et al.* 2019, 21). Eye contact, too, is a very important tool in the teaching context, but it is not easy to eye a group of students or individuals in a way that is neither mechanical nor intrusive but conveys a sense of warmth and genuine interest. Likewise, meaningful gestures and facial expressions can enhance the effectiveness of instructions and explanations and are learnable (cf. Scrivener 2019, 56-64). However, their effectiveness can depend on how natural or authentic such non-verbals are to the teacher's persona and how students perceive them. In addition, there are gestures and facial expressions that may not enhance meaning but are adopted sub-consciously, for example, pacifying or barrier gestures (Almond 2019).

"Yeah, I think I do that (standing with arms folded together across the chest). I try not to because they say that it's like closing out the audience. But, sometimes, I also don't know what to do with my hands, so that's like a safe position for me."

"Perhaps I will start thinking about what to do with my hands because, sometimes, I noticed, I just didn't know where to put them… "I tend to use gestures a lot, even outside the classroom, perhaps they are part of my personality. It's just a personal thing, to make sure that everyone understands."

Facial expressions and eye contact were not commented on by the observed trainees, but, as the examples show, novice teachers can be very unsure about the position of their hands. Perhaps, certain subconscious hand movements and the urge to stay behind a physical barrier like the teacher's desk are motivated by the same need for a safe place or a sense of control.

3.4   Voice Quality

As a trainer and mentor, I am frequently confronted with trainee questions like '*Do I have a teacher voice? And what is a teacher voice anyway?*' Perhaps this is because teacher trainees intuitively know that, as Alan Maley put it," quite simply, we are our voices" and "the voice is a teacher's most frequently-used and important teaching aid" (Maley 2000, vii). The quality of a voice can be seen as a composite of volume, pace, pitch and tone (Almond 2006, 54). As the quotes illustrate, trainees may sense the need to adjust aspects of their voice to the teaching situation but, again, tend to do so instinctively rather than consciously.

> "*I do think I have a kind of teacher voice with a class. I don't have that voice quality outside the classroom, I think. But it's difficult to analyse because I don't have a lot of classroom experience. With a class, I feel there's such a big space, so many people, it's kind of like public speaking and you must change your voice. But I don't consciously think about it, like: Okay, now I want to go higher with the pitch or up the volume. It's a different kind of role, I guess.*"

> "*(I speak) definitely not fast and hopefully not very slowly. Maybe somewhere, I don't know, not even in the middle, but closer to the medium, slowly, but not very slow.*"

> *(Teacher says loudly and with good pitch: "OK!" – then pauses for about five seconds):* "*Yea, here I'm kind of stalling and trying to decide how to proceed.*"

The last teacher quote also points to the importance of suprasegmental features of pronunciation, like sentence-level stress and intonation. Such features of speech are vital to the meaning of what is said because they provide focus and contrast. But here the teacher also uses them to maintain and assert his authority in a moment of uncertainty. In other words, suprasegmental features can also function as social identity markers and act as strategic resources for (re)defining social relationships (Morgan 1997, 431- 432).

3.5   Responding and Connecting

This category name was chosen to capture the way some of the recordings show how teachers managed to connect psychologically and emotionally with their students. This kind of connection is perhaps closest to *rapport*, which can be described as the "felt sense of the shared experiential space of the group" (Heron 1993, 49). If presence refers to the atmosphere that one person (the teacher) creates, rapport is what is created when different presences meet. It is the bridge between individuals in the group, the channel through which they communicate verbally and non-verbally (Pohl and Szesztay 2010, 27).

> "*Before class I like to talk with them or try to catch some small ... bits of information that I can hear because I really want to know them, know how they feel. Once, they didn't want to stand up. So, I was like: Why?! - Did you have a PE lesson?*

"Who will be the first person to guess? - Csongi maybe? I can see your desire for this, Csongi (teacher smiles). You want to be the first one. Please come here. Come on. You can do this."

As the two quotes demonstrate, such rapport-building can take the form of a teacher's intentional reaching out to students as human beings or a tongue-in-cheek, humorous nudge to prompt a response. Other facets of this ability to connect and respond are attention to the *here and now*, i.e., "the quality of alertness given to the unfolding of each lesson" (Hayes 2002:120). This quality has also been appropriately termed *with-it-ness*. It means a fully aware teacher can, in the moment, 'read' the classroom, determine what is taking place and knows how to respond (Bullough 1989, 47).

All the features of classroom presence described and illustrated here constitute an open list. They chiefly represent what was immediately observable and commented on in the six lessons and the discussion of the recordings. There are other features worth our attention, such as the use of *power* (Underhill 1989, 253-254), the degree of teacher *control* in micro-managing a lesson (Scrivener 2012, 52-55) or *readiness to teach* (Haynes 2002, 121), to name just a few. Initially, only the original categories were offered as a springboard for reflection and discussion at the first of three workshops with English teachers and mentors that followed the class observation part of the project. But, as it turned out, these categories were also fleshed out and expanded on by the workshop participants.

4   Insights from Conference Workshops

What follows is a short description of how the findings from the classroom observations were combined with insights from workshops at three conferences: The Hungarian National Teachers Conference and the TESOL Hungary Conference in 2024 and the IATEFL Slovenia Conference in 2025.

In every workshop, the participating teachers first clarified their understanding of teacher presence and were familiarised with the findings from the observation phase of the project.

TEACHER PRESENCE	I am aware of this myself.	This can be trained.
CLASSROOM SPACE & POSTURE • (not) to 'hide' (behind the desk and materials) • how close to get to the students • (de)emphasizing teacher status •		
GESTURES & FACIAL EXPRESSIONS • where to put your hands • pacifying or protective gestures • eye-contact •		
VOICE QUALITY • pacing (pausing and chunking) • highlighting and voice modulation • teacherly volume •		
RELATING RESPONDING • noticing, responding • smiles and humour • thinking on your feet & acting in-the-moment •		
READINESS TO TEACH • being prepared and looking prepared • conscious use of clothes • ...		
OTHER • • •		

Image 1: Example of workshop handout (Image from the personal archive).

This version of the worksheet was then used to prompt discussions on the personal significance of the suggested presence features and the extent to which such features can be taught.

The participants were also invited to leave comments and add ideas of their own in the *OTHER* category of the worksheet. As a result, my attention was drawn to the significance of a teacher's *appearance*, i.e., the clothes they wear, their hairdo, or accessories.

The overall picture that emerged from all the workshops is that most of these presence features can be trained, particularly the *use of classroom space* and *voice quality*.

At the same time, many participants were less certain about the teachability of more personality-related features, e.g., how to handle idiosyncratic gestures and facial expressions, the appropriate use of humour or learning to think and act confidently on your feet. The general feeling here seemed to be that "being comfortable in your body", as one teacher put it, is a process which takes time and that such abilities are best acquired tacitly through a lot of teaching experience. Other participants pointed out that the degree to which a teacher can learn to connect with their students, i.e., to 'read' them and respond well also depends on their professional attitude – whether the teacher cares.

5   Into the Future

This project was started with the intention to enrich my own practice as a teacher educator and to address what I felt was missing in our teacher training programme. I would therefore like to finish by outlining three professional spin-offs which are being developed in the current phase of the project and, hopefully, will become a permanent feature of the curriculum at our department. I feel emboldened to continue in this direction by studies that examined the relationship between teacher presence and learning outcomes in online environments. Their findings suggest a strong positive correlation between teaching presence and students' satisfaction and learning (Caskurlu et al. 2020).

5.1   A New University Course

The most immediate project outcome is a course for EFL teacher trainees in their final years at university. It is offered as a seminar option called *Finding your presence as a teacher*. Its overall design – in terms of aims, content and methodology – has been informed by what I have learned from the classroom observations, the literature and the feedback at the conference workshops. By the end of the course, it is hoped that the participating trainees have

- gained a clearer understanding of what teacher presence is and why it matters;
- become aware of existing strengths and challenges regarding their teacher persona;
- developed a number of performance-related and improvisatory skills;
- increased their readiness to teach 'in the moment', i.e., to allow themselves to be spontaneous and extemporise,

A novel element of the course is the instrumentalization of Rodenberg's energy circles concept as a *training* tool. By grafting specific manifestations of the presence features onto each of the three circles, as shown in Table 1 below for two features, a range of possible teacher behaviours can be exemplified. This makes the concept more accessible and concrete for teacher trainees. It also serves as a reference point whenever the course participants are invited to work through a presence feature with playful variations and dramatic improvisation.

PRESENCE FEATURES	1 st circle: self & withdrawal	2 nd circle: connecting	3 rd circle: bluff & force
CLASSROOM SPACE & POSTURE	• entering class slouched • attempts to 'hide' i.e. behind desk, course book etc. • uncertain hand movements	• starting lesson at front of the room; standing tall but relaxed • with-it-ness; continuous monitoring, reading the classroom • moving about the room energetically and purposefully, circulating (near students)	• walking around classroom relatively fast & without clear purpose
VOICE QUALITY			
volume	• too quiet • shushing students to get them settled or to pay attention	• talking to students authoritatively, with good projection, factually but warmly	• continuous 'public announcement' volume • yelling to be commanding
tonality/pitch	• husky or strangled, voice, monotone • meaning of tone vague or obscure	• voice modulation to convey vitality & meaning • highlighting lesson transitions, e.g. "OK", "Right!" etc.	• strained or shrill voice, • exaggerated or false cheerfulness
pacing/tempo	• (unintentionally) slow	• inner and outer tempo regulation through breathing	• (unintentionally) fast, rushing

Image 2: Combination of energy circles and presence features (Image from the personal archive).

Another form of encouragement comes from some of the feedback received after the first iteration of this course.

> *"We practised, for instance, how various speech patterns, tones, and volumes might affect classroom ambience and student participation. I had no idea how much my voice fluctuation could affect students' motivation and attention span."*

> *"I am more aware of my own pacifying gestures, and regarding posture and movement and can utilize the advice I received to stand firmly planted with both feet on the ground and avoid small movements which can be distracting and destabilizing for both me and the students."*

> *"The biggest change in my belief system was this: I do not have to become another teacher and have a certain group of distinct qualities to be respected, loved and accepted as a mentor/ guide/ facilitator/ ruler/zookeeper… as a teacher."*

5.2   A New Methodology Lecture

In their ninth semester, our teacher trainees attend a series of methodology lectures to develop and expand their understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the principles and practices of English language teaching. The lectures are given by a team of lecturers, each focusing on one area that represents their special interest and is seen as relevant to the expertise of an EFL teacher. Here is the title and description of a new lecture which I will give from the autumn semester of 2025:

Being there: how to find your presence as a teacher

As a teacher trainee, you have probably asked yourself whether it is possible to be 'teacherly', i.e., to look, sound, and act like a teacher but also remain authentic as a person. If so, you have been thinking about your teacher *presence*, which is less concerned with what you do methodologically and more with how you are and behave in the classroom. In this lecture, you will find out what exactly presence is, why it matters and how it might be developed.

Apart from providing an overview, it is hoped that this lecture will also make some trainees curious enough to join the course on teacher presence in one of their last semesters, so they can personalise their understanding of the concept.

5.3   A (Self) Observation Tool for Mentors and Trainees

Finally, I would like to reach out to some mentor colleagues in the schools where our teacher trainees do their short and long school practice. With their collaboration, it should be possible to design a practicable checklist of observable presence features that lends itself both to mentor classroom observation and trainee self-assessment.

6   Conclusion

As the title of this paper suggests, I have presented here an account of a work in progress and with little to conclude. My own understanding of teacher presence has certainly deepened, and I hope the article will also make the notion of presence clearer for other teaching and training professionals. Just as importantly, I have made some headway in the development of a common language for discussing issues related to presence with teacher trainees. But, ultimately, the proof of the pudding will be the extent to which this understanding and its application in the new seminar course translates into tangible learning outcomes for our trainees.

This success criterion has also raised some challenging new questions. For example, in the same way as teacher development can only be facilitated, I still wonder about the nature of presence development in the case of teachers-in-training. Will gains in self-awareness, for example, lead to more authentic and confident classroom performance rather than increased self-consciousness? What might be a realistic time frame within which one can hope for potential gains to materialise and make a positive difference? Is teacher presence a universal concept or does it need to be defined in a particular sociocultural context?

The answers to these questions will likely emerge in the practice of training and, thereby, reveal the extent to which teacher presence can be nurtured. I look forward to being part of that process.

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