



Doctoral Journeys-Beyond the Doctorate: Ema Ushioda

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Abstract

This blog presents insights from an interview with Ema Ushioda, focusing on her doctoral and professional journeys and the development of her academic identity, drawing on materials reported in Imanishi (2025a, 2025b; 2026a). Tracing her pathway from early research interests in language, culture, and identity through doctoral study and subsequent academic work, the article highlights key intellectual influences, challenges in articulating a scholarly voice, and shifts in research focus over time. The reflections offered may resonate with practitioner-researchers and doctoral students navigating their own academic trajectories. Key literature introduced by Ushioda is listed in the Appendix.

Keywords

1. Researcher identity
2. Researcher development
3. Doctoral education
4. Researcher voice
5. Research ethics
6. Academic blog and podcast

AI Declaration

AI was used solely for language refinement, and the authors created all content.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the content of this blog post.



Doctoral Journeys-Beyond the Doctorate: Ema Ushioda

Introduction

This reflective blog draws on an interview with Professor Ema Ushioda to consider how her doctoral and professional journey has shaped my own understanding of researcher identity and doctoral development. Key literature introduced by Ushioda is listed in Appendix 1. The full interview is available in the Spotify podcast series [Doctoral Journeys – Beyond the Doctorate](#) (Imanishi, 2026a).

Doctoral Journey

Professor Ema Ushioda completed her PhD when a doctorate was not essential for an academic career. She described it as a “luxury”- a chance to pursue a personally meaningful topic rather than a required qualification, which made the process enjoyable. She also sees the doctoral journey as never-ending. Looking back on my own experience, one of the reasons I began my own doctoral journey was to engage in lifelong learning in a constructive way. Listening to her interview reminded me of those initial feelings. However, I also realised, especially after my first joint supervision, as noted in Imanishi (2026b), that I needed to engage more deeply with my doctoral studies.

Research Interests

One of the strongest messages I took from Professor Ushioda's doctoral journey was that meaningful research often grows out of one's own life experiences. Her Japanese Irish background shaped her interest in language, identity, and belonging, leading her to explore psychological aspects of language learning. Her master's dissertation examined acculturation using her parents' data. In Second Language Acquisition (SLA), acculturation refers to learners' social and psychological integration into the target language community (Schumann, 1986). Reflecting on the field at the time, Ushioda (2025) describes quantitative social psychological models, especially the work of Gardner and Lambert, as dominant, focusing mainly on learners' attitudes while giving less attention to teachers and classroom practices. This imbalance led her to qualitative research on learners' and teachers' lived experiences and ultimately to her doctoral work on motivation.

Understanding where her research interests came from helped me see the depth and clarity of her academic path and made me wonder whether my own interests were similarly grounded in personal experience. Indeed, as my doctoral research progressed, I realised that my interest in student voice in language education was closely connected to my experiences as a student-council leader. I was pleased to recognise this continuity between my past and present. I was also struck by how little attention earlier language-education research had given to teachers and classroom practices, and how this shaped her research direction. This insight encouraged me to reflect on what I can contribute as both a teacher and a doctoral researcher.

Shaping a Researcher Voice and Mindset



A key turning point for Ushioda was reading Crookes and Schmidt's (1991) *Motivation: Reopening the Research Agenda*, which introduced a practitioner-informed agenda (Ushioda, 2025) and reassured her that others shared the perspective she was developing. This helped her shape a scholarly voice that acknowledged established figures like Gardner and Lambert while offering an alternative view. Presenting her work and receiving positive feedback from Richard Schmidt - followed by an invitation to a volume he co-edited with Zoltán Dörnyei - further strengthened her sense of belonging in the research community. Ushioda also emphasises the importance of keeping an open mind. In her final PhD year, emerging debates about the need to broaden theoretical and research approaches to motivation required her to rewrite her literature review and reframe her thesis narrative, illustrating the need for adaptability in research.

Her experiences led me to reflect on how academic conferences have shaped my own researcher identity. Although I was initially hesitant to attend as a schoolteacher and a doctoral student, presenting helped me reflect on my research, gain valuable advice, and feel reassured about my interdisciplinary approach. Encouraged by a fellow Doctoral of Professional Practice (DProf) student to participate, I gradually came to see the academic community as a welcoming space to which I also could belong. Regarding the thesis, DProf students develop a portfolio rather than a traditional monograph, yet the programme still requires substantial writing over a five- to six-year part-period. In this context, I felt that Ushioda's experience of revising her PhD thesis resonated with the realities faced by DProf students, who may also need to revisit and refine their work as their research field develops.

Learning to Write as a Researcher

Ushioda noted that all PhD students develop their academic writing through drafting, redrafting, and engaging with feedback, and she encourages them to keep early drafts to see their progress. She highlighted the value of studying effective academic writing, noting that she had modelled aspects of her style on David Little's clear approach to constructing arguments and paragraphs. Through the *Doctoral Journeys – Beyond the Doctorate* interviews, I learnt that both scholars continually work to refine their writing. While I have enjoyed their work, I had not realised the extent of their deliberate efforts, which reassured me that becoming an academic writer is an important, ongoing process.

The Encounter with Zoltán Dörnyei

She first saw Dörnyei shortly after completing her PhD, though they did not speak at the time. Their first direct interaction came a few years later, when Dörnyei was invited to give a talk at Trinity College Dublin. By then, he was familiar with her work, and their conversations became an important part of her subsequent scholarly and professional journey.

Professional Journey

From Doctoral Graduate to Academic Researcher



After completing her PhD, Ushioda worked in research-embedded roles at Trinity College Dublin, coordinating EU-funded language programmes and collaborating with teachers on projects supporting students' motivation and autonomy. She later chose the University of Warwick over an offer from Dörnyei as a way of establishing her own academic identity and reputation, noting that being addressed as 'Doctor' held personal significance in a gendered society. Her decision also reminded me that developing a researcher identity involves not only learning from established scholars, but gradually finding a scholarly path of one's own.

Shifts in Research Focus

Ushioda's ethical concerns later led her to explore generative AI, particularly issues of academic integrity and how multilingual writers navigate AI-assisted writing. She is now leading a funded project on these questions. I was pleased that she acknowledged my contribution to this research during the interview. The experience also prompted me to reflect on writing my MA thesis and assignments many years ago without AI. Remembering those moments reminded me of my own capability. As Bandura (1977, p. 195) notes, previous mastery experiences can strengthen self-efficacy when facing new challenges. While I am aware that my academic writing still needs improvement and may use AI-assisted refinement when needed, I also want to hold on to the sense of capability built through my past experiences.

Researcher Well-Being

Her curiosity sustains her motivation, and because motivation is central to her research, it also guides how she manages emotions and stress.

Recent Key Literature

Kubanyiova (2008) stresses the importance of ethical relationships with participants and sustained reflexivity. Consoli and Ganassin's (2023) book also offers a clear, accessible introduction to reflexivity in applied linguistics and why it matters for researchers.

Messages for Doctoral Students

Ushioda advises doctoral students to choose topics driven by genuine curiosity; a PhD is too long to pursue something you do not deeply care about. She encourages students to embrace confusion in the early stages, as it signals deep thinking, and to resist perfectionism - a thesis must be 'good enough', not flawless. When I interviewed her in the first year of my DProf, I understood this mainly as practical encouragement against perfectionism. In the second year, however, my deepening engagement with Critical Realism led me to revisit her advice. I came to understand "good enough" differently: a doctoral thesis is necessarily provisional because scientific knowledge itself remains incomplete and open to refinement. The conversation itself had not changed; my understanding of it had.

Closing Reflection



Reflecting on Professor Ema Ushioda's journey reminded me that becoming a researcher is a relational process shaped by the experiences and influences that surround us. I also learnt the importance of understanding a field's history, as current studies build upon earlier ideas and connections. It was interesting to see how she came to develop the 'person-in-context' approach (Ushioda, 2009). I am pleased to note that I have deepened my understanding of reflexivity since this interview.

Acknowledgement

I sincerely thank Professor Ema Ushioda for generously sharing her time and experiences as the first invited external guest. Although I had only a concept to present, she kindly accepted and prepared thoroughly for *the Doctoral Journeys-Beyond the Doctorate* series. Through this collaboration, I learned firsthand the high standards and open-mindedness of a leading researcher.



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- Ushioda, E. (2025). Ema Ushioda's essential bookshelf: Teacher engagement with classroom motivation research. *Language Teaching* 58(1): 87–98. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444822000428>



Appendix

Ushioda's Key Literature

Key literature that shaped Ushioda's doctoral journey

- Crookes, G. & Schmidt, R. W. (1991). Motivation: Re-opening the research agenda. *Language Learning*, 41(4), 469–512. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1991.tb00690.x>
- Dörnyei, Z. (1990). Conceptualizing motivation in foreign language learning. *Language Learning*, 40(1), 46–78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1990.tb00954.x>
- Dörnyei, Z. (1994). Motivation and motivating in the foreign language classroom. *Modern Language Journal*, 78(3), 273–284. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1994.tb02042.x>
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. Edward Arnold.
- Gardner, R. C. & Lambert, W. E. (1972). *Attitudes and motivation in second-language learning*. Newbury House.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy 1: Definitions, issues and problems*. Authentik.
- Oxford, R. L., & Shearin, J. (1994). Language learning motivation: Expanding the theoretical framework. *Modern Language Journal*, 78(1), 12–28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/329249>

Influential works Ushioda has encountered since becoming a researcher

- Deci, E. L., & Flaste, R. (1996). *Why we do what we do: Understanding self-motivation*. Penguin.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2009). The L2 motivational self system. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 9–42). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.2307/ji.30945943.5>
- Douglas Fir Group. (2016). A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world. *Modern Language Journal*, 100(1), 19–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12301>
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- Legenhausen, L. (1999). Autonomous and traditional learners compared: The impact of classroom culture on attitudes and communicative behaviour. In C. Edelhoff & R. Weskamp (Eds.), *Autonomes Fremdsprachenlernen* (pp. 166–182). Hueber.
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Longman.
- Ortega, L. (2005). For what and for whom is our research? The ethical as transformative lens in instructed SLA. *Modern Language Journal*, 89(3), 427–443.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2005.00315.x>
- Richards, K. (2006). ‘Being the teacher’: Identity and classroom conversation. *Applied Linguistics*, 2 (1), 51–77. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/ami041>
- Sampson, R. (2016). *Complexity in Classroom Foreign Language Learning Motivation: A Practitioner Perspective from Japan*. Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters.
<https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783095896>

Introductory readings for early career or practitioner-researchers in her field

Motivation research

For early career or practitioner-researchers investigating motivation, Ushioda would have to recommend the following co-authored text, out of respect for the late Zoltán Dörnyei:

- Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2021). *Teaching and researching motivation* (3rd Ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351006743>

Research in language education more broadly

Recommendations in relation to conducting research (including practitioner research) in language education more broadly (these include a couple of titles already listed above):

- Allwright, D. (2003). Exploratory practice: Rethinking practitioner research in language teaching. *Language Teaching Research*, 7(2), 113–141.
<https://doi.org/10.1191/1362168803lr118oa>
- Consoli, S., & Ganassin, S. (Eds.). (2023). *Reflexivity in applied linguistics: Opportunities, challenges, and suggestions*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003149408>
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<https://doi.org/10.1191/1362168806lr206pr>
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- Rose, H. (2019). Dismantling the ivory tower in TESOL: A renewed call for teaching-informed research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 53(3), 895–905. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.517>

Ushioda's recent publications that she would like to highlight

- Ushioda, E. (2020). *Language learning motivation: An ethical agenda for research*. Oxford University Press.
- Ushioda, E. (2023). Intuition and reflexivity: The ethics of decision-making in classroom practitioner research. *Journal for the Psychology of Language Learning* 5(2): 76-87. <https://mail.jpil.org/index.php/journal/article/view/183>
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