



A Critique of Theorizing Language Teacher Identity: Three Perspectives and Beyond

Thu Tran Thi Minh

Dept. Faculty of Foreign Languages, Dong Nai Technology University, Dong Nai, Vietnam.

Abstract: Teacher identity is a very popular topic attracting lots of researchers' attention in teaching and teacher development. Because these identities treat teachers as whole persons in and across social and contexts who continually reconstruct their views in relation to others, workplace characteristics, professional purposes, and cultures of teaching. As one aspect of teacher identity, minority teachers' identity has begun to gain great interest in this area. This paper explores three published studies about language teacher identity. These identities are explored by presenting three data-based studies of teacher identity and juxtaposing the three different studies: Farfel's (1978) social identity theory, Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning and community practice and Simon's (1995) concept of the image-text. Putting these three theoretical frameworks of teacher identity is not evaluating one theory against another but rather to use one to clarify the other. In addition, this paper also critiques the application of each theory in Vietnam class lesson.

Keywords: identity, perspective, critique

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching requires skill, insight, intelligence, and careful, and ability to struggle and succeeds in a variety of ways to meet the challenges of the classroom. Many teaching problems are experienced by all faculties: variations in students' preparation, characteristics, attitudes, etc... Among many applied linguistics, for a long time language teachers were considered as technicians who needed to apply the right methodology in order to help students acquire target language. Moreover, according to Allwright 1988 and Nunan 1988 classrooms are very complex places where simple cause-effect models of teaching methodology were not enough. Thus, teacher plays an important role in the constitution of classroom practices. However the exploration of teacher's beliefs, knowledge, attitudes could not be seen atomistically but it was the teacher's whole identity. Teacher identity is a crucial component in determining how language teaching is played out.

In order to understanding language teaching and learning we need to understand teachers. In order to understand teachers we need to have a clearer sense of who they are: the professional, cultural, political and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them. What does identity mean? First, identity is not a fixed, stable, unitary coherent phenomena but is multiple, shifting and in conflict. (Gergen, 1991; Norton Peirce, 1995; Sarup, 1996; Weedon, 1987). Second, identity is not context-free but is crucially related to social, cultural and political context (Duff & Uchida, 1997). Third, identity is constructed, maintained and negotiated to a significant extent through language and discourse (Gee, 1996; MacLure, 1993). In addition, in this paper we also discover list four substantive areas of interest on language teacher identity: marginalization, the position of nonnative speaker teachers, the status of language teaching as a profession and the teacher-

student interaction. These above issues have been looked not just as what happens in classroom but at how outside conditions shape both classroom teaching and teacher's lives outside the classroom.

The first study uses social identity theory to analyze the development of a teacher's identity as nonnative speaker of English within the context of a U.S master's in teaching English to speakers of other languages (MA TESOL) program. The second study uses situated learning and communities of practice to look at the way identities are formed in the course of an undergraduate bilingual teacher education program in the United States. The last study works on identity as image-text in considering the way in which an experienced teacher creates and maintains a particular identity within adult English as a second language (ESL) program in Canada. After the three studies, in the final section this paper will return to themes of identity. This final section will consider how the theoretical approaches address these themes and how these theories bring understanding to the different aspects of language teacher identity that we have highlighted.

II. CRITIQUE AND IMPLICATION

Study 1(Johnson): Social identities and the nonnative MA TESOL student.

In this first study Johnson discovers about social identity to investigate the language teacher identity of a new teacher- a nonnative English speaking graduate student in an MA TESOL program. The concept of social identity is based on the social categories created by society: nationality, race, class that are relational in power and status. The difference among teachers based on their status as native or nonnative speakers maintains the dominance of the native speaker in the English Language Teaching (ELT) profession and contributes to discrimination in hiring practices. Many NNESTs lack of confidence with academic work and interaction with faculty and students, at conference, or in job announcement that advertise for native speakers in their own comparison with peers – NES. Native English speakers without teaching qualifications are more likely to be hired as ESL teachers than qualified and experienced NNESTs, especially outside the United States (Amin, 2000; Braine, 1999; Canagarajah, 1999; Rampton, 1996). In fact, in Vietnam NESs without teaching qualifications are more likely to be hired than Vietnamese teachers. At my school and English center that I am teaching native English teachers are paid much more than Vietnamese teacher. They are often facilitated carefully with pictures, folders and equipment etc... in advance while I and my colleagues have to prepare them by ourselves. There is no doubt that native speakers of a language are comfortable in using its idiomatic expressions, and speak it fluently. However, people do not become qualified to teach English only because it is their mother tongue, and much of the knowledge that native speakers bring intrinsically to the ESL classroom can be learned by NNESTs through teacher training. In addition, there are many ways in which nonnative teachers are at an advantage in teaching English. First, Phillipson (1996) considers NNESTs to be potentially the ideal ESL teachers because they have gone through the process of acquiring English as an additional language. They have first-hand experience in learning and using a second language, and their personal experience has sensitized them to the linguistic and cultural needs of their students. Many NNESTs, especially those who have the same first language as their students, have developed a keen awareness of the differences between English and their students' mother tongue. This sensitivity gives them the ability to anticipate their students' linguistic problems.

In this study, for example, Johnson tells us about Marc- a Mexican woman enrolled in a 2-year MA TESOL in the United States. In her class there are few NNESTs while faculty, administrative staff and teacher are all NES so Marc feels that she is a numerical small minority in her department. Like many new teachers, she suffers among conflicting identities as student and teacher. This situation becomes more complicated when she was both a student of teaching and a student of language. However, she tries to balance these identities not only for herself but for peers and colleagues as well.

Although Marc called this program a good experience, there still have some difficulties during time she studied at USA. First, during her teaching practices, her multiple identities as both language teacher and language student seemed troublesome for her NES mentor teacher. When Marc was teaching, Marc's mentor

teacher has tendency to interrupt her. This interruption not only questions her competence as a new teacher in front of the learners but also focuses on her status as a nonnative teacher. It is self-perception, however, that is significant in the Marc's professional identity. Second, due to her status as a NNEST she is influenced by the attitude of the people around her. She is labeled as ESL learner, Latina, Mexican, woman, single, Catholic, student of color, NNEST, minority etc... Because of these difficulties she establishes an in-group identity that was both positive and supporting. Joining in this group helps her not to feel "the only one" and miss from her graduate program.

In short, qualified and trained NNESTs can contribute in meaningful ways to the field of English language education by virtue of their own experiences as English language learners and their training and experience as teachers. Recent efforts, including research addressing the native speaker fallacy, the formation of the NNEST Caucus in TESOL, the development of innovative curricula in teacher training programs, and collaborative efforts between native- and nonnative-English-speaking teachers are helping to give NNESTs a voice in their profession and to recognize their position as equal partners in the field of English language teaching.

Study 2 (Varghese): Bilingual Teachers and Situated Learning.

In the second study, Varghese looked at language teacher identity formation through situated learning. He followed a group of bilingual teachers in the United States to take part in a professional development program that concerns about bilingual-specific such as: theories of second language acquisition (SLA) and bilingual programmatic models. This group of bilingual teachers is at the same situated learning and study in a same community practice. So what do situated learning and community practice mean? And what is the relationship between them? Situated learning makes the link between learning and identity. Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that learning and understanding occur when people participate in activities to become active participants while community practice consists of multiple identities and levels of participation and it is an activity system about which participants share understandings about what they are doing and what occurs in their lives and their communities". So situated learning is considered as a process of becoming part of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). For example; after my sister graduated she was assigned to teach at a high school in highland. After 5 years, she is moved to teach at Le Hong Phong high school at Ho Chi Minh City. This makes her change a lot. She has to change teaching methods, performance, and attitudes etc... to fit with situated learning here and also challenge her level to avoid being left behind in her community practice.

Learners are seen to have more motivation when they cooperate and co-develop what has to be learned with peers and their teachers to develop their own curriculum. In other words, engaging in practice rather than being an object may be a condition for the effectiveness of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 93). I find that second study can be applied in Vietnam. Because whenever I go to an English workshop hold at Dong Nai Educational Department I have a chance to meet many teachers coming from different provinces. Of course, participation of each teacher is also different- some join enthusiastically while other just observe. As we discussed in critique study 1 identity is not a fixed, stable, unitary coherent phenomena but is multiple, shifting and in conflict but in order to have good experience after each workshop, teacher should change their identity to share knowledge and experience in community practice.

Although this theory is practical, it still has some limitation in terms of teacher education. First, how individual identity develops within the structure of group practice rather than considering other ways in which identities is separately created. Second is the difficulty of applying the model of apprenticeship used by Lave and Wenger in educational settings. This is explained more fully in Wenger's (1998) expanded investigation into communities of practice, where he describes a community of practice having three defining characteristics—mutual engagement and negotiation by participants, involvement in a joint enterprise, and share of knowledge. Third is the problem of defining a collective sense of bilingual teaching. Last is its weak consideration of power relations and underlying ideologies within groups.

However, it is not a point that is investigated fully. Issues of access, participation, and social engagement are always reflections of larger institutional, national, and global ideologies, which are not a focus of exploration in situated learning and communities of practice. Varghese's study, and its use of situated learning to understand bilingual teacher identity formation, demonstrates the strengths in viewing teacher education/learning as a process of becoming rather than how it has traditionally been viewed, exclusively as what teachers should know. This perspective allows us to approach teacher education, especially for second language teachers, as a process of being, which is surely filled with conflict and difficulty.

In short, although situated learning and the notions it has popularized have helped us conceptualize this identification process, as teacher education programs stand at present, situated learning cannot completely capture the complexities of a novice teacher entering, participating, and engaging in the language teaching profession.

Study 3 (Morgan): Identity as Pedagogy.

In the third study Morgan investigated the notion of a teacher's identity as a form of pedagogy. Through this theory Morgan perceives that students acquire language mainly through "image-text". An image-text is produced through the everyday practices of schooling and reflects the close, affective relationships that often develop between teachers and students (Simon, 1995). And it is formulated by teacher and student interaction. A teacher's life stories, gestures, clothing, and how these articulate with students' own prior experiences would also be inscribed in the image-text produced in class. Through repeated performance of the roles assigned to them, teachers and students learn ways to subvert or modify the prior norms assigned to their positions. These post structural insights highlight the point that as teachers we are always, in part, invisible to ourselves. Students "read" us, and respond to things about us of which we might not be aware.

Morgan uses different image text in presenting lessons to his students. He utilizes the image text of Gong Li—a woman who stole another's woman husband to compare with Elizabeth Taylor—a woman who also stole other women's husbands but how could his students "admire" Elizabeth Taylor and "hate" Gong Li? His students simply state that it was okay to admire Elizabeth Taylor because "she isn't Chinese." And the day after in teaching vocabulary class he also uses his life stories to provoke new and challenging understandings of culture, gender, and family relations among his students. He said that "his wife's preeminent role in their financial decision making and her superior income, which came as a surprise for several students—and not a flattering one in the eyes of some"

Morgan began highlighting aspects of his personal life previously unshared with his students. Domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, and child care were discussed informally or as part of lesson content. Morgan utilizes these opportunities to demonstrate his expertise and the sharing of such responsibilities in his own home. Over time, several incidents in class seemed to indicate that a new, reconfigured image-text—one that challenged students' traditional notions of masculinity and familial responsibilities—was beginning to circulate amongst his students. The chain of events described by Morgan confirms the importance of a teacher's identity in the knowledge received or rejected in classrooms.

This theory of Morgan is true with my lesson. Many students are influenced by teacher's behaviors, life stories, clothing and gestures. It proves that the interaction between teacher and student are very important. The teacher can meet students' needs by modeling a concerned attitude for the well-being of students and by creating a caring environment where students feel valued and appreciated. For example, a teacher may set the tone for a caring classroom environment by including students' viewpoints in the development of classroom rules or responsibilities. A teacher also may show care and concern for students by expressing an interest in their daily or extracurricular activities. In turn, students should respond positively to a teacher who understands the cultural dynamics of the classroom. Students will try to build a respectful relationship with the teacher because they feel that the teacher truthfully cares about them. The teacher's ability to identify with

students or understand the cultural identities of students is necessary for addressing the needs of every student. Therefore, teachers must learn as much as possible about their students so that they can structure activities, build curricular materials, and tap into resources that will help all students be academically successful.

III. CONCLUSION

The writer was successfully in pointing out that all three theories speak not just to a relational but also to an interactional understanding of teacher identity. These three perspectives construct teacher identity based on social, situated learning and pedagogy and they have close relation. We can see the ways Morgan's identity affected his students and "the negotiations of identity that formed part of Marc's story as told by Johnson and of the bilingual teachers Varghese studied". Through this study I have chance to understand about teacher identity and found that teacher plays an important role in the distribution and reproduction of social values, knowledge in a given society.

IV. REFERENCES

1. Gay, G. 2000. Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice. New York: Teachers College Press.
2. Banks, J. A., and C. A. McGee Banks, eds. 2005. Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives, 5th Ed. New York: Wiley.
3. Adams, G. R., & Marshall, S. K. (1996). A developmental social psychology of identity: Understanding in context. *Journal of Adolescence*, 19, 429–442.
4. Cushner, K., A. McClelland, and P. Safford. 2000. Human diversity in education: An integrative approach, 3rd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
5. Amin, N. (2000). Negotiating nativism: Minority immigrant women ESL teachers and the native speaker construct (Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, Canada, 2001). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 61, A 4579.
6. Phillipson, R. (1992). Linguistic imperialism. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
7. Phillipson, R. (1996). ELT: The native speaker's burden. In T. Hedge & N. Whitney (Eds.), *Power, pedagogy & practice* (pp. 23-30). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
8. Lippi-Green, R. (1997). *English with an accent. Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*. New York: Routledge
9. Medgyes, P. (1996). Native or non-native: Who's worth more? In T. Hedge & N. Whitney (Eds.), *Power, pedagogy & practice* (pp. 31-42). Oxford: Oxford University Press
10. Matsuda, A., & Matsuda, P. K. (2001). Autonomy and collaboration in teacher education: Journal sharing among native and nonnative English-speaking teachers. *The CATESOL Journal*, 13(1), 109-121.
11. Mitchell, R & Myles, F. 2004. Input and Interaction in Second Language Learning. In N. D. Thu (Eds), *Theories of Second Language Teaching and Learning*. London. Arnold. pp. 159-192
12. Dornyei, Z. 2006. Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition. In N. D. Thu (Eds), *AILA Review*. 19. pp. 42-68.
13. Woods, D. (1996). *Teacher cognition in language teaching*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press
14. Varghese, M. (2000). *Bilingual teachers-in-the-making: Advocates, classroom teachers, and transients*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.