Metaphors as a window into identity: A study of teachers of English to young learners in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Although teacher identity has become an emergent theme in the fields of both general education and language teaching, there have been few investigations into the identity of teachers of language to young learners. This paper reports on a study that explored the identity of six primary school English-language teachers in Vietnam. Data for the paper were collected through life-history interviews in which the participating teachers were encouraged to use metaphors as a means to understand themselves and their work. The findings reveal that the participating teachers projected their images as teachers of English to young learners through a wide range of metaphors, which were subsequently classified into five groups: 'artists', 'mothers', 'trial judges', 'intercultural promoters' and 'democrats'. These findings offer important insights into primary school English-language teachers' multiple identities, the particularity of teaching language to young learners, and Vietnamese teachers' construction of identities in relation to the local context. They also offer some implications for the fields of teaching English to young learners and second language teacher education.

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1. Introduction

In line with the emergence of identity in social science research in general, identity has become a focus of attention for research in education, where it is acknowledged as an effective analytical tool to illuminate the relationship between schooling and society (Gee, 2000). Central to educational research on identity is teacher identity, which has emerged as a separate area of study (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Research on teacher identity raises social awareness of what it means to be a teacher by exploring different aspects of teaching (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). As in general education, teacher identity has become an important issue in applied linguistics and in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) specifically. In the words of Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005), the significance of teacher identity to language teaching lies in the fact that "in order to understand language teaching and learning we need to understand teachers; and in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are" (p. 22).

As the majority of the world's TESOL teachers are non-native speakers (Canagarajah, 1999), the position of non-native English-speaking (NNES) teachers has been discussed as an important theme in a substantial body of research on teacher identity in the field (Braine, 2010; Miller, 2009). In particular, the predominant model is one in which NNES teachers construct and negotiate their multiple identities (national, cultural and professional) during their postgraduate studies or residency in Anglophone countries (Faez, 2011; Huang, 2014; Ortaçtepe, 2015; Phan, 2007). In terms of the teaching level in which NNES

teachers are involved, these studies have investigated teachers in secondary and tertiary education. Teachers who are engaged with young learners have tended to be overlooked, despite the often complex and demanding nature of teaching English to children (Butler, 2015; Cameron, 2001; Copland, Garton, & Burns, 2014; Pinter, 2011). Given that the majority of NNES teachers spend their lives pursuing careers in their country of origin, research needs to shift its focus towards this group of teachers in their home contexts. Moreover, to counterbalance the emphasis that has been placed on language teachers at higher teaching levels, it is essential that research on TESOL teacher identity be expanded to include teachers of English to young learners, an emergent branch of TESOL (Copland & Garton, 2014). To fill these two gaps, this study focuses on the identity of primary school English-language teachers whose life and career have been situated in Vietnam.

Metaphors, which are simply defined as a tool for "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 5), have been recognised as a vehicle for teachers to "present their beliefs and/or experiences with teaching" (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011, p. 763). Examination of the metaphors used by teachers to express their identities is thus well documented in the literature (Alger, 2009; Farrell, 2011; Ma & Gao, 2016; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011; Zhao, Coombs, & Zhou, 2010). Based on the established value of metaphors for understanding teacher identity, the present study employs life history as method and metaphors as data to explore the identity of primary school English-language teachers in Vietnam.

2. Literature review

2.1. Language teacher identity

Language teachers today are no longer seen as technicians who simply acquire language-teaching techniques in methodology courses and then apply them in their classroom (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Rather, they are recognised as active agents who bring professional, sociocultural and sociopolitical dimensions to classroom dynamics (Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Nguyen, 2016; Varghese et al., 2005). Such a shift from a traditional to sociocultural perspective "place[s] identity and discourse at the heart of language teaching and learning" (Miller, 2009, p. 172). In line with the complicated, multifaceted nature of identity in social science research, no consensus has been reached on what is meant by teacher identity in general and language teacher identity in particular. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a specific definition of identity in this paper to give readers a sense of what kind of identity the research study focuses on.

The definition of teacher identity underpinning this study partly draws on the essential features of teacher identity put forward by Beijaard et al. (2004). Specifically, teacher identity is (1) "an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences", (2) "implies both person and context", (3) "consists of sub-identities" and (4) embraces "agency" (meaning that teachers are active during their teaching careers) (p. 122). From a practical perspective, teacher identity is also understood as the roles performed by teachers; that is, "the concept of identity reflects how individuals see themselves and how they enact their roles within different settings" (Burns & Richards, 2009, p. 5).

As Varghese et al. (2005) point out, teacher identity in the field of language teaching is more likely to be fully understood through an analysis of its characteristics, here explored through three predominant themes outlined by the authors:

1 Identity as multiple, shifting and in conflict
2 Identity as crucially related to social, cultural and political contexts
3 Identity as being constructed, maintained and negotiated primarily through discourse. (p. 35)

These three themes indicate that language teacher identity is constructed from multiple shifting and conflicting factors (personal, professional, social, historical and cultural). Identity is not something language teachers are born with. Rather, it results from their engagement and interaction with the sociocultural contexts in which they have been involved. In this sense, teachers form and negotiate their identity through discourse, which is defined as "a pattern of thinking, speaking, behaving, and interacting that is socially, culturally, and historically constructed and sanctioned by a specific group or groups of people" (Miller Marsh, 2003, p. 9). The characteristics of language teacher identity are, to some extent, similar to the features of teacher identity in general education (Beijaard et al., 2004). To characterise language teacher identity, as distinct from the concept of identity conceptualised in general education and in other fields, Varghese et al. (2005) emphasise aspects of identity specific to language teachers, and which correspond to the three themes listed above. The first two of these aspects point to the position of non-native teachers and the status of the language-teaching profession. Marginalisation, which refers to as the third point, posits language teaching is regarded as a marginalised profession, leading to the instability of teachers' work and lives.

Varghese et al.'s (2005) suggested features of language teacher identity have given rise to a number of research studies exploring the construction of language teacher identity. In particular, the focus of attention in the majority of studies on language teacher identity has been the status of non-native language teachers and the dichotomy between this group and their native counterparts. The most common model found in the research views language teachers from NNES backgrounds as constructing and negotiating their multiple identities (national, cultural and professional) during their postgraduate studies or residency in Anglophone countries (Faez, 2011; Huang, 2014; Li, 2007; Menard-Warwick, 2008; Park, 2012; Phan, 2007; Reis, 2011; Samimy, Kim, Ah Lee, & Kasai, 2011; Zacharias, 2010). The NNES teachers in these studies learned new pedagogies