



# Teacher agency, positioning, and English language learners: Voices of pre-service classroom teachers



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- This study explores narrative positioning and agency of teachers of ELLs.
- Relational and oppositional positionings contribute to the teachers' identity (re)formation.
- Pre-service teachers can construct contradictory positions, which shapes their agency.
- Teacher identity and agency are affected by the micro-politics of the educational setting.

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the identity (re)negotiations and agency of three pre-service classroom teachers who received their ESL (English as a Second Language) endorsement at a research university in the United States. An analysis of interview data and teachers' journal entries, from a narrative positioning perspective, indicates that the teachers took on various, and sometimes conflicting, positional identities in relation to their social context (e.g., mentor teachers, ELLs, etc.). The findings further indicate that those positional identities have shaped teachers' agency and self-reported classroom practices. The analysis presented provides implications for teachers of ELLs and teacher educators.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there were more than 4.5 million English language learners (ELLs) in public schools in the U.S. in 2010–11, which is approximately 10% of the K–12 student population in the nation. It is projected that the numbers will continue to grow. To understand who these students are, a large number of studies have investigated ELLs' sociocultural backgrounds, positionings in new cultural and educational settings, and identity (re)creations (e.g., Bashir-Ali, 2006; Black, 2004; Duff, 2001; Hunter, 1997; Iddings, 2005; Yoon, 2008). This literature has emphasized the complex nature of identity negotiation of ELLs and suggested that teachers' awareness of complex identity work should be raised while their teaching practice and interactions with ELLs should be re-examined. Teachers can only do this when they construct positive selves in relation to their

students. As Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005) argue, the teacher is not “a neutral player in the classroom, but on the contrary, her positionality in relation to her students, and to the broader context in which the teacher was situated” (p. 22) is vital. They further argue that to understand 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: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them” (p. 22). However, the identities of teachers of ELLs have not been adequately addressed. Little is known regarding their identity negotiations in relation to their educational contexts and ELLs, and how such negotiations influence their agency, interactions, and practices. In particular, the research on the identity (re)construction of novice teachers who teach ELLs is scarce. The previous research has mainly focused on the identities of EFL (English as a foreign language) and ESL teachers. Mostly focusing on the sociocultural (e.g., Duff & Uchida, 1997; Tsui, 2007), non-native (e.g., Lee, 2013; Tsui, 2007) and professional (Liu & Xu, 2013; Motha, 2006; Urzúa & Vázquez,

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2008) identities, this limited literature has demonstrated the important role of institutional, linguistic, and cultural environments on EFL/ESL teachers' identity construction. To better understand the identity (re)negotiation of regular classroom teachers and address the gaps in the literature, this study, drawing on Positioning Theory (e.g., Davies & Harré, 1999) investigated how pre-service K-5 classroom teachers positioned themselves and ELLs in their narratives, and how such positionings interacted with their agency. The aim is to show how teacher identity and agency are constructed and understood through teachers' self- and other-positionings in orally elicited narratives and written diaries. Accordingly, the research question addressed is: *How do teachers of ELLs position themselves and (re)negotiate identities in relation to their social context in their accounts of experiences and how do such positionings interact with their agency?*

## 2. Narrative positioning and identity

This study uses Positioning Theory (Davies & Harré, 1999) as its theoretical framework. Positioning Theory focuses on the social construction of identities and the world through discourse. The term, discourse, has been defined differently across disciplines. The most common definition that can be found is "language in use". In this study, my focus is not only on the language itself, but "language used to do something and mean something, language produced and interpreted in a real-world context" (Cameron, 2001, p. 13).

The discourse we produce is shaped by our multiple selves while at the same time discourse shapes our multiple identities. This understanding of discourse and its relation to personhood is consistent with poststructural discourse. As Davies (2000) suggests, "Poststructuralist discourse entails a move from the self as a noun (and thus stable and relatively fixed) to the self as a verb, always in process, taking its shape in and through the discursive possibilities through which selves are made" (p. 137). The term *position* is used to capture the dynamic aspects of selfhood. This selfhood, Davies (2000) argues,

is constantly in process; it only exists as process; it is revised and (re)presented through images, metaphors, story lines, and other features of language, such as pronoun grammar; it is spoken and re-spoken, each speaking existing in a palimpsest with the others. (p. 137)

Unlike roles that are static and fixed, positions are situation-specific, disputed, challenged, changing, shifting and therefore dynamic (Harré & Slocum, 2003; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Assigning positions to oneself or others is called *positioning*, "a discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines" (Davies & Harré, 1999, p. 37). Positioning relates to situating oneself or others with particular rights and obligations in and through talk (Rex & Schiller, 2009). As speakers actively and agentively position themselves in talk (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004), they (co)construct and (re)shape their self. This self-positioning is called *reflexive positioning* (Davies & Harré, 1999). Individuals also position others, which is referred as *interactive positioning* (Davies & Harré, 1999). Drawing on Davies and Harré (1999), Sørensen (2006) argues that

if several positions make clusters within a discourse, an identity construction will emerge. [...] To understand identity construction as a process of narrative positioning is useful, because it opens up an understanding of teachers as active agents in their own lives and the construction of teacher identity as a dynamic and changing activity. (p. 529)

Given its tight connection to identity, positioning is viewed as a powerful tool to analyze identity in discourse. Using positioning as a tool or a lens, a number of scholars have investigated how language learners construct positional identities in educational settings. Kayi-Aydar (in press), for example, analyzed how two ESL students constructed conflicting positional identities in an ESL classroom and how those positionings shaped their social status and access to learning opportunities in class. In a similar study, Menard-Warwick (2008), analyzed how Fabiana, an immigrant woman, was positioned in non-powerful ways, during a unit on employment in her ESL class, by her teacher who had contrary pre-assumptions about her students' identities (e.g., perceiving them only as homemakers). Such positioning acts prevented Fabiana from speaking up and constructing the identity that she wanted to project (e.g., identity as a businesswoman in her home country). Although these studies demonstrated how language learners (re)constructed identities, little has been said regarding how teachers negotiate identities in relation to their students (Reeves, 2009). Sørensen (2006) argues that teacher identity is narratively constructed and she rejects creating typologies of teachers or defining what identity teachers as a group or individuals should possess. Then, understanding how teachers construct identities for themselves through positioning becomes necessary. This understanding is important because, as Yoon (2008) claims, "whatever the positions teachers take, that positioning guides them in their interactive approaches with students in classroom settings" (p. 499). Indeed, Reeves's study (2009) demonstrated how the participant-teacher, Neil, positioned himself "as a good and effective teacher to prepare ELL and all students for society, and that meant viewing and treating ELLs like all other students" (p. 38). This reflexive positioning resulted in Neil's refusal to make linguistic accommodations for ELLs. In a similar study, Yoon (2008) described how three teachers assigned various positions to themselves and ELLs in their classrooms and how these positioning closely influenced teachers' classroom practices. Overall, the limited literature on positionings of teachers of ELLs shows that teachers' self positionings closely interact with how they position their students and how such positioning moves influence their teaching practices. Focusing on this relational aspect of positioning, this study aims to add to the limited literature on teachers' reflexive and interactive narrative positionings.

## 3. Agency

Rogers and Wetzel (2013) define agency as "the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world" (p. 63). In this study, drawing on Positioning Theory, I view agency as "strongly connected to the contextual conditions within which it is achieved and not as merely a capacity or possession of the individual" (Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012, p. 197). Just like identity, agency is shaped by social interactions and achieved in particular situations (Priestley et al., 2012). Lasky (2005) claims that agency is "mediated by the interaction between the individual (attributes and inclinations) and the tools and structures of a social setting" (p. 900). According to this view of agency, "human beings are neither independent and autonomous agents nor are they shaped and controlled entirely by external influences" (Ray, 2009, p. 116). It is therefore possible to see the same individual exercising more agency in one context and less in another.

Agency is possible or achieved when individuals are assigned agentic positions. When individuals take on agentic positions, they have the capacity or willingness to act. Harré and Slocum (2003) argue that there are three categories of actions:

Those one has done, is doing, or will do; those which one is permitted, allowed or encouraged to do; and those which

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