

A Data-Driven Conceptualization of Language Teacher Identity in the Context of Public High Schools in Iran

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In spite of a paradigm shift towards poststructuralism, the legacy of the cognitive paradigm continues to permeate mainstream teacher education programs for teachers of English as a foreign language with its focus on “methods” as blueprints for language teacher practice (Crandall, 2000; Adamson, 2004). This problem derives from the humanist, modernist perspective—a fully autonomous, self-aware subject, who is able to freely choose which aspects of his or her identity are of pedagogical value (see Butler, 1992; Norton, 2000; Pennycook, 2001).

Since teacher autonomy is presupposed in methods discussions, contextual constraints and the situated nature of teaching knowledge are taken as irrelevant. Debates have typically centred around arguments of what to teach (Freeman & Johnson, 2005; Tarone & Allwright, 2005; Yates & Muchisky, 2003). Such positions mistakenly assume that problems of practice are cognitive in origin. Once teachers have a solid knowledge-base, they can apply it freely without any contextual constraints. Rather than being cognitive, problems of practice are social because teachers do not just teach: they teach within and for a social system. Within such systems teachers have limited opportunities to act based on the knowledge

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they accumulated in pre-service teacher education programs. They can not even assert their own beliefs because of:

1. what others expect from them (Reynolds, 1996);
2. assimilatory strategies of central agencies, such as exclusion, marginalization, and assimilation (Matusov, 1999);
3. the desire for social wholeness and common identity (Young, 1990); and
4. a variety of roles teachers feel that they have to play (Volkmann & Anderson, 1998).

Since these external constraints are rarely mentioned in the cognitive orientation and methods prescriptions and proscriptions, teachers enter the profession with their universal, context-free views of language teaching. As Coldron and Smith (1999) pointed out, these contextual constraints create a tension between agency (the personal dimension of teaching) and structure (the socially given dimension). Over time teachers come to the bitter conclusion that it is these socially given constraints rather than their professional knowledge, that shape their practice. The discrepancies between teachers' professional knowledge and the realities of teaching often contribute to what is known as *praxischock* (Mark, 1998) (also referred to as *praxis shock*). Early-career praxis shock makes teachers reject the knowledge and skills that they learned at university in preference for the knowledge and skills valued by the teaching culture at their school. Thus they suffer from what can best be termed identity crisis.

To accommodate these social givens, which account for culturally acceptable though theoretically unjustified modes of teaching, teachers experience change externally, i.e., in response to the requirements of the specific career role, and internally, i.e., in the subjective self-conceptualization associated with the role (McGowen & Hart, 1990). This self-conceptualization can be viewed as one's professional identity. Becoming a professional incorporates both external requirements and internal self-conceptualizations. An individual's self-conceptualization associated with a career role can be viewed as one's professional identity. Thus instead of identifying himself or herself with his or her knowledge-base and teaching skills, the teacher identifies himself /herself with the roles s/he plays. As such s/he develops a new "situated identity" (Clement & Noels, 1992).

The main focus of research until relatively recently has been on learners rather than teachers. This has resulted in a dearth of substantive literature that might otherwise represent teacher identity. The knowledge base for language teacher education has tended to confine studies of identity to language learners and learning (e.g., Norton & Toohey, 2002; Ricento, 2005), rather than to language teachers or teaching. Noting this paucity of research on teacher identity, Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005) called for further research on language teacher identity.

As noted by Verghase (2001) teacher identity has only recently emerged as a subtopic within the field of language teacher education. Of the few studies on teacher identity, some focus on “native speaker fallacy”, i.e., the belief that native speakers are natural-born language teachers (see Canagarajah, 1999; McKay, 2002). A second line of research looks at identity as something complex, situated, and subject to change across time and place (James, 2002; Johnston, 1999). These latter studies are enlightened by poststructuralism. In poststructuralism conformity to discourse is a precondition for autonomy or resistance. Far from being autonomous, as it is assumed in the humanist, modernist approach, the teacher and his/her identity are affected by classroom experiences, collegial relationships, organizational structures, and external situational pressures (van Veen, Sleeper, & van de Ven, 2005).

Poststructuralism urges us to look at human activity around “knowledge and power” (Foucault, 1980) interrelationships. Rather than being an autonomous universal act, as language teacher education programs inculcate, teaching reflects context (Pennington, 1995); and it is context adaptive at the level of individual events and classrooms, as well as at the level of the school, the society, the individual teaching field, and the teaching profession. Thus we can describe teachers as having a situated identity (Clement & Noels, 1992), such that different aspects of identity are switched on and off in response to context and circumstances.

Teaching must be recognized “as a socially constructed activity that requires the interpretation and negotiation of meanings embedded within the context of the classroom” (Johnson, 1996, p. 24). As part and parcel of this interpretation and negotiation, there is a continual redefinition of teacher identity. “Teaching and teacher identity are socially constructed through experiences in and with members of the teaching profession” (Johnson, p.24), and various student and other groups. Thus teacher identity becomes dialogic in Bakhtin’s (1981) sense of invoking an overlay of multiple voices, roles, or discourses.

Teachers who see their main task as that of responding to students’ needs create a coidentity (Pennington, 1995) with their students. Thus teacher identity is constructed in activities that are responsive to students’ needs. The professional identity of teachers can be described as a tension between the subjective and personal aspects of teaching and the intersubjective or collective aspects (Pennington, 1999). That is, every teacher sees himself or herself as a “rational decision-maker” (Clark & Peterson, 1986); however, he should also see himself through the roles he is socially expected to play, or in Greetz’s (1973) words through “cultural lenses.”

Thus in addition to being a rational decision-maker, every teacher sees himself/herself as a social being who responds to the particulars of a given culture. Teaching activities initially tend to be subjective. Over time, however, they tend to be more intersubjective or collective. Teacher preparation programs focus on the universal component of teacher knowledge. Pennington (1999) believes that this universal basis is then refined in specific teaching contexts in interaction with an individual teacher’s characteristics.

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Research has demonstrated that teachers' sense of professional and personal identity is a key variable in their motivation and commitment to change (Day, 2002). To foster change, the field is in urgent need of "field-internal" (Morgan, 2004) and data-driven conceptualizations that are deeply grounded in teachers' free expression of their identity in actual teaching situations. Such conceptualizations will help researchers contribute sounder concepts to language teacher identity rather than just consuming theory-driven concepts. This study aims to contribute to this line of research by exploring language teachers' self-conceptualizations in public high schools in Iran.

Purpose and Significance

Van Veen et al., (2005) believe that teacher identity is affected by external structures. With this insight and through elaborate coding schemes of grounded theory, this study aims at developing a data-driven conceptualization of language teacher identity by exploring: (1) the socially givens or structures that shape teachers' identities (Conditions); (2) the roles teachers fulfil in the face of these structures (Action); and (3) the effect on their professional lives of taking such roles (Consequences).

The significance of this study is manifold. First, through the dialogical process of grounded theory, participants come to uncover their "false consciousnesses" (Webber, 1964). Having become aware of their identity, they are motivated and committed to change. Second, the study is of theoretical significance in that it contributes concepts to the literature rather than borrow concepts from it. Third, it is valuable locally in that knowledge of teachers' perception of aspects of their identity is useful in helping them to cope with educational changes. It also serves as a basis for institutional and educational innovations (Nixon, 1996).

Research Context

Three aspects of teaching are tightly controlled by the Ministry of Education of Iran. First, the input or the syllabus for all language classes in public high schools is centrally determined. Thus teachers have no say as to what to teach. Second, conformity with the input is guaranteed by a uniform testing scheme issued by the central office. This eliminates the exercise of professional expertise in testing. In addition to specifying what student knowledge is, the central office specifies what teacher knowledge is and presents it unidirectionally through in-service teacher training programs. The researcher was interested in exploring the effects of these contextual constraints on teachers' professional lives. He believes that the findings are useful not only for participant and non-participant language teachers, but also for policy-makers.

Method

Grounded theory was chosen for three reasons. First, in contrast with the

experimental mode of enquiry, which provides a snapshot, grounded theory captures a moving picture of the social process of identity formation in the face of contextual constraints. Second, instead of hypothesizing before having any actual data, in grounded theory, it is the data that give rise to forming, refining, and testing hypotheses. Third, instead of statistical sampling, which allows for a predetermined set of data, theoretical sampling of concepts increases the scope of data and leads to a theory that fits the data.

Participants

Five in-service teachers from different high schools in Mashad participated in this study. Mashad is one of the five major cities in Iran. It is located in the eastern parts of the country. Participants were all selected from urban areas. They were all males, with more than 12 years of experience. All of them majored in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). Three of them had earned their master's degrees, and the others had earned bachelor's degrees. They were selected on the basis of teaching experience and willingness to share their views and experience with the researcher because "understanding requires an openness to experience, a willingness to engage in a dialogue with one that challenges our self-understandings" (Schewandt, 1999, p. 458). The researcher stopped sampling after interviewing five participants because theoretical saturation was achieved after iterative data collection from the fifth participant.

Data Collection

Following Seidman (1991), the interviews were designed to acquaint the participant with the nature of the study, to establish rapport, to set a context for phenomena, and then to obtain depth and details of the experience. Initially the researcher acted as a passive listener in unstructured, open interviews. After identifying transient concepts and categories through open coding, the interviewer tried to be more active in the dialogical process to make participants elaborate and corroborate identified concepts and categories related to contextual constraints, action, and consequences. Each interview lasted about one hour. To derive, corroborate and verify concepts and categories each participant was interviewed five times.

Interviews were held until redundancy was reached. They were audiotaped and then transcribed to best represent the dynamic nature of the living conversation. Each of the verbatim transcripts was returned to the participant for his review and verification. During the research, each participant was assured confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms in the reporting of data. They were also assured that once the data were coded, connection back to the individual participant would be almost impossible to trace. Identification of the individual participant was not necessary because the concepts generated by the participants—not the individual participants—were at the centre of study (Glaser, 1978).

Data Analysis

To analyse interview data, the researcher undertook the following analytical processes. First, concepts or the building blocks of the theory were discovered and developed into categories through open coding. Second, conditions, actions and consequences were related through axial coding. Third, the central or core category was selected and systematically related to other categories through selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this study “*rationalized identity*” emerged as the core category. This category was chosen since it vividly explains that language teachers’ action within the context of high schools in Iran is not justified by clear and sensible thinking and judgement on teachers’ part; rather it is justified by factors external to the teacher. Thus instead of seeing themselves through their professional knowledge and skills, they see themselves through the roles they are socially expected to play. To establish trustworthiness, the emerged concepts and categories were verified through “member-checking” (Riley, 1996).

Despite methodological rigor, findings such as these that follow are not a guarantee of truth; for truths are always partial (Clifford, 1986) and knowledge “situated” (Haraway, 1988). We also cannot ignore how interviewer and interviewee negotiate face or manage impressions (Goffman, 1959) in interviews. An interview is but a snapshot in time. Much is left unsaid about events and persons despite the intention of the interviewer to provide a holistic account. Of course, more interviews and stories would deepen our understanding of this exploratory study. Still, I am confident that the macro-structures identified represent a subset of a larger set of macro-structures governing foreign language teachers’ work in public high schools in Iran at this time.

Results

Iterative data collection and analysis yielded “*rationalised identity*” as the core category. This category vividly explains that language teachers’ action within the context of high schools in Iran is controlled and justified by factors external to the teacher. It is the determining conditions and the consequences of action that leads them to rationalize such a remarkably conformist mode of teaching. Language teachers’ self-conceptualization is shaped by the roles teachers have to play in the face of external conditions. As Volkmann and Anderson (1998) put it cogently, teachers’ self-image is balanced by a variety of roles teachers’ feel that they *have to play* in the face of contextual constraints or the “socially given” (Coldron and Smith, 1999). *Rationalized identity* was taken as the core category because it has explanatory adequacy to pull together three major roles taken by language teachers in public high schools in Iran: in in-service teacher education programs as *passive receiver of information*; in teaching as *information transmitter*; in planning as *cool implementer*, i.e., as a person whose action is detached from his or her own knowledge and skills. At a time when reflective teaching is the buzz word of

teacher education programs, these conceptualizations would seem biased, unless the reader knows the factors or conditions that bring them about. In what follows the researcher tries to uncover the determining conditions of such conceptualizations by relating them to language teachers' comments.

Passive Receiver of Information

Periodically teachers have to participate in centrally planned in-service programs. Teachers do not believe that they need these programs because they think they are irrelevant to their needs and problems. Nonetheless most of the language teachers take part in these programs because teacher promotion depends on hours of participation in in-service programs. Teachers complain that the content of these programs are irrelevant to teachers' felt problems of practice because the content of these programs is determined by central agencies. Since the predetermined content is presented didactically by the lecturer, teachers have no chance to express their thoughts and feelings about the information presented. Teachers' complaints better illustrates this senseless scenario. Below Reza talks about how he perceives in-service programs:

I have participated in nearly all in-service programs for language teachers. However, I have never found a chance to present my views because these programs are mainly lecturer-fronted, lecturer-centred. I hate in-service programs because they focus on practically useless theories presented through lecturing. I participate in these programs because my promotion depends on the hours I participated in these programs.

These comments are theoretically significant. Reza sees himself as the consumer of centrally-planned irrelevant theories because he has no chance to express his own views. The only thing he can do is to listen to monologs presented by the lecturer. Although he does not like these programs, he takes part in all of them because he needs them for his promotion. Passive receiver of information is corroborated by comments from Arash:

In-service programs take us as deficient. Thus they mainly intend to improve centrally preconceived deficiencies without having any actual data about teachers' educational problems. We cannot express our voice in these programs. We are not heard. We are bombarded with theoretical junk. I have to participate because I don't want to lag behind others who are promoted merely because they participated in these programs.

Mehrdad believes that he can contribute to in-service programs, but he finds no opportunity to express his views. He expresses his complaints as follows:

Since I know that I can not find any opportunity to use my teaching knowledge and skills in public high schools, I *also* teach in private institutes. In contrast with high school, I am satisfied with my teaching in private institutes because

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my students learn well. I do like to share my ideas with my colleagues in these programs, but I find no opportunity because these programs are presented through lecturing rather than dialogue.

When central agencies impose a strong sense of what teaching knowledge is, then there is no space for teachers to reflect on their own knowledge and experience. Over time teachers will probably lose their own knowledge and skills since top-down in-service programs inculcate the idea that other's knowledge is superior to teachers' own knowledge. To sum up, because of contextual constraints such as irrelevant content, delivery approach, and lack of teacher voice, teachers see themselves at the consumer end of educational initiatives. Being at the consumer end of the continuum, teachers are alienated from their knowledge and skills.

Information Transmitter

Since there is a one-to-one correspondence between the content of the final exams and the content of the textbook, coverage has become a more planning and teaching issue than learning itself. This concern has diminished the frequency of responsive teaching in which teachers take their cues for the pedagogic moves from the responses of language learners. The reason is that both input and output are tightly controlled. The textbook specifies what knowledge is, and the final exam specifies how much of this knowledge has been transferred to the students. In such a system teachers see themselves as a mechanical channel through which the content of the book are transmitted to the learners. Ahmad's focus on coverage is related to the school principal and to the final exams. He comments:

Nothing is important but the content of the book. My knowledge is limited to the book because in teaching and testing I can't overstep the specified content. If you say something that has not been specified in the textbook, the principal intervenes. Once I taught a poem by William Blake. The principal warned me that I have been hired to teach the book not what I want to. The book doesn't cover what students need. Notwithstanding this fact, I must follow the book because students are tested based on the content of the book rather than the information I present in the classroom.

Ahmad's comments specify three situational conditions that turn him into a mechanical information transmitter: the textbook, the principal, and the final exam. Rather than being controlled by teachers' professional knowledge, the "what" of teaching is tightly controlled by situational conditions. Afshin's comments express similar concerns. His comments are noteworthy in that they uncover pass rate in the final exams as the most powerful determinant of teachers' information-transmitting function.

Although teachers and students prefer oral skills, they ignore them because they are not tested in the final exams. Rather than being judged by their teaching skills and strategies, teachers are judged by students' pass rate in the final exams. Since pass rate is the only yardstick of success in our high schools, unwillingly my teaching strategies motivate students to sacrifice learning well for scoring well.

Since students' main concern is to pass the final exam, they favor teachers who teach to the test. Since popular teachers are those who limit their teaching to those parts of the book which carry high weight in the final exam, teaching to the test is the rule. Those who teach otherwise are marginalized since they lose their popularity among students. Ahmad's comments better clarify this problem:

When I started teaching 14 years ago, I was not familiar with the now fashionable trend of teaching to the test. Although I planned ahead and worked hard, student achievement in the finals fell short of my expectations. After consulting those who had a high pass rate in the finals, I found that teaching to the test is the only road to success. Based on analysis of previous sample test, I know what to cover and what to drop while teaching.

Theoretically, the teacher is the only decision-maker who is in tune with the heartbeat of the students. Thus he should act as the gate-keeper to his classroom, "deciding which curriculum and pedagogical strategies will be allowed to enter and to what degree" (Leuhamann, 2002, p.8). In practice, however, the educational code and the nature of curriculum in Iran do not recognize this right for language teachers. The national testing scheme reinforces the rigidity of the curriculum. This uniform scheme compels teachers to teach according to the syllabi prepared for them. Under these constraints teachers no longer have professional autonomy about how best to teach; they have autonomy about how best to teach to the test. It is teaching to the test that reduces teachers' role to transmitting information.

Cool Implementer

Instead of developing and using their own initiatives to improve teaching, teachers must wait for change initiatives that are imposed by central agencies. Teachers must follow the centrally mandated changes; they have no voice in change. The changes are transmitted to teachers through directives and circulars. Teachers are expected to do as they are told. Under these circumstances, teachers act as cool implementers, i.e., their teaching is detached from their professional knowledge and skills, since teaching is controlled by people that are external to the teaching process. Under these constraints teachers are actors not planners. All planning is done outside the teaching circle. Teachers simply execute externally produced plans. Reza's comments better clarify this process:

Instead of following my own plan and my students' needs, I find myself following externally imposed plans. I am not free to act based on what I have learned at the university. Award of advanced skills is given to those who follow top-down initiatives. Teachers are rarely awarded for their own initiatives and personal plans.

Textbooks change periodically. Instead of reflecting the views of those who are in tune with the heartbeat of the students, changes reflect the views of outsiders who are alien to the realities of teaching in public high schools. Mehrdad explains teachers' lack of voice in change as follows:

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Centrally determined textbooks do not go through trial administration. That is, they are not tested on a small-scale basis before being prescribed for nation-wide use. The accuracy and efficiency of imposed changes are taken for granted by the central agencies. Only after change is introduced, teachers are asked to evaluate the book. Although teachers actively evaluate newly adopted textbooks, their views are rarely taken into account.

Not only do language teachers implement externally imposed change plans, they also have to implement testing schemes issued by the Central Bureau of Education. Afshin's comments make teachers' task in testing quite evident:

The testing scheme defines the "what" and "how" of testing in advance. It clearly specifies the content of the test. Even the type and number of questions are predetermined. Since test construction involves copying the instructions issued by the testing scheme, tests have a predictable shape and content. It is the predetermined format and content of final exams that guarantees the success of teaching to the test as the dominant approach, and opens the door to teachers of other school subjects to the task of teaching and testing English.

Arash corroborates Afshin's views when he ironically states that his students develop better language tests than he does. When he was asked about the reason, he stated:

What is needed is a sample test from the previous years; you can duplicate the format, form, and number of items. Since the same format has been used repeatedly, teachers and students alike know the what and how of testing. The test developer is free as long as he moves along the format.

Thus the "what" and "how" of testing is centrally determined and introduced through testing schemes. Pass-rate pressure determines the "how" of teaching. Since teachers know that student pass rate in the finals is the only yardstick of success, they see teaching to the test as the only workable and efficient approach. Similarly the "what" of teaching is out of teachers' control because teachers must teach a predetermined body of knowledge. In such a situation, teachers find no opportunity to use their knowledge of syllabus design, methodology, and testing. Due to lack of use, teachers' knowledge and skills are likely to atrophy over time. Thus instead of being professionalized, language teachers are de-professionalized.

Discussion

When teaching is rationalized, i.e., theoretically unjustified but contextually justified, teachers forget their professional identity and develop what may be referred to as rationalized identity. In such cases teaching becomes management of ends and means; learning becomes the consumption of prepackaged bits of information; and success becomes teachers doing as directed. With final scores as the only criterion of success, teachers and students turn into the means to that given end. Education is nothing more than an input-output system where resources and

raw materials enter at one end and the final product—pass rate as an indication of achievement—issues from the other. This delivery system produces star teachers who are alien to the principles of language teaching and learning. Along the same lines, it produces thousands of high school graduates who, despite their high final scores, are communicatively incompetent.

Since students are high achievers in terms of their final exams, no one makes teachers accountable for students' communicative incompetence. Instead of being taken accountable for students' communicative incompetence, they are rapidly promoted to the top of career ladder since they are positively evaluated by schoolmasters, parents, and students. However, this rapid promotion does not come cheap. By doing as they are told, teachers no longer need to use their professional expertise, and lack of use naturally results in atrophy.

Conclusion

Teachers' work is usually explained in terms of agency (free will) and structure (constraints). The core of this agency-versus-structure debate, as Fine (1992) explained, is an attempt to understand the range of actions that are possible (agency) and the systematic limitations of those actions (structure). The way teachers defined their roles in this study is suggestive of the fact that it is the structural constraints that shape and limit teachers' practice. Considering the host of constraints over teachers' work, conceptualizing teaching as a reflective practice cannot be other than a chimera. With all the rhetoric about a reflective approach, the reality of participants' lives bears little resemblance to this rhetoric. Given the determining conditions of teachers' work elaborated above, teaching in the context of this study is devoid of any reflection.

Having no opportunities for reflection, teachers cannot develop their professional self. Antonek et al. (1997) identified reflection as a key component associated with the concept of self. In other words, it is impossible to speak about the self when there is no reflection to develop the self as a teacher. Through self-reflection teachers relate experiences to their own knowledge and feelings. Since working conditions indoctrinate teachers to behave in prescribed ways (e.g., receiver of knowledge, transmitter of knowledge, and implementer of externally produced plans), they do not find any opportunity to reason soundly about their teaching as well as to perform skilfully. They are thus alienated from their personal and professional identities. Moreover, since teachers characteristically do as they are told, they are not accountable for students' communicative incompetence in public high schools in Iran.

To improve teachers' work, the education system should be conducive to thought and reflection. It should create an atmosphere in which teachers can develop their personal and professional identities. This is possible when the system does away with instrumental roles and lets teacher take genuine roles through self-reflection on their experience.

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