

# Theorizing language teacher identity: three perspectives and beyond

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper explores the published article that discusses theorizing language teacher identity. The article analyzes ways of theorizing language teacher identity by showing three date-based studies of teacher identity. The first study, by Johnson (2005), uses the social identity theory of Hogg and Abram (1998) based on the work of Tajfel (1978) to explore the language teacher identity of a new teacher – a nonnative English speaking graduate student in an MA TESOL program. The second study, by Varghese (2005), employs Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning and communities of practice to see how identities are formed in the course of an ungraduated bilingual teacher education program in the U.S. The last one, by Morgan (2005), draws on Simon's (1995) post-structural work on identity as image-text to consider how an experienced teacher creates as well as maintains a particular identity within an adult English as a second language program in Canada. The article does not appraise one theory by rejecting another one but uses one to elucidate the other. This paper aims to examine the studies and then gives responses to the issues raised in the article.*

**KEY WORDS:** *critique, language teacher, identity, perspective,*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The study of teacher identity began to gradually gain importance in educational research from the early nineties as it was considered important factor that determined to a great extent teacher's professional development. However, the ways theorizing teacher identity has paid little attention. Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & Johnson (2005) have rightly claimed that educators and educational researchers could only arrive at the understanding of teaching and learning by seeking ways of knowing teachers. One of the best ways of understanding teachers is by having a clear idea of who they are. This means knowing about the different roles they play in life, the people who are important to them, the concept that they have about students and about themselves as people and professionals, what values they believe are important for teaching and learning, critical moments throughout their lives; that is to say their identity. The purpose of the paper is to briefly summarize the three studies on theorizing language teacher identity presented the article, then my critique and in the end a conclusion that will summarize my review and provide readers further thoughts as well as implications in my context.

## II. CRITIQUE AND IMPLICATION

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

John's study based on Tajfel's (1978) social identity theory, it shows the process of identity formation of a nonnative English speaking (NNES) graduate student - Marc, a Mexican woman who pursues a master of arts in teaching English to other languages (TESOL). According to Hogg & Abrams (1998), individuals derive

identity or understanding of self in the social categories to which they belong. This self-identification is a changing process. Through Marc's fight with what she was labeled by others in the United States such as an ESL learner, Latina, color student and nonnative speaker teacher, it points out clearly how the conflict between claimed identities and assigned identities links processes associated both the multiple and shifting nature of identity and the important relationship between identity and cultural, social and political context. The study also reflects the substantive issue through Marc's story, her assigned identity as nonnative speaker leads to dangers of increased marginalization. In fact, this assigned identity has impact on Marc's relation with her students.

The study makes me clearly understand how teachers develop a professional identity and what factors play a significant role in that development. Teacher professional identity includes demonstrating the appropriate knowledge, attitudes, skills and habits to facilitate student learning and success. Although Marc's situation is not always typical, it presents clearly the nature of identity and close relation between the personal and the professional self. Social identity theory is useful for us to understand this issue. In the social identity theory, a person has not one, "personal self", but rather several selves that correspond to widening circles of group membership. According to Turner et al. (1987), different social contexts may trigger an individual to think, feel and act on basis of his personal, family or national "level of self". Apart from the "level of self", an individual has multiple "social identities". Hogg & Vaughan (2002) suggests that social identity is the individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership of social groups. In other words, it is an individual-based perception of what defines the "us" associated with any internalized group membership.

John is successful in pointing out distinction between native English speaker (NES) and nonnative English speaker (NNES); the two categories do exist in English language teaching today through Marc's case, the difference in power and status. Nonnative English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) worldwide face challenges in English language teaching profession. They are likely to feel marginalized in terms of linguistic and sociopolitical power dynamics (Samimy&Brutt-Griffler, 1999), and in many cases, authenticity and authority privilege are used by NESs as the proper educators (Widdowson, 1994). Reves and Medgyes's (1994) study reveals that an awareness of the differences between native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and NNESTs especially affects NNETs' "general self-image and attitude to work". In regards to this issue, I would like to mention distinction between NESTs and NNEST in Viet Nam, namely my case as a NNEST. I experienced this when I had a part time job as an English teacher at a foreign language center. The managers, staff and students all showed that native English speakers were ideal teachers. In the Center, NESTs were appreciated, cared more and paid higher salary as well. My students were very eager to meet NEST although he taught them one period per week. Another experience I share is my private tuition at home. My students are kids and teenagers who study at different primary schools and secondary schools. Some of my students asked me for stopping learning with the reason that their parents wanted them to study at foreign language center where they can learn with foreign teachers. At my college, every year there are two voluntary foreigners who are from Canada. Although they are high school graduates, they are NESTs in my college. My students appreciate them. I can find clearly that their ideal English teachers are whites and native speakers. Many English teachers and I feel disempowered by student's and parents' English teacher? Samimy (1997) suggests that a NEST is not only category in which to classify the ideal teacher and that the most important qualifications of English teachers are language proficiency, the extent of the teacher's teaching experiences and, relevant teaching qualifications. However, many studies also show that if NNESTs achieve near-native proficiency in English, they can be ideal language teachers (Phillipson, 1992). According to Phillipson, NNESs can achieve NESs' fluency, knowledge of idiomatic expressions, and cultural understanding. I agree with Medgyes (2001) who names the advantageous qualities of NNESTs: they can provide better learner model, teach language-learning strategies more effectively, and better anticipate language difficulties. In addition, they are more sensitive to their students' need and can benefit from their ability to use the students' native language. Rampton (1990) notes that the notion of the expert should change from "who you are" to "what you know", because this revise construct of expertise can diminish the marginalization of NNES professionals. Hence, educator, parents and students need to recognize the positive elements of NNSTs.

Using social identity theory suggests a specific way of conceptualizing the hegemony that is unequal power and status relations and inherent in conflicting identities. In addition, social identity theory is useful in handling substantive issue in language teaching that is a disempowered and marginalized profession. However, social identity theory has limitation in deal with notions such as linguistic performativity of identity suggested by postmodern approaches. Hansen & Liu (1997) claim that there has traditionally been an overreliance on questionnaires, observations and interviews that do not allow for dynamism, as they are typically onetime occurrences. We cannot see the evolution of Marc's teacher identity because social identity theory only examines her identity in oppositional and constant categories. This framework limits individual variation. Therefore, a question I want to raise here is how another NNES language teacher identity will be formed in the same situation?

### **Study 2 (Varghese): Bilingual teachers and situated learning**

Varghese employed Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory in her study to examine the way identities are formed and developed in the course of ungraduated bilingual teacher education program in the United States. The identities are formed were multiple and often conflict that reveals a wide range of ways in which the work of the bilingual teacher can be understood. In the study, the development of a professional identity was presented against the marginalization of the profession and the doubted status of bilingual education. Tensions between claimed identity and assigned identity were also found in Varghese's study and in the process of identity formation, the agency of individual teachers is a vital mediating factor.

Situated learning is a model of learning involving in participation in a community of practice. In other words, situated learning is learning that takes place in the same context in which it is applied. And that participation 'refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities' (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. Situated learning connects between learning and identity by viewing learning as an identification process. Lave and Wenger (1991) claims that the community of practice includes multiple identities and level of participation and the community is not a well-defined entity but an activity system about which participants share understandings about what they are doing or experiences in their lives for their communities. For the group of bilingual teachers in Varghese's study, they participate in community of practice is not solely to share or transfer knowledge and skills in teaching careers, but as a crucial period of teacher identity construction, where identity refers to understandings of who they are and who they think other people are.

Varghese's study uses situated learning to understand bilingual teacher identity formation help us find that learning or teacher education is not like as the cognitive acquisition of knowledge or what teachers should know, but as a process of identification that is a process of acquiring an identity. This perspective allows us to approach teacher education which filled with conflict and difficulty as well as help us in conceptualizing the design of language teacher education programs. The theoretical framework used to explore language teacher identity in relation to teacher education in terms both of "identity-in-practice" and "identity-in-discourse" which help us in conceptualizing language teacher education more completely. "Identity-in-practice" describes an action-oriented approach to understanding identity, underlining the need to investigate identity formation as a social matter, which is operationalized through concrete practices and tasks. In "identity-in-discourse", Varghese (2005) acknowledges that identities are discursively constituted, mainly through language. Language is the means by which we both express and construct our identities. However, applying situated learning in Varghese's study focuses much on individual identity in relation to groups and less considers other ways in which identities are separately created. Moreover, the methods used in situated learning lack participant voice because of focusing much more observations than interviews and the independent constitution of individuals. The last limitation I want to mention in this theoretical framework is power relation and underlying ideologies in

group have less consideration. According Wenger (1991), groups do not have access in a true sense to their community of practice because of the authoritarian role of their masters. This offers me a question is what are the characteristics of communities of practice that make broad accessibility to newcomers? Therefore, in my opinion Varghese unsuccessfully points out how language teacher identity is formed through situated learning. I have not had a grasp of bilingual teacher identity formation when they participate in the community of practice.

### **Study 3 (Morgan): Identity as pedagogy**

Morgan uses Simon's (1995) theory of image-text to examine how an experienced teacher creates and maintains a particular identity in an adult English as a second language program in Canada. Through informal discussions in classroom, namely commenting on a movie Chinese actor Gong Li and sharing his personal life with the students, Morgan explored the possibilities of transforming and utilizing his image-text in ways that might stimulate new and challenging understanding of culture, gender, and family relations among his students. Morgan presents clearly the substantive issue of the teacher – student relation in the study. The interpersonal relations create between teachers and students are not simple a context for language learning. This study also shows that identity is constructed, maintained and negotiated mainly through discourse. He points out that not only does text become identity, but identity can also become text, which helps us see the really close relationship between language and identity.

According to Simon (1995), an image-text is produced through the everyday practices of schooling and reflects the close and affective relationships that often develop between teachers and students. Morgan successfully points out such an image-text through the discussions about actor Gong Li and sharing his personal life with his students in the classroom. However, as teachers sometimes we do not see ourselves that our students can see and they respond to things we cannot be aware. For example, last semester I had a listening class, some my students commented that I was not enthusiastic in teaching because in a three-period session I only taught a unit. I was very surprised at this. Morgan's study helps me understand the importance of teacher's identity in the knowledge received or rejected in the classrooms and teacher's image-text can activate our students' new understanding of culture, gender, race, and family relations. A key point to draw from Simon is that a teacher's identity, his or her image-text, is a pedagogical resource for bilingual and second language education. An image-text, however, is unlike other teaching resource in that its outward appearance and application cannot be formalized in a predetermined way. Moreover, an image-text is co-constituted, its authorship belonging to both teacher and students. Thus, an image-text must be discovered accidentally and relational if it is to be utilized.

Teacher identity as pedagogy through image-text help us find that although teachers cannot operate in ways which ensure define outcomes, they can show themselves in ways that open up identity choices not previously imagined. However, the notion of identity as pedagogy is always potentially "dangerous", and multiple forms of power that teachers hold over students should never be forgotten. Thus as teachers, we need to present ourselves – our image-texts – in ways that are not unthreatening and respectful, indeed, like to other "texts" we bring to class: always open to critical analysis and reinterpretation. Basing on the notion of image-text, we can specify clearly how identities appear through and in language and it also helps us explore how the multiple facets of identity and their attaching in particular social contexts, and their transformational power are presented in and formed by language. However, viewing language teacher identity as image-text is hard to apply in actual reality. According to Kumashiro (2002) and Lesko& Bloom (1998) who have studied multicultural teacher education program and the use of poststructuralism in teacher education program, point out that there are many dilemmas and difficulties in applying in such theories into practice. Moreover, in field of language teaching, such a view of teacher identity which focuses on reflexivity can often make teacher unselfconfident and inaction.

### III. CONCLUSION

I find this article interesting for its representation of different theoretical perspectives on the same topic, namely language teacher identity. As we can see in the article, each theory give us a different aspect of what we study but has its own limitations which shows that one theory does not fit all types of research. Identity is defined here as an “understanding of self”, a self which is influent by many sociopolitical factors such as ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, educational background. Another reason why we cannot use one theory to analyze all aspects of identity is if so many factors influence a person's identity and by extension, a group's identity and if people change identity, one specific theory cannot be used to generate 'universal' models of identity. Studies of identity from various perspectives are extremely important in second language teacher education because it is a community where many individuals (teachers, students, teacher-students) meet and work together, making teacher learning and teacher education become a possible site for identity conflicts.

As an English teacher I find the article is very useful. It helps me have a grasp of development, formation and maintenance of language teacher identity which are new to me before. After reading the article, I can apply to my career and my current workplace, namely in forming and maintaining my identity in my college and what I should do to change my students' and their parents' stereotype of an ideal English teacher as well. In addition, I am aware and more careful of bringing my image –text as a teaching recourse to class. The teacher – student relation, which is not simple a context for language learning, is also an issue I need to consider after reading this article and the relation with my colleagues in the faculty where we share knowledge, skills and experience to help our teaching be better.

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