

THE DYNAMICITY AND FLEXIBILITY OF EFL TEACHERS' ROLE IDENTITIES IN LANGUAGE INSTITUTES

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Abstract

Teachers' active positioning in social space and their role identity are likely to be affected by workplace policies that impact their working conditions. By the same token, the teachers' congruence or incongruence with the institutions' policies can have an impact on their work-related identities. This qualitative study sets itself the objective of exploring the role identities of EFL teachers in language institutes. To this end, 36 experienced language teachers from six language institutes in Yasouj, Iran, took part in the study. The data were gathered through semi-structured individual interviews with the participants. Among the total of 9 role identities, the frequency count of the occurrences of roles demonstrated that the most recurring teacher role identity reported by teachers was teacher as "vendor" who is in charge of "selling" a particular teaching methodology. Further, the least recurring teacher role identity was teacher as "collaborator" indicating that teachers were reluctant to share with other teachers.

Keywords: teacher identity, EFL teacher role identity, teacher professional development

INTRODUCTION

Since the time that language teaching was perceived something more than applying some pre-selected methodologies for learners to acquire the language, the role of teachers in constructing the appropriate classroom practices has received considerable attention that consequentially has given rise to the understanding of teacher identity as a pivotal component in decid-

ing how language teaching is carried out. In other words, "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: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them" (Varghese et al., 2005, p.22). It is argued that teachers' identities have a pivotal role in the beliefs, values, and practices that provide a guide for their profes-

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sional and emotional decisions, such as engagement and commitment, in and out of the classroom (Day et al., 2006; Hargreaves & Dawes, 1990). Cardelle-Elawar, Irwin, and Lizarraga (2007) argued that teachers' motivation in choosing the teaching profession as well as their commitment to stay in the profession can be, largely, understood through studying teacher identity. Further, Williams (2007) held that in order to delve into factors that influence teachers' decision in the process of teaching, it is highly crucial to explore the concept of teacher identity.

The literature is replete with diverse conceptualizations of identity, suggesting that 'identity' seldom is defined properly (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004). However, there is a consensus of opinion among researchers that identity is not a stable but rather a dynamic relational phenomenon process massively influenced by a panoply of social, cultural, and political factors (Atay & Ece, 2009). In other words, as pointed out by Mercer (1990), identity is the upshot of the social, cultural, and political systems that operate in every aspect of daily life, driving people into shaping and reshaping their possible ways of existence in a given context.

Taking into account people's social positioning and their membership in certain groups, Burk and Stets (2009) distinguished between three different bases for identity: person identity, role identity, and social identity. Person identity pertains to "a view of the person as a unique entity, distinct from other individuals. Here, the focus is on the qualities or characteristics individuals internalize as their own, such

as being more (or less) controlling or more (or less) ethical" (p.112). Social identities refer to "individuals' memberships in certain groups as in persons being Democrat, Latino, or Catholic" (Burk & Stets, 2009, p.112). Role identity, which is the focus of the present study and will be addressed in more details, is "internalized meanings of a role that individuals apply to themselves" (p.114).

TEACHER ROLE IDENTITY

Role identity refers to a range of meanings individuals attach to themselves when carrying out different roles. These meanings are not necessarily shared among different individuals. In effect, different individuals may assign different meanings to the same identity (Burk & Stets, 2009). For instance, the role identity of teacher may entail the meanings of one as a mentor, friend, and a researcher. Each of these different identities a person may attribute to himself or herself while performing the role of teacher. These meanings are derived partly from culture and partly from the distinctive interpretation that individuals carry with themselves about a particular role (Burk & Stets, 2009; McCall & Simmons, 1978). McCall and Simmons (1978) held that the individuals will not try to maintain a role identity for which they cannot find support from the situation. As such, they will not invest in non-supported identities and seek to direct their attention to an alternative identity that has received prior support. Cohen (2008) stated that role identities are "powerful organizing structures because people get recognition, posi-

tive reinforcement from others, and other rewards when they accomplish roles successfully” (p.82). Derived from the values individuals attach to particular roles and how often they adopt such roles, role identities are perceived differently and thus have different salience for individuals (Callero, 1985; Stryker, 1968). Researchers believed that exploring role identities is crucial because it can help individuals to understand who they are through performing particular roles in society (Farrell, 2011; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995).

Teacher role identity refers to “the way in which individuals think about themselves as teachers -the images they have of self-as-teacher” (Knowles, 1993, p.99). According to Farrell (2011, p.55), “teacher role identity includes how teachers recognize their roles within their world and involves their beliefs, values, and assumptions about teaching and being a teacher”. Teachers’ role identity and their active positioning in social space are likely to be affected by policies of their working conditions or the expectations of their education systems. Cohen (2008) held that one is not free to perform any identity in the sense that social positioning together with its norms, values, and practices can constrain the range of possibilities for a given identity. Tensions will run high in the event individuals’ personal beliefs about a particular role identity are in conflict with those regulated by others and fail to conform to norms, values, and practices germane to that particular imposed role identity. According to Hargreaves (1998, 2001), approaches adopted by teachers to their profession and identities are argued to be influenced by emotion they experi-

ence during the profession. Further O’Connor (2008) found that the level of caring teachers display during the act of teaching as well as the perspective they take toward the profession is impacted by emotions they experience. In the light of these considerations, teachers may struggle with multiple identities constructed and advocated by institutions or individually constructed by themselves. Likewise, the teachers’ congruence or incongruence with the institutions’ policies can have an impact on their work-related identities. This qualitative study set itself the objective of exploring the role identities of Iranian EFL teachers in language institutes.

METHOD

Participants

Thirty six (N=36) experienced language teachers from six language institutes in Yasouj, Iran, took part in the study. 12 males and 24 females, aged between 35 and 38, constitute teachers participants. All of the participants had more than 5 years of teaching experience and were teaching English to students of different levels of proficiency. The participants’ average teaching hours ranged from 20 to 62 hours a week. The participants held degrees ranging BA to MA: BA degree (N=22) and MA degree (N=14).

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews structured around Farrell’s (2011)

taxonomy of ESL teacher role identities. Participants were interviewed individually in person during the winter semester, 2013. During the interviews which ranged from 30 to 40 minutes in length, the participants were asked questions in a semi-structured interview designed to elicit their perceptions about the teachers' roles in their institutes. The interviews were in English, audio taped and then transcribed by the researchers. All transcripts were analyzed by means of pattern coding to reduce the "large amounts of data into a smaller number of analytic units" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.69). In the present study, pattern coding was utilized for an accurate interpretation of emergent patterns and themes.

FINDINGS

Emergent Teacher Role Identities

Nine role identity claims including teacher as vendor, teacher as passive technician, teacher as entertainer, teacher as motivator, teacher as expert, teacher as learner, teacher as socializer, teacher as reflective practitioner, and teacher as collaborator were identified across the analysis of transcribed interviews conducted with the participants. It is worth mentioning that the emerging role identities in this study are not by any means a definitive representation of EFL teachers' role identities across contexts. What is more, the objective of this study was not to alter teachers' perception, interpretations, conceptions, knowledge, actions, beliefs, or values of who they are. Rather, it aimed to help them to become aware of their role identities in

conjunction with institutional influences and then decide if and how they may want to make changes to their roles.

Among the 9 teacher role identities which emerged from the interviews, the most recurring role was the teacher as a "vendor" and the least reported role identity was the teacher as a "collaborator". Due to space limitations, only four of the emergent role identities were dilated upon.

Teacher as Vendor

According to Farrel (2011), teacher as vendor is a role in which teachers have to adopt a particular teaching methodology to the advantage of the institution. In other words, teachers are sellers of teaching practices imposed on them by the institutions they are engaged at. In the present study, the frequency count of such a role identity indicated it is prevalent among the participant teachers. One of the teachers stated:

you are under pressure to finish the book and other materials on time and at the same time keeping students pleased and happy with books is really hard. You know you cannot spend the time you think should be spent on what you wanna teach. In case you cannot finish the predetermined content at the definite time, you lose your job and you have to look for another institute to teach in. What I am going to say is that, most of the time, you think of how to finish the book on time and sometimes you have to ignore the quality of what you teach. This is unfortunately a bitter fact.

Owing to playing out such a role identity, teachers' autonomy is likely to be constrained. As one of the teacher with more than 5 years of teaching experience stated, *"there's always a fixed curriculum to follow and we are not really free to experiment with new ideas and materials. That's a pity, you know, teaching demands the exercise of creativity, but you are not much allowed for innovation"*.

Teacher as an Authority

Contrary to the fact that L2 communicative teaching places strong emphasis on a student-centered classroom, language teachers, at times, owing to different reasons, try to adopt the role identity of being "the authority" of their classroom. Findings in this study suggested the image of being "the authority". The following was explicitly uttered by a teacher:

I am responsible for providing and controlling the content that should be taught. I should explain the content so that my students can see the important points. They are expected to study what I teach and do the homework I give them.

Teacher as a Passive Technician

Within this role identity, the teacher manages the flow of information from one end of the educational system (i.e., language institutions in this study) to the other (i.e., language learners) without remarkably changing the content of information (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). One teacher with 12 years of teaching experience stated:

you know, one big assumption,

when you work in some institutes, is that you should not question the validity of the materials. It is like you must teach and present some already accepted materials and tasks. This has, I think, a bad effect on teachers. We do not think of creativity or novelty. I mean we have to unchallengingly follow the act of teaching.

Another teacher commented: *the teacher has to follow the regulations that are stated by the administration officials, the material should be finished even if the expected achievement hasn't been reached yet.. the teaching-learning process would run well if all of the students had the same level of English proficiency.. Unfortunately, in my class, the students' proficiency varies*

Teacher as Collaborator

Teacher as collaborator was the least frequent role identity that emerged from the interviews. The participant teachers believed that they receive no feedback in relation to their work from their colleagues. They do not seek help and sharing ideas is fairly scarce. Teachers' interest in understanding about their colleague teaching practices is very often perceived as meddlesomeness. Cooperation is not encouraged and the feedback teachers receive on their work is cursory and not contributing. Consequentially, this fails to act as an opportunity to learn something and further prevent teachers from opening up real

learning opportunities.

A teacher with 7 years of teaching experience stated:

We hardly ever arrange to have a meeting in order to discuss and go through problems we encounter in the process of teaching. We hardly ever know what our colleagues actually do in their classes. Approximately all meetings are around topics related to managerial issues.

When teachers are reluctant in offering help, there accordingly would not be any chances for the exchange of ideas. Another teacher stated:

Due to the unhealthy competitive atmosphere, when I come up with something new in relation to the act of teaching, I do not tell my colleagues since they do not allow themselves to apply what other teachers have found relevant and effective.

As was evident from the interviews, it appeared that this role identity was not valued in some institutes. As a result, teachers who wanted to play out this role identity might experience negative responses from either their colleagues or administrative officials. A teacher, with an MA degree and 5 years of teaching experience, working at the same institute simply stated “no longer do I want to ask my colleagues to get together and exchange ideas. I am filled with negative feelings when I see nobody cares about my suggestions. That is a shame”.

DISCUSSION

Hermans and Kempen (1993) held that in order to address factors affecting teachers' identity, it is essential to take into consideration both micro-structural elements, including working conditions and personal specifics, and macro-structural elements encompassing socio-cultural conditions. Workplace conditions can exercise considerable influence on teacher development (Clement & Vandenberghe 2000) and the realization of the cultures and power processes embedded within institutes can, in large measure, illuminate how teachers construct and reconstruct their identities (Paechter, 2007, Benjamin 2002). As much as the findings of this study are concerned, it is transparently clear that contextual factors including student retention and getting good results in language tests influence the role identities the teachers adopt in their workplaces.

McCall & Simmons (1978) contended that role identities have two dimensions, namely conventional and idiosyncratic dimensions. The conventional dimension pertains to the cultural expectations associated with social positions in a particular social context. The idiosyncratic dimension is comprised of distinctive personal interpretations individuals bring to the roles they play out. The authors continued by arguing that individuals can fall at either end of this continuum, rigidly conforming to culturally defined behaviors related to roles or adhering to their own interpretations. However, many may decide to fall somewhere between the two extremes. What was apparent in the present study was the fact that the teachers vary in their adher-

ence to the dimensions of role identities. Some teachers in the study believed that having out-of-class contact with their students is a part of being a teacher. A 34-year-old female teacher who was teaching young learners asserted that *“my students and their parents are free to call me outside the class because I believe this way I can make a friendly relationship with my students. I think I need to become my students’ friends as well. This is useful for me. I have motivated students”*. On the contrary, a 32-year-old female teacher stated that *“keeping boundaries with my students is one of my policies. If I am serious, this makes students do their job well”*. What teachers stated was part of the idiosyncratic dimension of their role identities which guide their behaviors when playing out their role as a teacher. This is very much in accord with the literature (Day & Kington, 2008; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Zembylas, 2003a, b) that some individuals are adherent to the meanings embedded in culture and display culturally defined behaviors of roles they play out. However, others may adopt unique behaviors derived from their own interpretation of the roles.

McCall & Simmons (1978) argued that individuals may claim more than one role identity when they hold a social position in social contexts. The authors believed that the emergence of a particular role identity is affected by factors encompassing support the individuals get for the role identity as well as intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. The first factor is the amount of support the individuals get for the role identity they are adopting in a situation. The more individuals give self-support to their

role identity and receive support from others, the more they are likely to play out that role identity. That is to say, if the support teachers receive from their institutes for a role identity has been less than expected, they will turn their attention to another role identity for which the institutes they work for expresses support. In this case, as stated by Burk and Stets (2009):

The person will not seek to maintain a previously non-supported identity, because he or she doesn’t want to risk the identity not being supported again. Thus, he or she will disinvest in a threatened identity and reinvest in an alternative, non-threatened identity (p.41).

The findings of the present study are in agreement with those of other researchers (Beijaard, 1995; Nias, 1996) who maintained that teachers developed a positive and stable identity when they were able to establish good relationships with institutional authorities whom they worked for. Having said this, it can be argued that experiences that teachers gain at the institute determine, to a large measure, the nature of their role identity, motivation, and successful engagement.

The second factor that can influence the activation of a role identity in a situation is intrinsic rewards, including satisfaction and positive feelings, and extrinsic rewards such as material possessions that the individuals obtain for a particular role identity. Intrinsic rewards refer to satisfaction and positive feeling the individuals experience when playing out a particular role identity. As it was argued in Burk and Stets (2009),

If persons are invested in the identity that they are claiming, such that they derive a great deal of esteem or positive feelings when they live up to the view they have of the identity, then that identity is prominent to them (p.40).

In the same vein, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) pointed out that being a dimension of the self, emotion has the capacity to impact the expression of the identity, to shape identity, and even to alter a teacher's identity in relation to the profession. The findings of this study revealed that experiencing negative feedback and emotions hinder teachers from collaboration. In this regard, the findings of the study are in line with those of Day and Kington (2008) who found that the emotional aspect of teaching as well as the interaction between personal experiences and the institutional environment had a considerable impact on the construction of teacher identities.

CONCLUSION

A myriad of parameters may affect teachers' role identity. The fact is that teacher identity development may be formed or reformed by a large number of norms and values. The norms and touchstones specified by organizations, intimately tied up with the organizational cultures, can influence fashioning and refashioning of teachers' role identities. Further, it was revealed that teachers' role identity is fraught with conventional dimensions and idiosyncrasies affecting different role

identities played out by the teachers. Hence it can be concluded that teacher role identity turns out to be a dynamic and volatile phenomenon massively influenced by teachers' harmony or disharmony with institutional policies and ideologies.

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