SECONDARY SCHOOL LANGUAGE TEACHERS’ TEACHER IDENTITY FORMATION

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This paper reports on the findings of an interview study on six secondary school language teachers’ teacher identity formation in the school context. After analyzing the transcripts using Wenger’s social theory of identification, three communities emerged as influential in teachers’ teacher identity formation, the community with the former teachers, the community with the students and the community with the colleagues. The present paper focuses on the community with the students, discussing examples of teachers’ recollections of their identification process, and a possible pattern these personal accounts add up to.

Keywords: teacher identity formation, community with the students, Wenger

As teaching is less regarded as a simple set of methods based on cause-effect models (Allwright, 1988; Nunan, 1988), but as an activity that involves the whole personality of the teacher (Cochran-Smith, 2005), teacher identity became an emergent topic within the research in applied linguistics (Miller, 2009). That is, nowadays it is a widely accepted concern that in order to better understand language teaching, we have to understand teacher identity as well (Varghese et al., 2005).

According to Varghese et al. (2005), teacher identity research has four main areas of interest; teachers’ marginalization, non native teachers, language teaching as a profession and the teacher-student relation. Tsui (2007) identified three major issues in teacher identity research; the multifaceted nature of identity, the personal and social dimensions of identity formation and the relationship between agency and structure in identity formation.

Although the above mentioned topics represent a growing number of research areas in teacher identity, less attention has been given to research into the process of teacher identity formation (Tsui, 2007). Two research areas study the teacher with an eye to the temporal, procedural dimensions, these are the teacher development and teacher cognition interest groups. Research on teacher development provides data on the process of acquiring knowledge and skills as professionals (Mann, 2005), but seldom attempts to account for teachers’ identities as well. Research on teacher cognition have similar limitations as they focus on the cognitions, beliefs and theories of teachers related to classroom practice (Borg, 2003), but do not broaden the picture to include identity as well.

Research on the process of teacher identity formation converge on two types. The first one is where the researcher maps the identity formation of a
few teachers either retrospectively through life-history interviews (Lasky, 2005; Guzmán, 2010) or in a longitudinal fashion analyzing diary entries, logbooks and interview data through a longer period of time (Tsui, 2007). The second type attempts to capture identity formation by comparing novice and experienced teacher’s beliefs, attitudes and knowledge related to teaching, preferably by questionnaires (Beijaard et al., 2000; Hong, 2010). The first type of research is useful in presenting individuals’ personal cases, while the latter in identifying differences between variables related to novice and experienced teachers’ identities.

The aim of the present paper is to account for the process of teacher identity formation by collecting life-history interviews, analyzing the personal stories they contain and identifying patterns of the identification process. That is, the study aims at using qualitative data to present personal cases and to present a possible general process to which the personal data adds up to. In order to meet this aim, the following research question needs to be answered: how do secondary school language teachers construct their teacher identities through social interaction in the school context?

Background

The identity concept of recent research in education evolved around certain characteristics (Varghese et al., 2005). The first one is, that identity is a phenomenon that is not fixed and static but multiple and conflicting, being in motion (Norton Peirce, 1995). The second is that it is embedded in a social and political context (Duff & Uchida, 1997), therefore it cannot be analyzed in isolation. The third is that it is negotiated by using the language and discourse (Gee, 1996). The identity concept of the present research maintains that inherent to identity is its procedural nature, that it should be understood in context and that it can be researched by interviews since it is mediated through language.

As regards the concept of teacher identity of the present paper, it can be based on Lasky’s (2005) definition of the professional identity. It is “a professional self that evolves over career stages, and can be shaped by schools, reform and political contexts” (Lasky, 2005:901). The merits of this definition is that inherent to it is the procedural nature of identity formation and identity’s location in context. Teacher identity, however, not only focuses on the instrumental self and the career, but it includes personal and moral dimensions as well (Mann, 2005). Therefore, the present paper uses teacher identity as a personal and professional self that evolves over one’s professional practice (Roberts, 1998), and can be shaped by social interactions (Cooper & Olson, 1996).

In light of the above mentioned characteristics of identity, it is worth briefly reflecting to what extent the main theories in identity research can account for such an identity concept, which also justifies my choice of theory as an analytic tool. According to Morgan (2004) and Varghese et al. (2005), these main theories are Tajfel’s social identity theory (1978), a post-structural approach that is less a model but an influential point of view in understanding identity, marked by Bourdieu (1977), Weedon (1987), West (1992) and Norton Peirce (1995), and Wenger’s social theory of identification (1998).

Tajfel’s (1978) social theory of identification perceives identity as being constructed by group membership. That is, it is one’s sense of being or not being a member of a group that influences one’s identification. Tajfel also recognized that as people can be members of more groups, identity is a
multiple and complex phenomenon (Tajfel, 1978). However, a limitation of that theory is that it employs static social categories (nationality, race, class) for its analysis, therefore it cannot account for the evolution of identity (Varghese et al., 2005).

Norton Peirce (1995) also claims that the individual is situated in social context, therefore the personality should be analyzed in relation to social structures. Central to Peirce’s understanding of identity is the role of power in society. She also claims that the medium for making sense of a self is language. Drawing on Weedon’s (1987) theory, Peirce substitutes social identity with the poststructuralist notion, subjectivity. This idea sees the identity as a complex, multiple self, which, being exposed to different power relations, is also a site of struggle, that changes over time. The limitation of this approach is that it defines characteristics of identity, but it does not function as a coherent model of identification, which could be used as an analytic tool in identity research.

Wenger’s (1998:215) theory of identity formation is based on the assumption that identity is formed by being a member of groups. When discussing groups, Wenger uses the term communities of practice. These communities are groups that are brought together by the shared pursuit of an enterprise. In these social units, four activities happen: learning, the negotiation of meanings, the practice itself, and identification as well, since as “learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity”.

The strengths of Wenger’s theory is not only that he specifies what features a group may have, so that one can have a more vivid image of what membership can ideally mean, and where identity is located once obtained, but that he writes about the process of identification as well. He states that neither the person, nor the community should be investigated alone in identity research, but “the process of their mutual constitution” (Wenger, 1998:146). Tajfel (1978) in his model of social identity accounted for the drive of becoming a member of a group, which is to maintain positive self-esteem. West (1992) asserted as a drive the desire for recognition, and Bourdieu (1977) claimed that social and economic power are just as influential goals to attain. Weedon (1987) sees identification as a site for struggle, a constantly changing phenomenon. That is, researchers have frequently made reference to the dynamism and drive involved in identifying with a group, but Wenger’s four step model makes the process even more tangible and analysable.

The first process in Wenger’s model is the reification as a member of a community. This means, that as a person is a member of a community, he is able to define himself as a member, that is, he or she sees the characteristics of that group, and can apply those to him or herself. The second process is called the recognition of competence. By this, Wenger (1998) means that the person identifies those skills that are valued by the community, and therefore sees him or herself as a competent member. The third process is called the legitimacy of access to practice. That is, one may only identify oneself as a member of the group if he or she has sufficient options for part taking in what the primary activity of the group is. The last process is called the ownership of meanings. This refers to the ability to negotiate the frameworks, situations and terms that are important to the community.

In the present study, Wenger’s framework will be used as an analytic tool as it not only supposes identity as a socially constructed phenomenon which is negotiated through language, but it accounts for the process of identification as well.
Methods

Data collected for this paper were part of a previous study of mine conducted in order to gain a general picture into teachers’ identities. The interview transcripts that were analyzed for the previous study were used for the present paper as well, this time focusing on how teachers recall the process of their identity formation and what procedural steps if any can be found in their identity formation.

Therefore, semi-structured life history interviews with six secondary school language teachers were analyzed, by colour coding the transcripts where social interactions occurred, and grouping the coded lines under community headings. Then the phrases were labelled with Wenger’s terms, and then examined whether they add up to a fuller pattern of identity construction. Although three communities emerged as identity-shaping agents in the school context, to be able to give a detailed account, only the community with the students will be discussed.

Data collection

To tackle the procedural nature of identity formation, life history interviews were used (Guzmán, 2010). The interviews began with a question that invited the participants to talk about what brought them to the profession. The following questions were also devised to trigger stories of the important events of the participants’ career. These questions attempted to tackle those themes that are necessary for a phenomenological interview, which are the important events in the participants’ lives, the details of these experiences and the meanings these experiences hold for them (Seidman, 1998). The second set of questions turned from reality to values and beliefs, asking about how the participants could describe the ideal teacher and the purposes of their teaching. These questions are relevant since the notions about how to be a good teacher and the moral purposes are inherently linked with teachers’ identities (Lasky, 2000; Lasky, 2005). The interview protocol primarily consisted of twelve questions, then after a pilot interview with one of the six teachers, those seven questions remained in the final schedule that triggered the most relevant answers. The questions were as follows:

1. I’d like you to tell me a bit about how you became a teacher. What brought you to the profession?
2. How do you process your teaching experiences?
3. Did you have any turning points in your career that changed your teacher identity?
4. Why do you teach in the public sector?
5. How would you describe the ideal teacher?
6. What is the purpose of your teaching?
7. What do you want your students to learn from you?

As for the six participants, a limitation of this study is that they cannot be considered as a representative sample of secondary school language teachers, since they all teach at the same secondary school in Budapest. They are all language teachers, five of them teach English, one of teach French as a foreign language. Among the five English teachers is an American native exchange teacher. The teachers are all female, they are between the age of 25-60, and have teaching experience between 3 and 45 years. As for the number of participants, compared to research on teacher cognition with
similar methods to this study (Freeman, 1993; Golombek, 1998; Richards & Pennington, 1998; Gatbonton, 1999), six teachers seemed to be reasonable. In the present study, the teachers’ names have been modified to ensure anonymity.

Data analysis

The transcripts were analyzed by colour coding the phrases that revealed social interaction in the school context and that were somehow related to teacher identity construction. An example is the following excerpt, where grey colour stands for the influence of former teachers:

“I had great teachers from the beginning of primary school, and so I got to love the school itself so much, that I think this gave the first impetus to do the same.” (Anna)

As a result of colour coding, three communities emerged as influential ones in teachers’ identity formation. These three communities partly correspond with existing findings on influential factors in teachers’ thinking, as Borg (2003) identified prior language learning experience, teacher education and classroom practice as decisive areas. In the present study, the first community is the one with the former teachers, which is the past experience of the interviewees as students, when they were members of a class or a seminar group. The interviewees’ references to their primary school, secondary school or university teachers added up to this community. The second one is the community with the students, which means the group where the interviewees are the teachers and there are students to teach. The interviewees’ stories about the interaction with their students produced this cluster. The third one is the community with the colleagues. This refers to the teachers and other staff members at the school where the interviewees teach. In the present study, results from the second cluster, the community with the students will be discussed.

As the phrases were grouped under their community headings, they were labelled with Wenger’s terms. The following excerpt is an example:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Community with former teachers</th>
<th>Teacher identity construction</th>
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| “... I decided to be a teacher mostly because I had a lot of sullen teachers and evil teachers and ironic teachers, and so I bought a little notebook with a checked cover and I wrote down what a good teacher is like. And imagine, I still stick to it.” (Eszter) | • OWNERSHIP OF MEANINGS  
• RECOGNITION OF COMPETENCE |

In the above case, Eszter seemed to own meanings at a very early age, because she was able to discuss terms in the teaching profession, and she felt absolutely free to make her own judgements about the profession. Although she was not part of the teachers’ community, she could communicate her thoughts into her diary, thereby engaging in the process of negotiation even alone. She at the same time also recognized her competence as a critic and as a probable future teacher who could teach better.

After using Wenger’s terms for labelling phrases and stories, the different labels were sequenced into a possible cycle of identity construction. A limitation is that this last phase is not based on empirical data but on my own assumptions. Therefore, further research is required that could prove the validity of such a cycle of teacher identity formation.
Findings

In the following section, findings from the community with the students will be discussed. Six labels could be attached to parts of the transcripts. These parts were stories in the majority of cases. Stories have an empirical base, usually an event, yet they are already “interpretive constructions” (Connelly, Clandinin & Ming, 1997:669), the recollections and responses to events in the classroom.

The first label is recognizing students’ expectations for competence. When people face changes that can threaten their identities, they either develop strategies to protect their self-images or even radically adjust their identities to the new circumstances (Beijaard et al., 2000). In the teachers’ case, such an identity shaping endeavour can begin when the teacher faces a situation that she cannot solve. Within that situation, the teacher can recognize an expectation from the students for a competence that she is currently lacking. In Tünde’s case, this competence was related to didactics that is being powerful and using conventional methods.

“They are typically the class that is amused by power. So when the teacher stands there, usually male, and he tells them how it should be and then they are totally content. Now I’m not like that but I tried it in the first term, and I freaked out a lot of times… Then came the moment – not so long ago – when I sensed that one point – I didn’t know that there is such, but there is – where we can combine learning and their sensitivity and playfulness and all else.”

(Tünde)

Interestingly, Tünde first tried to form a teacher identity that responds to students’ expectations, but it required a major change on her part as her deepest convictions about teaching had to be reformulated to teach the way students expected. Finally, she managed to come up to the expectations of her students by finding a solution that does not violate her convictions and therefore restores a teacher identity that is comfortable to her.

Another example is Eszter’s, who treats it as evidence that both her teaching methods and her teacher self are based on what her students are like.

“I think the who and what a teacher is heavily depends on who she is teaching at the moment… I love teaching my own granddaughters, because I know it very well what they react to, and then I teach the same thing totally differently to Cili than to Dia. With Dia I know that it has to be done differently… What do you do with someone with a negative attitude? Which personality of yours comes to the fore? For me unfortunately the shoulder-shrugging. Then I say, OK, you stay there.” (Eszter)

The second label is building competence as a result of interaction with students. In the previous story, we could already see an example of building competence. This second label means that after facing the need, through engaging in interaction with the class, the teacher gradually develops the required competence.

“I had to learn to be tactful, because I had to realize that some children are very sensitive, which I wouldn’t have thought. So I’m a lot more tactful, with a lot of them, than I used to be for example in my private life.” (Tünde)

A part of identity development can happen through an interpretation of experiences (Kerby, 1991), which was the case with Tünde as well. She interpreted, “realized” students’ selves as “sensitive.” Then she could respond to their sensitivity by building the corresponding competence; she
“learnt” to react to their sensitivity correctly. That is, she gradually developed the proper competence, which resulted in that she became “a lot more tactful” than she used to be.

Another example might be Anna’s, who recalls having to put more energy into dealing with different student personalities, but also the rewarding knowledge she obtains at the end of the process.

“…it takes a lot more energy to win everyone for myself, but it’s not unfortunate when I realise that haha this type can be won by this and that kind of person with that, simply I just feel that I can react a lot more sensitively to people as I know more personality types.” (Anna)

Once the teacher recognizes the need for a competence and builds it, the next step can be recognizing competence by positive feedback and success stories. Through feedback from the students, teachers’ identities are informed and formed at the same time (Cooper & Olson, 1996). In the story below, Anita is informed by positive feedback that students appreciate her kindness, and therefore considers it as a worthwhile component of her teacher self.

“Sometimes I call somebody out to talk with, and then I see that he keeps thinking about how he could defend himself… And then comes my question: ‘How are you?’ Incredible! ‘How are you?’ He was prepared to defend himself, but I know what is behind these types of behaviour. How are things at home… They are surprised… Now it’s interesting that they see, that they can tell me… I see that they appreciate it, it feels good, it affirms that it is worth doing it.” (Anita)

Positive feedback may appear in the way that students instruct themselves, as the following success story indicates.

“There is a class for example, where there are more children with weaker abilities, and a lot of them do sports and arts and sing and stuff. Their attention wanders very easily. They have to be wakened regularly. For instance in the English lesson even if we’re doing some fantastic task, you have to wake them up. I used to do it more roughly, like “Come on, let’s do it, let’s do it!” Since I’ve been this nice, kind, since I realised that they are better with this, they have been receiving it better too, and they’ve been waking themselves.” (Tünde)

In Tünde’s case, the positive feedback comes in the form of her students’ positive attitude and in that it became the norm among the students to cooperate with the teacher.

A phase of similar nature to the previous ones is recognizing the different competences required at a language school and a public school. As teachers engage in the practice of teaching, they not only develop competences solely from the school context, but also in relation to other institutions beyond the public school. By this, they gather “local forms of knowledge” about teaching (Prabhu, 1990:172) and themselves as teachers as well.

“You can’t really go wrong if you bring your own personality in the [language school] classroom… Here [secondary school] it’s totally different. As I see, you can’t tell a lot of things, that you would in a language school. I had to be careful about that at the beginning, because I got used to starting with a friendly relationship there. But here, what you’d say, first you have to think it over: if you say this, then what will they infer, and if you say that, then they’ll infer to that.” (Tünde)

This teacher has recognized that teaching at a language school and at a public school requires different behaviour and personality on her part. This recognition then became an inherent part of who she should be in the public school classroom as a teacher.
The next phase can be reifying teacher identity, which means that teachers theorize from practice, this time not only about competences but about their roles as teachers as well. As identity “reflects how individuals see themselves and how they enact their roles within different settings” (Burns & Richards, 2009:9), it is worth observing how teachers theorize about their teacher roles related to different settings; school and beyond, as it adds up to their understandings of their teacher identities. The following two brief examples present teachers’ perceptions of themselves in the role of teaching and beyond, revealing two different reifications of teacher identities.

“…[in the classroom] it can go wrong if you are yourself, so you should rather take on a teacher persona.” (Anita)

“I’m always myself. It is one thing, that I’ve got a teacher role, but unfortunately I can’t get out of it in the afternoon events either… I can really end up in trouble, because my teacher-self is absolutely my self. So if I fail, then it really knocks me out.” (Anna)

Anita perceives being a teacher only as a professional role, while Anna sees teacher identity as inseparable from her personal self. These examples illuminate that distinguishing between professional and personal selves can be justified, but in cases they may collide within one person.

After reifying what teacher identity means and locating it within the practitioners’ self, the last, even broader step can be reifying themselves as competent teachers. That is, recognizing due to interaction with the students that they can identify themselves as good teachers, whose work is worthwhile. In the first example the teacher told the story of a disadvantaged boy, with whom she developed a trustful relationship as a result of her caring behaviour.

“I wanted to help him . . . and I know that I reached him in some ways. There has been a lot many students along the way who really helped me identify myself as a teacher, but he stands out.” (Amy)

As a result of interaction with that student, Amy could better identify as a teacher. In the second case, Anna first told the story of how she almost left the profession when she had been teaching at another school.

“It was a turning point that I came here, and that I can work with kids who are very much alike me. I not only got affirmed that I do my job right, but that I’m in the right place as well.” (Anna)

As she came to her present school and could engage in interaction with students whose values are close to hers, by them, she got affirmed that she is working in the right profession for her, and she is a competent teacher. That is, all the above mentioned labels of procedures can lead to a positive identification.

In sum, with the help of the labels, a possible cycle of identity formation procedure can be outlined. Its phases are recognizing students’ expectations for competence, then building competence as a result of interaction with the students, then recognizing the competence by positive feedback and success stories. Also, teachers may derive competence needed in the classroom from a broader level as well, by comparison between education institutions. This phase is recognizing the different competences required at a language school and a public school. Closely linked to the previous ones is when the teacher theorizes about his or her teacher identity, then finally reifies him or herself as a competent teacher. The majority of the phases were self-content stories themselves, revealing phases of the cycle alone. Some phases can be omitted and the cycle can function again and again as teachers face new challenges within the community with their students.
Conclusions

The findings in the present study showed how secondary school language teachers construct their teacher identities within the school context. Using Wenger’s social theory of identification helped capturing the procedural nature of identity development through individual cases. The identity concept of the present research aligns with contemporary conceptualizations of identity, as it presented identity as being embedded in social context, as a phenomenon to which evolution is inherent, and as something which can be negotiated through language.

As a result of analysis, three communities emerged as influential ones in teachers’ identity formation, the community with the former teachers, with the students and with the colleagues. The present study showed findings from the community with the students. The teachers constructed their identities through narratives, preferably through stories. To these accounts terms from Wenger’s social theory of identification were attached in a way that the term would best capture the essence of the story. These labelled stories each present an evolution in the teachers’ identity alone, and being ordered in a possible sequence they add up to a larger cycle of secondary school language teacher identity construction.

Further research

The findings from this study prompt us to pay more attention to the narratives of teachers, especially to their stories. Stories seemed to be a powerful way of conveying developmental processes that happened in the classroom, through interaction with the students. As teacher education should pay more attention to exploring the teacher self, but only a limited amount of time is available for practice to pre-service teachers, gathering experienced teacher’s stories of teacher identity development could be a useful tool in preparing for the experience of teaching and teacher identity construction.

For the same reason, the proposed cycle of teacher identity construction could be further researched as well. As the cycle of this study is only a hypothesis, a next step could be verifying it. Also, by collecting more stories about the community with the students from teachers with different backgrounds, other patterns of identity construction could emerge.

As a third future research interest, the difference between language school and secondary school language teachers’ identity formation could be investigated. It seemed that language school and public school teachers needed not only different behaviour on their parts, but they needed to develop different teacher identities as well. Such a study could further illuminate aspects of secondary school language teachers’ identities.
References


