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CHAPTER 13

Understanding language teacher identities: Conceptualizations, practices and change

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I have been a foreign language teacher and language teacher educator for 15 years. These years have included happy, joyful, hilarious, surprising, boring, emotional, sad and frightening experiences with my students and colleagues. Experiences that have challenged my beliefs about language teaching and made me rethink my teaching and my identity as a teacher. Today, as a language teacher researcher and teacher educator, I consider my priority to better understand these processes of change that every teacher has to go through in developing their identities and language teaching practices. I believe these processes are of great importance for the development of language teaching at large. This has resulted in me focusing on language teacher identities and especially on the study of narratives that capture the emotional richness of human experience. To me, listening to practitioners' stories of their professional lives provides me with the opportunity to understand what the essential questions of language teaching are. To reach an understanding of the identity development process as a whole, I have studied both pre- and in-service language teachers' identities and identity development. I have also developed pedagogic models to support these processes. In this chapter, I present some new approaches and questions in language teacher identity research that could facilitate a better understanding of the work of language teachers, and as a consequence help us to support them in that work.

Choosing a research topic

I believe that good research topics should also somehow be connected to our life-histories and lived experiences. In addition, for a research topic to be **current** it should be a topic that we really want to explore and invest our time and effort in. We should ask ourselves which phenomena interest us. For me, as a beginning researcher the first people I decided to go to were other newly qualified teachers. I wanted to better understand my own and their experiences of struggling with the challenges of teaching. Their views helped me to build my understanding of the difficulties and potentialities of the beginning phase of teaching languages, and they also led me to discover my major research area. As a consequence, researching in-service language teachers' experiences also made me reconsider teacher education practices from the point of view of identity development. I became active in developing practices that organized learning differently to support identity development. This cycle of research has continually inspired even more questions.

In addition to the above, I would suggest a researcher first take time to consider what has been problematic, odd, or interesting for him/her as a language learner and/or teacher. Emotions provide good ways of finding topics that are worth investigating. Negatively experienced emotions challenge us to better understand ourselves and others. Choosing a topic can also be guided by our future hopes for a career. If interested in university teaching, for example, a topic might be found in this area. Good research topics are often quite near to us. Whose stories would you like to hear? Who would you like to understand? A good topic addresses a problem that other people also often recognize. In addition to being personally significant, we should therefore

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consider the value of the topic in a broader context. Research in education is always about solving real life problems connected with learning and teaching.

Current and future topics

Conceptualizations of language and language teacher identities

During the past decades, the understanding of language has changed considerably, from being a system to a resource for participation and learning. Despite this considerable change, and the consequent changes in the content of the academic study of language, little research has focused on language teachers' conceptualizations of language as part of their professional identities. This is surprising in the light of the vast literature on language learner and teacher psychology. From a practical perspective, these conceptualizations are, however, at the very center of language teacher identities. The central role of language as both the goal and medium of instruction makes language teaching different from teaching other subjects. This relationship between teachers' conceptualizations of language and their identities mediates the professional practice of teachers in significant ways. Teachers are considered as gatekeepers in the classroom. Their ways of understanding language has a significant impact on building learning environments and learning itself (Borg, 2006). No change can permeate schooling and language teaching practices unless it is considered meaningful and worth investing in by practicing teachers. By understanding teachers' ways of conceptualizing language as part of their professional identities, it would also be possible to design better teacher education and in-service training for teachers. To study this topic, interviews, visual or written narratives might offer a possible starting point.

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It is now added

Language teachers' identities and practices

In addition to being constructed in talk teacher identities are also enacted in teaching practices (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & Johnson 2005; Trent, 2014). The studies on language teachers have until now mostly focused on narrative forms of data enabling the exploration and understanding of discourses. However, not much attention has been paid to the study on classroom practices in the field of teacher identity research. In our attempts to understand more thoroughly the identities of language teachers, I believe a focus on their practices would be crucial. It would complement our understanding based on teacher narratives in significant ways.

To connect the narrative study of language teacher identities to the study of teaching practices, think-aloud protocols and stimulated recall methods could be valuable tools. Also, teacher blogs, that have already to some extent being introduced in teacher research projects (Golombek & Doran, 2014), could help to gain a more day-to-day perspective on the phenomenon.

Ethnographic methods including classroom observation and artefacts, portfolios and teaching materials could also help in understanding the connection between identities and practices.

Teacher identities in the midst of change

Language teacher research has shown that periods of change play an important role in identity development (Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro & Ruohotie-Lyhty 2016). Transitions and changes in the contexts and contents of work cause individual teachers to reconsider identities and practices. In the field of general teacher research, several studies have addressed the significance of transition phases and changes in curriculum for teacher identities and beliefs. The study on language teachers has until now shown less interest in the significance of contextual and societal changes for language teacher identities. However, there has been some research on the significance of

Kommentoinut [GB3]: 2015 in reference list, which is it?

teacher education and transition to full time teaching for language teacher identity development (e.g., Kayi-Aydar, 2015). In the midst of micro and macro level educational and societal change an understanding of the subsequent change in language teachers' work and its relationship to teacher identity development could offer a valuable perspective needed to develop teaching and learning of languages in different contexts.

This kind of research often necessitates a longitudinal perspective. Studying teacher identities in transition periods needs to take into account not only their immediate reactions, but the long-term significance of these changes for language teacher identity development. Conducting interviews both individually and in groups could be a valuable data collection method. A more participatory method in the form of discussion groups for teachers during a change could also provide institutional insights into the different phases of the process.

Kommentoinut [GB4]: could you think of another word here? I don't know what you mean by this one. I think you mean 'reactions to change'

Language teacher identity development across the career span

As indicated above, some language teacher research has already focused on the processes that are significant in beginning language teacher development (e.g., Kayi-Aydar 2015 Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). In contrast, the development of teacher identities after the induction period has received less attention. Previously, it has been assumed that experienced language teachers have remained rather stable in their ways of teaching. The understanding of individual teacher development has, however changed to recognize the need and possibility for continuous development in teachers' identities and practices (Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro & Ruohotie-Lyhty 2016). Until now, however, we have little understanding of the ways in which this development takes place after the beginning phase. To me, this kind of research would help us to see the processes involved in teacher development more holistically.

For this kind of study life-history narratives could offer a useful approach. Teachers could be asked to draw a timeline of their past and present experiences. Another perspective could be offered by group interviews with teachers of different ages or longitudinal case studies that would follow individual teachers' development over a longer period of time.

Supporting language teacher identity development

In my previous suggestions for language teacher identity research, I have concentrated on topics that increase our understanding of identity development. As my last research topic, I would like to challenge researchers also to engage in developing teaching practices, tools and methods to support pre- and in-service teachers in their identity development. I believe our research should be connected to real educational problems.

For this kind of research action research provides a suitable framework. By developing research-based language teacher education, we can support the development of teaching and learning of languages.

Kommentoinut [JL5]: Does this make sense now? The idea was that it is important to put the understanding of identity development in practice and develop better teacher education practices.

Research questions

1. In which ways do language teachers conceptualize *language* in relation to their professional identities?
2. In which ways are these conceptualizations significant in their everyday practices as language teachers?

3. In which ways are these conceptualizations linked to larger societal discourses on teacher identities?
4. Which identities are drawn upon when language teachers make sense of their own practices?
5. To what extent are language teachers' identities compatible with their classroom practices?
6. What other phenomena become important in language teachers' practices in addition to their narrated identities.
7. How do language teachers conceptualize *change* as part of their work?
8. How is the change significant in language teacher identity development?
9. In which ways do language teachers' identities develop in different phases of their careers?
10. In what ways can language teacher identity development be supported in pre- and in-services education?

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