Recognizing the local in language teacher identity

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the importance of understanding, theorising and incorporating the local in language teacher education programs. Based partly on biographical reflections, the chapter looks at how my college experiences in Pakistan led me into questioning the exo-normative approaches to language and language teaching. The chapter identifies some key influences on my thinking about the 'local' and then outlines my understanding of language teacher identity. The chapter ends with some suggestions for future research on the topic.

A. College days

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the kind of research I focus on today is a result of rather futile (at that time) discussions on language, identity, power and access during my undergraduate days. As a student doing my Honours in English literature at Karachi University in the early 1990s, I would often get into heated debates about why we needed to focus on British literature and read criticism of that literature written by (mostly) dead white men. Why, I argued, did we not also read literature written in English by people from around the world, or, criticism that related the classics to our contexts? To me, it made little sense to be reading Shakespeare as if we were British youth growing up in the 19th century. Disillusioned by the curriculum in my English literature program, I opted to move into linguistics. Here, I naively

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thought, I would be able to focus on language in today's world rather than be stuck in 19th and 20th century British and American literature and literary criticism.

The linguistics program, I was to discover soon, was not about linguistics, but about training us to become English language teachers. 'English' in our program was projected unproblematically as a language best spoken by the British (and, for some, the Americans) and our job was to learn about this language – including the phonology of received pronunciation – with the eventual goal of teaching this language to our students. The problem of teaching a foreign accent and grammatical patterns alien to the context of the students was never questioned. In addition, not only was the appropriacy of adopting western methods in a Pakistani context never discussed, but there was also an underlying hint of contempt of local teachers and traditional teaching practices. So, here again, I was frustrated by a lack of recognition or discussion of the local. I did not find my colleagues' or my identities reflected in the program. I found little, if any, sympathy in my discussions with my colleagues or lecturers on the nature of language or language variation and how language(s) were used, taught and learnt in our contexts. While some of the lecturers were interested in these issues on a personal level, it was not reflected in their lectures.

B. Early reflections on language teacher identity

The key goal of both programs (literature and linguistics), it seemed, was to train the students to become language teachers. While they differed in terms of what the best training for these future teachers should be, there were quite a few similarities. English language teachers were seen as people who would teach their students 'English' as described and codified in formal textbooks. This 'English' was native-speaker English, which, while absent from the local context, was seen

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as the goal of language learning. In this context, teachers' own identity, their voice, their understanding of the context and of their students, their ideas about language or experiences with language teaching and learning were not considered important. A language teacher's projected identity, as envisioned (but unarticulated) in these programs, was segregated from all their other identities. They were expected to teach a language alien to them and in ways that they had not experienced themselves.

My questions about the place of 'local' in understanding and teaching English were first addressed theoretically at the TESOL Summer Institute, Vermont, 1995. After a long discussion of my experiences at Karachi University with Prof Shikaripur Sridhar, Prof Sridhar walked me to the bookstore at St. Michael's College, took out a book from the shelf and handed it to me saying, "Read this". This volume, *The Other Tongue* (1992), edited by Braj Kachru, was indeed the book that I needed to read. Here, for the first time, I saw a critical and informed discussion of English in a post-colonial world. This volume, if I am to single out one book, introduced me to theoretical and practical implications of questioning the monolingual bias in applied linguistics and TESOL and opened up possibilities that my previous educational experiences had denied. Work on 'World Englishes' provided a theoretical framework for looking at issues of localisation of language and language teaching/learning; and, it affirmed my identity as a user of 'Pakistani English' and a 'non-native' English-speaking teacher (NNEST) of English.

C. Towards a personal understanding of language teacher identity

Research on World Englishes, or, to place this within a broader context, language variation and NNESTs, continues to have a tremendous impact on my understanding of language teacher identity. Understanding language variation (Mahboob, 2015) helped me to observe how language

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relates to who is using it, with whom, for what purpose, and using which modality(ies). The linguistic choices that we make allow us to project and negotiate our identities with others and this is shaped by the context (context here includes an understanding of users, uses, mode and time) in which such interactions take place. However, this, for me, is not the only source of teacher identity. I see teacher identity (within a schooling context; so, not including other aspects of teachers' lives) as a combination of at least three aspects:

1. Teachers' use of language
2. Teachers' classroom practices
3. Teachers' presentation of curriculum

All three aspects are interrelated and language plays a crucial role in all of them. The first aspect focuses on how language teacher identity is shaped by and negotiated through the linguistic choices they make. For example, the choice of using a formal register in the classroom may project an identity of being distant and formal; while using informal and colloquial language may project an identity of being friendly and open. Of course, these are projections and how these are actually perceived and interpreted by students will vary based on a number of factors. Since language choices are based on who one is interacting with, teachers will use different languages depending on whom they are talking with (e.g. students, colleagues, parents, administration, etc.), and this will also impact their identities. The second aspect focuses on teachers' classroom practices, which include both a linguistic dimension (how language is used to organize and realize these practices) as well as other actions. These practices and their perceptions by different stakeholder will impact teachers' self- and other-perceived identities. The third aspect, the curriculum, is itself construed through language (as used in textbooks and other curricular material) and is presented and taught by teachers using language and different

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practices. Here, the textbooks/curriculum themselves, their interpretation and presentation by teachers, and their perception by stakeholders (mostly, but not only, students) together impact teacher identities.

While these three aspects show how language (variation) relates to teacher identity, they do not include a clear positioning of 'local', which is something that has always been a concern to me. In order to focus on the role of 'local' in language teacher identity, I like to draw on Jim Martin's (2010) SFL-informed work on identity and, in particular, the notion of 'allocation' and 'affiliation'. Language allocation refers to the sum of semantic resources that an individual is 'given' or 'allocated' based on who they are, where they grew up, etc. Affiliation refers to the groups (and the discursive practices of these groups) that a person may want to be associated with. I interpret allocation, in the context of language teacher identity, as the collection of experiences that a person brings with them in becoming a teacher, their community-based beliefs about teaching and learning, as well as their linguistic abilities (including, but not restricted to the target language). Affiliation, in this context relates to professionally (as opposed to individually or culturally) defined beliefs and practices and the way that these are described and taught through teacher education programs; training that leads language teachers to develop explicit and declarative knowledge about language as well as about language teaching/learning. Based on this, teacher identity, for me, is the space (the tensions and the synergies) between the resources that an individual teacher is allocated and what s/he affiliates with: a teacher's professional identity is shaped by and negotiated in relation to what they bring to the school/classroom and what they are expected to do/perform.

D. Looking backward, moving forward

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The arguments of my college days regarding the recognition of the local in both understanding language as well as researching and theorizing language teaching and learning seem to be partially vindicated in some of the recent literature in areas such as critical applied linguistics, NNEST studies, World Englishes, and English as a lingua franca. This work helps us in understanding the issues that I experienced and debated during my undergraduate days. Based on this new work, we now know that the differences in how English is used in different contexts is a natural outcome of language variation and change; we know that the reason for native speakerism are not professional, but rather political and historical, and that being a native speaker is not a criterion for evaluating teacher success; and we know that preference given to western-based pedagogical approaches and teaching/learning materials is not necessarily effective in or appropriate for all contexts.

While things have changed quite a bit in some research and language teacher education, this is not the case for all (sub-)fields. For example, my review of some recent PhD dissertations based on work in Pakistan show how local teachers and students live and work in contexts that have hardly been researched or theorized. In many cases, teachers teach based on their allocated resources and beliefs and, as necessary, reinterpret any training and professional support received to reinforce their allocated beliefs and practices. This is where, by exploiting the tensions and synergies between their allocated and affiliated resources, these teachers negotiate their identities. For university academics, who are more vested in textbook and academic knowledge, such recontextualization of academic work is not always acceptable and leads to a negative stereotyping of local teachers (as I observed during my days at Karachi University). This suggests that while some work has been done, there is a lot more to do in order to provide better and more localized training for and support to teachers.

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E. Directions for future research

If, as hypothesized earlier, language teacher identity is potentially construed and negotiated in terms of the tensions or synergies between a teacher's allocation and affiliation of pedagogical as well as discursive practices and beliefs, then this needs to be investigated. As of now, I am not familiar with any research that has investigated this, but it would be interesting to do so. Doing this may require us to extend the current work on teacher cognition by integrating detailed linguistic analysis of teacher talk – both in and out of the classroom – that includes teachers' classroom as well other school-related discourse. An analysis of teacher talk in out-of-class situations with different stakeholders will give us an understanding of how teachers negotiate their identity in a range of context by varying their linguistic choices. An analysis of their language, especially their use of appraisal resources, can also help us to understand what values they hold dear and what things they like or dislike, how these positions are encoded in their discourse, and how this might relate to their self-perception as well as their perception by others. An analysis of their language in class can help us to better understand their practices, including both teaching practices and classroom (and other) management. Their linguistic, discursive and other practices can then be studied in relation to local beliefs and practices as well as in relation to the literature that these teachers are exposed to in their context (as well as other current literature) to get a better sense of how their allocated and affiliated resources interact and are represented in teachers' performed behaviour and practices. This work, grounded in an understanding of the local, can then be used to train teachers in ways that recognize and respect their context and identities rather than trying to supplant these with models and identities coming from alien (mostly western) contexts.

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