

Examining Language Teacher Identity: Insights from Reflective Thinking Patterns

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Abstract

The process of trainee teachers engaging in reflective writing about their experiences plays a vital role in shaping their teacher identity. Analyzing and recognizing elements of teacher identity within these written reflections offer valuable understanding into the progression of trainee teachers' professional growth and identity learning. The aim of this study is to capture the complex process of teacher identity learning as observed in the reflective writing of trainee teachers. The findings of this research indicate that pre-service teachers' reflective writing can provide insights into the initial stages of their teacher identity development. Findings also suggest that identity learning through reflective practice helps pre-service teachers develop a realistic and genuine understanding of their own identity and role as teachers.

Keywords: Teacher identity, reflective thinking, pre-service teachers, teacher education

Introduction

Teacher identity refers to a personal perception of oneself as a teacher, shaped by teaching experiences that reinforce the understanding of the teaching role (Korthagen, 2004; Wenger, 1998). It refers to how trainee teachers develop a sense of self that blends personal and professional perspectives, forming an image of themselves as teachers (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beijaard et al., 2004). Research suggests that teacher identity significantly influences motivation, self-confidence, dedication, job satisfaction, overall performance, and the likelihood of teachers remaining in the profession (Chong et al., 2011; Day et al., 2006).

Reflecting on teaching experiences, including knowledge, skills, and self-image, is believed to have a considerable impact on shaping trainee teachers' identities (Alsup, 2006). As a result, reflection is regarded as an essential learning principle in teacher education (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). In this study, reflection in teacher education is perceived as a process intended to foster the development of teacher identity.

Review of Literature

Researchers have proposed various definitions and standards for evaluating teacher identity (Beijaard et al., 2004). However, they unanimously recognize two fundamental aspects of teacher identity. Firstly, teacher identity is viewed as a dynamic process that is continuously interpreted rather than being static or fixed (Sutherland et al., 2010). This implies that it is not merely an evaluation of an individual but an analysis of how they respond to experiences (Cheng 2021). Secondly, teacher identity is shaped through the contextual and social factors and thus includes teachers' understanding of the educational environment in which they operate (Peterman, 2017).

- Deng et al. (2018) delved into the evolution of trainee teachers' professional identities by focusing on emotions and dilemmas. They discovered a consistent emotional journey during practicums: initial eagerness and anxiety, followed by shock and embarrassment, then anger and puzzlement, and finally helplessness, loneliness, guilt, and regret. Additionally, four dilemmas added to the complexity of their teaching experiences: (1) managing the balance between maintaining classroom authority and demonstrating care (2) deciding between being part of the community or staying an outsider (3) juggling roles as an office assistant versus a teacher and (4) dealing with different teaching approaches for students with varying performance levels.
- Gu and Benson (2015) examined teacher identity construction during teacher education. Individual identity formation was influenced by immediate contexts and socio-economic backgrounds, shaped by societal discourses about teaching.
- Díaz Benavides (2013) illustrated how student-teachers develop identities through school experiences. They navigated and grew within the school environment, becoming independent decision-makers.

- Pillen et al. (2013) investigated challenges faced by novice teachers in shaping their professional identities. Balancing personal and professional aspects created tensions. Understanding these tensions is vital for providing support to beginning teachers.
- Kanno and Stuart (2011) investigated the learning process of novice English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teachers and its influence on their identities as teachers. The results indicate a close connection between the development of novice teachers' identities and the evolution of their classroom practices. Based on these findings, the researchers suggest the necessity of incorporating a comprehensive overview of teacher identity development into the knowledge base of L2 teacher education.

Theoretical Framework

Teacher identity, even in its initial stages, influences trainee teachers' learning preferences and how they process information both cognitively and emotionally. This study adopts a category system developed by Graus et al. (2022) to identify aspects of teacher identity learning in student teachers' reflective entries. This model classifies teacher identity as an interplay of (a) content elements, including practical experiences, theoretical experiences, personal self, and professional self (Beijaard et al., 2004), and (b) identity learning concepts: sense-making, ownership, and agency (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017). The combination of the four content elements and the three identity learning concepts is seen as a set of categories suitable for examining reflective journal entries written by trainee teachers. Trainee teachers' reflective entries are analyzed with the aim to determine the presence and extent of these categories within their reflections.

Theoretical experiences in trainee teachers' reflective writing include references to theory aimed at interpreting practical experiences or experiences involving their personal or professional self. Practical experiences in reflective writing refer to trainee teachers' descriptions of aspects related to their teaching. Personal self in reflective writing pertains to the individual characteristics of trainee teachers, which can either facilitate or impede their development as teachers. Professional self in reflective entries includes their perceptions of essential qualities for being a teacher as well as skills and abilities that are widely

acknowledged as indicative of competence in the teaching profession.

Apart from examining content elements linked to identity learning, it is also essential to take into account identity concepts that investigate the process of how this learning about identity takes place. In simpler terms, these concepts help us understand how teachers make sense of their experiences, learn from them, and take control of their personal and professional development. Sense making, in trainee teachers' reflections, involves describing how they connect new information with their existing knowledge and beliefs, whether it aligns with their current understanding or implies discrepancies between old and new information. Ownership, viewed in the context of identity learning, may result in descriptions of their identity as a teacher, their values, aspirations, or general accounts of what they have acquired in terms of knowledge and skills. Agency, examined through the lens of identity learning in trainee teachers' reflections, should yield insights into their capacity to lead and manage their development as teachers, the informed positions they adopt, or their accounts of self-direction in teaching and learning.

Aim

The study aims to capture the intricate, multi-dimensional process of teacher identity learning as observed in the reflective writing of trainee teachers. The following research question is addressed through this study—How does trainee teachers' reflective writing provide insights into their process of teacher identity learning?

Methodology

The subjects of the study were two trainee teachers of the B.Ed. programme at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. They were chosen based on their willingness to be a part of the study. They were both fresh graduates of 24-27 years and had no teaching experience. Trainee teachers' journals written during peer and block teaching phases of the practicum provided the data for this research. The fieldwork for the present study was carried out in two phases—peer teaching and block teaching stage of their practicum. The trainee teachers documented their experiences in the reflective journal after each teaching session.

Data Presentation and Interpretation

Analysis of TT1's Journal Entries

During the peer teaching phase, TT1's journal entries revealed that the content of her reflection focused mostly on practical experiences in the classroom. The most frequently noted reflection (40 out of 104 coded responses) focused on teacher actions. The excerpts which show these occurrences are:

"I asked the students various questions such as do they like reading poems? Then I stimulated their thinking a little by asking them a direct question relating them to the title."

"I first read the poem aloud, they all listened to it. Then I distributed the text. I asked all of them to look at the poem and to read silently. Then I discussed the lexical items, as in the new words."

As can be seen from the excerpts above, most of these reflections were through sense-making where TT1 recollected and described her actions in the classroom and tried to understand the same in the light of her existing knowledge. However, there was also one instance of reflective thinking as ownership where she interpreted the situation by attempting to give reasons for her actions in the classroom. The following excerpt reveals this:

Then I called each student to come up and write the particular word on the board. After that I asked the students to open the text and tell me the correct spellings, at the same time I also asked them to read the sentence. In this way I made them aware of the contextual meaning of these words.

It was also found that some of TT1's reflective entries on student participation/interaction and student responses were through the lens of ownership where there was an attempt to answer the question 'why' or interpret the experience with rationale. For instance, in one of the lessons she noted that her students could understand what she taught because they were her peers but she was doubtful if the same lesson would be successful when taught to learners in a real classroom. This shows that the teacher could connect her peer teaching experience with a real classroom situation and was trying to look for a relationship between these two experiences. There was also another occurrence where the reason behind her students' responses was stated as their prior knowledge of the topic.

Reflective entries which focused on supervisor feedback (professional self) and lapses in the classroom indicated identity learning through agency. TT1 wrote about the supervisor's comments on a mistake that was made while writing students' responses on the blackboard. She then states that she decided to be alert with students' responses from the next class. This is an indication of reflective thought through agency as the trainee teacher takes a professional position and describes the actions as a result of it.

Another interesting finding in TT1's journal entries of peer teaching was an occurrence of how a teaching experience led to a change in her preconceived notion (personal self) about teaching grammar. In session four of her peer teaching after a description of her teaching situation, the reflective statements revealed that her experience made her recognize that teaching grammar "was not as easy as I thought it was". This preconceived notion that teaching grammar is easy could be a result of her own prior experiences as a language learner. An analysis of TT1's journal entries during block teaching also reveals statements on her beliefs as a teacher as well as her perceptions on what it means to be a teacher (professional self). Excerpts from her journal include statements such as:

"The task of the teacher is to guide students and make them aware of the theme of the text."

"It is important as a teacher to also involve those students who did not participate in the class."

Pre-service teachers' ability to acknowledge and reconsider their preconceived notions and beliefs on the basis of the new information and experience they encounter during the practicum is a crucial aspect of their teacher identity learning.

TT1's journal entries during the block teaching reveal that her major concern was on student interaction/participation in the classroom. Reflective statements which showed this are:

"So the back bench students were always distracted. Thus, I had to change my plan. At times, I had to read it myself. This was called 'model reading' but again this limits the approach."

"The class became interactive when I started asking questions."

"Students enjoyed the class and were eager to answer as there was a subjective approach to it."

It was observed that instances of reflective thinking on student interaction/participation were related to all three identity learning concepts: sense-making, ownership, and agency. There were instances of describing the experience followed by an analysis with an attempt to provide rationale and analyze experience from multiple perspectives.

TT1 also chose to comment on her own feelings/perceptions (personal self) during the block teaching. Examples of such statements are:

“Prose lessons are not difficult to teach provided students read the text before coming to class.”

“Teaching poetry was much more interesting and easy, as firstly, the text was small and secondly, the theme was easy to explain.”

The reflective statements on tasks/activities used in class during peer teaching were described mostly with respect to what was done in class and the reasons behind choosing certain tasks/ activities. On the other hand, journal entries during block teaching reveal that the teacher could see the influence of the task/activity used on student behaviour and responses in the classroom which is indicative of reflective engagement through sense making and ownership.

Another finding was one occurrence where the teacher could explicitly write about her learning during the practicum where she stated, “I learnt innovation is one important aspect in teaching. Students enjoy learning if the text is made interesting and simpler.” Thus, it can be said that apart from developing an ability to verbalize her learning as a teacher she could also relate and generalize different experiences to frame guiding principles that inform her teaching. This also proves that trainee teachers build their own understanding of language teaching and learning through their experiences and by an analysis of their own classroom practices through reflection—an example of identity learning through agency.

Analysis of TT2’s Journal Entries

On analyzing TT2’s journal entries, it was found that the most frequently noted reflections (16 out of 74 coded responses) during peer teaching were on personal and professional self. In the first few entries, reflections under this theme were limited to feelings of nervousness and fear about peer teaching. Her focus then gradually shifted to her thoughts about the success of a task or the effectiveness of the lesson. For example,

“I was so tense about peer teaching. Can I do it to my level best? How do I start? With all these things in my mind, I entered peer teaching.”

“I was very happy with the lesson as it was an interesting subject for the students.”

The second highest coded responses during peer teaching were identified under the theme of practical experiences in the classroom. Most of the reflective entries included a description of what the teacher had done in the classroom based on recollecting her experience and so were indicative of sense-making. TT2 also chose to comment on the student interaction, participation and performance in the classroom based on recalling what she observed in the classroom and one instance of reflective thinking through ownership. Eight out of the ten journal entries during peer teaching included reflective statements such as:

“The student interaction was very high... the students were able to answer the questions.”

“They did the exercise in a good manner on the basis of what I taught them.”

“Students were able to manage within the time limit as I used a very simple topic and put the students into groups.”

Similar statements were also noticed in TT2’s block teaching reflections. Nonetheless, it was interesting to observe that reflecting on this particular aspect during the block teaching led her to realize that the type of activities used could influence the nature of student interaction and participation in the classroom. She mentioned, “Student interaction and participation varied according to the activities which I had used.” This is a significant incident of teacher learning where the trainee teacher developed her own theory of teaching and learning based on reflecting on her classroom experiences which is a clear indication of agency through identity learning.

Another common theme that emerged in the peer and block teaching journal entries was reflections on the materials and teaching aids used in class. Reflective engagement spanned across all three identity learning concepts—sense-making, ownership, and agency.

Responses which showed this were found in the journal entry of session two of peer teaching where TT2 explained the choice of teaching materials, discussed alternatives, and analyzed how these choices

affected student understanding and engagement. This indicates that the teacher was actively learning about her role as an educator and how her actions impacted students, which is a form of identity development through agency.

The maximum number (23 out of 131) of coded responses in the block teaching journal entries were about the tasks and activities used in class. Identity learning was found to be through all the three concepts and was revealed in statements such as:

“I tried to focus on so many activities in the class. Some days it went on well, others were a big flop because of my fault. These activities helped students improve communication skills.”

“When I taught profile writing, I asked them to write about their favourite sports/film stars as I felt they would be happy to write about someone they like.”

TT2 also wrote extensively on the problems faced in class and displayed identity learning through all the three concepts. Most of them were related to difficulty regarding explaining certain terms or meanings of words. Reflection was not limited to a description of the problem faced but also included a mention of the measures taken by the teacher to deal with the difficult situation. Classroom management and voice modulation were also mentioned as problems encountered during block teaching.

Teaching techniques, procedures used, and institutional requirements (theoretical experiences) were also areas that were reflected upon during the block teaching phase of the practicum. While reflecting on the prose lessons taught during block teaching, TT2 expressed her dissatisfaction with the school’s demand of teaching in a particular way where every lesson is taught followed by giving notes, homework and so on. She found this to be teacher-centred and wrote about her preference to teaching language using activity-based learning and felt that the latter helps students think in a better way. This can be seen as a clear indicator of identity learning through ownership and agency.

A significant finding from TT2’s journal entries of block teaching is reflections on preconceived notions and beliefs. The reflective statements under this category could be seen as i) preconceived notions/beliefs about teaching and learning based on her prior experiences and ii)

beliefs formulated as a result of the practicum experience. Excerpts which show this are:

“Before block teaching I had a false belief that I don’t have the capacity to understand a concept and relate it to a student’s level but when I started to teach I got the confidence that I can.”

“According to me, teaching through activities is better than teaching rules of grammar.”

“Innovative lessons help the students learn through games which lead to better understanding when compared to other classroom teaching.”

Hence, it can be said that TT2 could not only acknowledge her beliefs but also examined and reconsidered her pre-conceived notions/beliefs on the basis of the new information and experience of the practicum.

Responses from TT2’s journal entries also highlight the fact that she could explicitly record her own learning during the block teaching phase which is an indication of identity learning through agency.

“Students asked so many questions related to the topic, so I realized that detailed preparation is needed for each and every word.”

“When I stood in front of 30-40 students I realized how much preparation is needed for teaching a 40-minute class.”

Her teaching experiences reminded her of all her teachers who taught her during her school days and now believes that “teaching is an art and we need time and practice to acquire perfection.”

Findings

The analysis of the trainee teachers’ journal entries reveals significant findings. Although each trainee teacher’s experience was unique, some common themes were identified. The findings indicated a total of 25 aspects that the trainee teachers reflected upon during the practicum. Reflective thinking in trainee teachers could be explained in terms of a shift in attention: beginning with a focus on the self—i.e. the teacher (personal and professional self), moving to classroom management and organization (practical experiences), and finally turning to what students were learning, subject matter and pedagogy (theoretical experiences). However, it is important to note that not all entries demonstrate evidence of teacher identity learning; some were simply basic descriptions of teaching experiences without incorporating identity learning concepts.

The implication of this finding is that for identity learning to occur, there needs to be a meaningful connection between the content elements, and this connection is facilitated by the processes of sense-making, ownership, and agency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study offers valuable insights into the examination of language teacher identity through the lens of reflective thinking patterns. It highlights the significance of reflective thinking as a tool for teachers to critically engage with their teaching experiences, beliefs, and interactions, ultimately shaping their identities as teachers. By analyzing the reflections of trainee teachers, we gain a deeper understanding of how they construct and develop their professional identities. By acknowledging and incorporating reflective thinking as a key component of language teacher identity development, we can empower teacher educators to thrive in their roles and make a meaningful impact on trainee teachers in their journey from 'learning' to 'being' teachers.

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