

Teacher Identity as Pedagogy: Auto-Ethnography of an ESL Teacher

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Abstract

Following the realization that teacher identity can be “productively harnessed in the interest of more productive language teaching” (Norton, 2016, p. 81), teacher identity has come to occupy a prominent position in the teaching-learning process. While teacher identity as a term is easy to comprehend, defining precisely what comprises teacher identity and how teacher identity is shaped remains a challenging proposition since the variables are too numerous and the contexts too varied. However, situating teacher identity as a pedagogical resource to improve oneself as a teacher is a sensible way to form and embrace teacher identity. Speaking therefore of teacher identity with respect to the pedagogical value it carries is one way to press into service the notion’s usefulness to a teacher. Informed by and drawing on his own classroom experiences and outside it, this ESL teacher grappled with questions of ‘what’ and ‘how’ of teacher identity formation even as he realized that using identity as pedagogy opens up rich possibilities for a teacher to use his or her assigned identity as an enabler in the second language classroom.

Keywords: Teacher identity, identity as pedagogy, image text, narrated identity

Introduction

Identity may be defined as the way an individual perceives themselves in relation to other individuals or groups and sees themselves as being different from others in a community they are part of. Extending this definition of identity, teacher identity may be defined as the manner in which teachers identify themselves in relation to their learners,

classroom practices, beliefs about teaching and learning, and the institutional setting they are part of. Nevertheless, such a definition is rather simplistic since the variables informing teacher identity are far too many, the contexts across time and space unimaginably numerous and the sphere of operation overlapping to allow for certainty in fixing teacher identity.

Also, identity may often be imposed on an individual without their approving it or in the absence of evidence validating such an imposition: for example, a teacher who is identified as a non-native speaker teacher of English by their colleagues or students may experience a sense of inferiority or insecurity since the term invites a comparison with the counterpart—native speaker teachers of English, with the latter seen as superior in terms of their ability to use and therefore teach English. The legitimacy of the non-native speaker teacher is thus questioned and their capabilities subject to scrutiny.

Identity can also be assigned or claimed, (Buzzeli & Johnston, 2002; as cited in Varghese et al., 2005, p. 23) with the former being an identity that is imposed or attributed to an individual while the latter is what the individual would like to be identified by. The challenges of having an identity are thus manifold, with layers of meaning and mapping intersecting at various points of negotiation.

Thus, teacher identity has always played a role—positive or adverse—in determining how receptive learners are to learning and teaching. It has also determined the success of a teacher in the classroom and outside it.

There are numerous ways to theorize teacher identity. However, there is no single authoritative definition that meets all the parameters demanded of a comprehensive and all-embracing definition of teacher identity. Instead, there are multiple theories each dealing with some aspects of the phenomenon. One such theory is the social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1998; as cited in Varghese et al., 2005, p. 25) which “espouses the concept of identity based on the social categories created by society (nationality, race, class, etc.) that are relational in power and status”, (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 25). This is important in that the teachers’ views and status are accorded validity and respectability based on who they are rather than what they know. Thus, a native speaker teacher of English is considered superior to a non-native speaker teacher of English by virtue of the former’s status as a native speaker and not necessarily

on their teaching capabilities. This explains the bias for Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) in employment opportunities in countries where English is taught as a foreign language.

Yet another popular theory is situated learning based on communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) which views learning and teaching in the context in which they occur and the community that the learners wish to identify themselves as part of. Thus, “learning is located in coparticipation, and the focus is on what kinds of social engagement produce distinct types of learning rather than what kinds of cognitive processes are involved in these learnings” (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 29). A group identity is implied in situated learning; learning is seen as a by-product of the social circumstances in which learners/teachers find themselves as also a willingness to be an active participant in the learning process where knowledge is shared and discussed and not just handed down from one agency—usually the teacher—to the stakeholders—learners.

The Image Text concept is attributed to Simon (1995) who envisaged rich possibilities in the interpersonal relations that develop between the teacher and learners during the process of learning and teaching and the concomitant image text that learners form of the teacher. Drawing on the principles of image text, Morgan (2004) saw a pedagogical value in identity which he labelled identity as pedagogy.

Psychologically, five processes have been identified by van Lankveld et al. (2017) who see these as shaping and impacting teacher identity. These are: a sense of appreciation, a sense of connectedness, a sense of competence, a sense of commitment and imagining a future career trajectory. These aspects are Higher Education Institutes (HEIs)-specific and relate to forming teacher identity in the university context. Thus there is an interplay of several factors—socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-political, psychological, and interpersonal factors—in determining and informing teacher identity.

Teacher identity informs how well teachers cope with the pressure of meeting the demands of curriculum, ensure that learning happens, use resources available at their disposal with vigour and employ their expertise for the benefit of learners. Teacher identity also determines learner receptivity or hostility to learning. Making a success of teaching is predicated on the self-image a teacher has of themselves and also the

image learners carry of them. A teacher perceived as a failure by learners or colleagues or the management of the institution they are employed at may not have the emotional or moral strength to continue as teacher. Besides, teacher identity is closely related to teacher evolution from an average teacher to a good teacher or a good teacher to a better one.

Yazan (2018) provides a comprehensive list of definitions of teacher identity. Yet, it needs mentioning that despite all the definitions provided, each of which deals with a certain aspect of teacher identity, none of the definitions comes close to capturing the universality and breadth of what it means to identify oneself as a teacher. This is because teacher identity is so vast and unremittingly fluid that a plethora of agencies—open and tacit, perceptible and imperceptible, tangible and intangible, play out in ways that need to be seen, felt or experienced for a teacher to identify themselves as being part of this identity or that.

One teacher has multiple identities depending on the frame of reference they choose to operate from. It is equally possible for a teacher to repudiate completely an earlier identity by which they were identifying themselves as a teacher, as happened in my case, when acquainting myself with teaching and learning theories that alerted me to the flaws and fallacies of my earlier beliefs.

Table 1: *Definitions of Teacher Identity*

Source	Definition
Kelchtermans (1993, p. 447)	“[teachers’] conception about themselves as a teacher and a system of knowledge and beliefs concerning ‘teaching’ as a professional activity”
Bullough (1997, p. 21)	“what beginning teachers believe about teaching and learning as self-as-teacher”
Lasky (2005, p. 901)	“[T]eacher professional identity is how teachers define themselves to themselves and to others [and is] a construct of professional self that evolves over career stages and can be shaped by school, reform, and political contexts.”
Beijaard et al. (2004, p. 108)	“Teacher identity refers not only to the influence of the conceptions and expectations of other people, including broadly accepted images in society about what a teacher should know and do, but also to what teachers themselves find

	important in their professional work and lives based on both their experiences in practice and their personal backgrounds.”
Olsen (2008, p. 139)	“as a label, really, for the collection of influences and effects from immediate contexts, prior constructs of self, social positioning, and meaning systems (each itself a fluid influence and all together an ever-changing construct) that become intertwined inside the flow of activity as a teacher simultaneously reacts to and negotiates given contexts and human relationships at given moments”
Urzúa and Vásquez (2008, p. 1935)	“how teachers relate to their practice in light of both social and individual perspectives”
Cohen (2010, p. 473)	“how teachers view themselves as professionals in the context of changing work situations, often driven by changes in education policy”
Hsieh (2010, p. 1)	“the beliefs, values, and commitments an individual holds toward being a teacher (as distinct from another professional) and being a particular type of teacher (e.g. an urban teacher, a beginning teacher, a good teacher, an English teacher, etc.)”
Akkerman and Meijer (2011, p. 135)	“should be defined as an ongoing process of negotiating and interrelating multiple I-positions in such a way that a more or less coherent and consistent sense of self is maintained throughout various participations and self-investments in one’s (working) life”
Mockler (2011, p. 519)	“the way that teachers, both individually and collectively, view and understand themselves as teachers [and it] is thus understood to be formed within, but then also out of, the narratives and stories that form the ‘fabric’ of teachers’ lives”

Source: Yazan, 2018 (pp. 26-27)

Research Question

The following research question guided the study:

How can identity as pedagogy and image text be used as a resource by the teacher?

Method

Identity as pedagogy (Morgan, 2004) and Simon's (1995) image text were employed to view myself through my students' eyes and mind: I was intent on creating "space for knowledge that is generated by teachers in the context of their own practice" (Motha et al., 2012, p. 16), in this case, my own classroom practice.

Self-reflection, teacher diaries (which recorded events and classroom happenings over a semester), mental note making which would be transferred to my personal diary at the end of the work day, silent observations of how students would behave with me and with my colleagues, student opinion of teachers and their reasons for having such opinions, student feedback during and at the end of the semester were my main sources of data collection. I learnt to use my image text to navigate the syllabus along with learners.

As has been pointed out by Motha et al. (2012) "... author analyses of narratives and counter narratives can sustain the pedagogical, transformative and intellectual practice of both authors and the audience with whom they share their analysis" (p. 16).

Varghese et al. (2005) point to the pedagogical power of image text in the teaching-learning process:

It is a composite portrait, based on interpretations of immediate and observable phenomena—teacher–student interactions, formalized instruction, evaluations, and so on—but shaped as well by indirect and often imperceptible factors—the attitudes a student might have towards a teacher based on the latter's race or gender, or conversely, a teacher's low expectations for a group of students based on the socioeconomic status of the neighbourhood where the school is located. A teacher's life stories, gestures, clothing, and how these articulate with students' own prior experiences would also be inscribed in the image-text produced in class. (p. 32)

It is akin to Cassius reminding Brutus that he (Brutus) needs someone to bring to light his (Brutus') worth and capabilities.

Cassius : ".....Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?"

Brutus : " No, Cassius; for the eye sees not itself,

But by reflection, by some other things." (Julius Caesar, 1599/2015, 1.2.139-142)

As a teacher teaching first year students of engineering, I would spend the first few days of a fresh semester talking to students, foregrounding aspects of my personal and professional life they found interesting, informative and perhaps unusual. I would invariably bring up my love of football.

I would talk about my favourite team—Argentina, favourite club—Barcelona, favourite player—Messi, and so on. This image text was particularly useful to get students to interact with me as well as their classmates and participate in classroom-based activities.

The image text I had created from interacting with learners was that of a football lover/footballer *manqué*, who would go to great lengths to talk about the beautiful game. This set the tone for a learning experience that was an enabler for me and for learners. I would use my passion for football and my learners' interest to initiate a dialogue that would be negotiated as we went along.

I would then invite questions from students, which would invariably be along these lines:

1. Why do you like football?
2. Why don't you like cricket?
3. Do you play football even now?
4. Can we have a game this evening during sports hour?
5. Would you like to join us on Saturday or Sunday for a game of football?
6. Do you like any other sports?

After answering their questions, I would commence my session with a question of my own: "What is the goal of football players?"

The collective answer would be: "The goal is to score a goal ", and this would be followed by laughter. I would join in the laughter and agree with them. Then I would invite a comparison between football and writing.

A series of passes stitched together leads to goal. Likewise, a series of well-constructed sentences put together forms a paragraph or an essay. I then follow it up with a YouTube clipping of Argentina scoring a goal in the World Cup in 2006. The learners would watch the clipping with fascination and then questions would be put to them about what went into the goal.

The responses would range from—quick thinking to better strategy to superior positioning on the field to excellent coordination and team work. I would supplement their answers with my inputs and proceed to teach.

Football has various formats of play—4-3-3, 3-4-3, 4-4-2, 3-5-2 and so on, depending on whether the team wants to attack or simply defend its goal. Thus there can be 4 defenders, 3 midfielders, 3 forwards or attackers, or 5 defenders, 3 midfielders and 2 attackers and so on. Likewise, a paragraph can have around six-twelve sentences and the idea can be developed using humour, irony, sarcasm, or simply through statement of facts. The first three sentences can elaborate an idea or the first four depending on the style of the writer. We thus have narrative, descriptive, expository and argumentative paragraph types, with a fixed format, though the number of sentences would vary depending on the topic, awareness of the writer about the topic, writing skills of the writer etc.

The effectiveness of a football game depends on the imagination and strategy of the players and the coach. Similarly, the effectiveness of a paragraph depends on its coherence and cohesion. Thus, as in football, paragraphs also have a format: I-B-C—Introduction-Body-Conclusion. There must be a topic sentence followed by supporting sentences and then a conclusion.

To make the game interesting, crisp, and accurate, imaginative passes are needed; one such style of play made famous at the club level is *tiki taka*—short passes with players forming triangles to play the ball. To make a paragraph interesting, you need short, crisp and concise sentences, and these can be made if you use idioms and phrasal verbs. Likewise, to engage the attention of the reader, you need to move from one idea to another with ease and panache. To enable this movement from line to line, you need to make the paragraph or essay coherent and cohesive. I would then talk to them about linkers, and other cohesive devices.

I would then ask learners if they know what ‘park the bus’ means (this idiom is attributed to a football coach, Mourinho). I also added that they were free to look it up on Google if they did not know it. This is how idioms were introduced to them. I began with sports-based idioms starting with football and then graduated to idioms based on other

sports as well. Some of these are: to move the goalposts, to keep your eye on the ball, to score an own goal, to have a game plan, to blow the whistle on something, etc.

Phrasal verbs were also taught through authentic texts (a sample is included in the appendix) which brought the context of use alive and emphasized the necessity of introducing colourful expressions when writing.

The image text of the teacher as a football fan first and a teacher next was both unusual and fascinating to the learners. This was reinforced from time to time when I went to class in Argentina jersey, particularly on days that Argentina was set to play a match during World Cup 2022. Besides, my joining them for a game of football and my attempts at dribbling, passing and taking free kicks met with approval and amazement.

The discussion in the classroom moved from players to tactics to coaches and the style of play of individual players. There was great fun and also learning happening simultaneously. Through authentic texts and worksheets, units were taught in an ambience that was friendly, non-threatening, anxiety-free, and conducive for learning to occur.

The discussion was followed by a topic set for paragraph writing: My favourite sport. Learners were receptive to the idea of learning paragraph and essay writing through examples from sports because they were captivated by the connection between sports and writing. My sports person image text, therefore, was the game changer here.

There was something very unusual about linking a sport with an academic activity such as writing and that worked to the advantage of the teacher in enabling learning. Everyone participated and there were animated debates about whether Messi's Argentina would win the World Cup or Kylian Mbappe's France. In the semi-finals, predictions were made about a Croatia-Morocco final since the two teams were recognised as giant killers, Croatia having defeated Brazil and Morocco, Portugal.

Many learners wanted a final that did not have Argentina since they were upset over Cristiano Ronaldo not making it to the finals! Learners joined in the laughter that greeted everyone when I had a very friendly banter with a student about GOAT—greatest of all time—title and why Messi deserved it. He was rooting for Ronaldo and I, for Messi, and this set the tone for teaching vocabulary to the learners.

Football has other connotations of sportsmanship, fair play, team play, leadership, strategies, game plan etc., and learners were happy to see these values manifest in the classroom discourse which aimed at inclusivity. I allowed learners, for example, to use a language they were comfortable with and many learners spoke without feeling shy or being self-conscious when switching to the L1. If their L1 was a language other than Hindi or Telugu, translations were made of the spoken speech. Everyone was given a chance to speak even if for a minute.

I was able to promote classroom participation without frightening learners into silence with a 'Use-English-Only' dictum or declaring that there would be oral interaction and everyone was expected to participate. I invited participation through an approach that was both personable and learner-friendly.

What has been described above does not however present a complete picture of the image text that learners carried with them: there were many reluctant learners in the group and I wanted to know why. They felt that the whole discussion was football-centric and that there must be space for cricket too, a sport they were more familiar with than football. I took cognizance of this and set them a task: I encouraged learners to bring authentic materials culled from newspapers, online sites and magazines that discussed not just football but any sports that appealed to them. This activity of training learners to write a good paragraph/essay carried further in the lab where group discussion topics included the following: the importance of extra-curricular activities in the engineering curriculum; what sports and games teach us and sports and leadership skills

Thus I was able to consciously employ my image text to prepare learners to speak freely, take part in group discussions and improve their spoken and written English gradually. If my teacher identity had not been very clear to me, I could not have used the image as a pedagogical resource to teach the learners who needed scaffolding psychologically as well as with the language. The modest exercise I engaged in has significant pedagogical implications which figure below.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

1. Teacher identity enables teachers to fashion pedagogies based on "their own local classroom contexts, their students, and, most importantly,

themselves.” (Motha et al., 2012, p. 23). In the study mentioned above, I was able to engage learners and engage with learners productively and meaningfully by negotiating what they wished to learn with texts and samples that appealed to them. Thus, as has been rightly observed, “Morgan’s (2004) notion of identity-as-pedagogy opens up possibilities for teachers to actually craft their practice in the richly relevant context of their own lives” (Motha et al., 2012, p. 24). This practice is far more relevant than using texts and contexts far removed from or alien to the learners’ lived experiences. Learning took place as did teaching and both the teacher and the taught gained in the process.

2. A positive image text of the teacher is beneficial for teaching and learning. It invests teaching with a purpose while helping learners gain knowledge through experiences and activities they find rewarding. For example, after teaching learners the advantages of using texts they most relate to, I was able to get them to read movie reviews, book reviews, blurbs, and a variety of other texts and genres. The image text they carried of me as a friendly sports loving human enabled me to build trust and camaraderie with them.

3. An image text is helpful and can be employed as a pedagogical resource to challenge stereotypes, learn from students, teach students the dangers of a single story or narrative, get students to participate in group discussions, lower their anxiety levels, engage with them, and increase willing classroom participation and their willingness to communicate (WTC). A happy perception in the learners’ minds about the teacher leads to a negotiated discourse vis-à-vis learning. In conjunction with the teacher, learners can negotiate how units can be taught, through what texts, under what conditions and through what mode to maximize learning opportunities.

Conclusion

Teacher identity can be employed gainfully to bring about transformation in teaching and learning provided the teacher is perceptive and receptive to employing their identity to benefit learners.

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Appendix

Worksheet 1

Identify the phrasal verbs in the reading passage below. What do the phrasal verbs mean? Why are they used?

Lionel Messi sets up his shot at destiny with throwback brilliance

Does it actually matter if Lionel Messi wins a World Cup? This will now be the narrative around the dog days of his final global tournament leading up to the final on Sunday.

The reality is something else. In fact, watching Messi here the opposite seemed to be the case. This was not just a performance of edge and thrust and decisive moments but all of those things carved out of the air in his own unique physical style, a footballer capable, at 35, of basically making this thing up in his own image.

Football will always be the most literal-minded, outcome-based form of sporting chaos. But whatever the final strokes of this fever dream of a winter World Cup, one thing seems inarguably true. The small, badger-ish figure in the baggy blue and white shirt, that man out there turning the game against the iron fist of the Croatia midfield, is already the best footballer who has ever played.

He has been for ages, was also the last time he reached a World Cup final, eight years ago, just in a slightly different guise. And there was something of the throwback, the football equivalent of a sentimental wedding anniversary dance, about the third and final goal of this Messi-drunk semi-final victory.

There were 69 minutes gone when Messi took the ball on the right. Straight away there was something different in his stride, that buried, ferrety sense of purpose. He dropped a shoulder. He jinked. Wait. He's doing Messi redux. He's doing the winger thing.

Messi led Josko Gvardiol into the area, holding his man off, touching the ball constantly like a woodpecker hammering at a piece of bark. Then he pirouetted back, a kind of lure, before spinning back towards goal and inside Gvardiol once again, who is, lest we forget, 20 years old and the defender of this tournament, but is now out here being rinsed, and rinsed again like a wet tea towel.

From there Messi had the space to roll the ball back at 45 degrees for Julián Álvarez to kill the game. The run, the pass, the finish, it all felt like a kind of mnemonic, a memento Messi, another ghost at this World Cup of ghosts.

But then every one of these late-Messi knockout games has a strange sense of peril around it. Could this be it? Are we saying goodbye to something here? If so, there will be a fitting wake. The Lusail Stadium is an aggressively splendid thing inside, sides craning towards its closable roof, an expanse of darkness above the top ringed with vast steel braces like an open mouth howling at the sky.

Argentina's fans had one end of it, although any attempt to generate an authentic atmosphere was of course drowned by the mind-numbingly inane PA. It is to be hoped this is dialled back for the final because something is happening here with Argentina's fans.

Heading down through concourses there was once again a kind of spontaneous San Gennaro procession, the blue and white shirts singing, stamping, waving their litany of relics, the severed cardboard Maradona head, the flags, the miraculous vestments and trinkets. There is always something devotional about Argentinian football. At this tournament it has felt like a kind of festival of faith, a Messi revivalist parade.

Argentina needed his spark here as Croatia dominated the ball early on, superior midfield genes kicking in. It was once suggested that Luka Modric looks like a little boy dressed up as a witch. This is no longer the case.

He now looks like a teenager dressed up as a witch. And he was brilliant here for 20 minutes, right up until the moment another kind of destiny intervened.

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