

NEP 2020 and Emerging Language Teacher Identities

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Abstract

Recent research (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Fairley, 2020) addresses the concept of teacher identity not as a fixed but as an evolving entity, in the sense of how teachers view and express themselves in their professional practices (Wu et al., 2011). Factors like personality, beliefs, and adaptability (Hsieh, 2010; Gee, 2001), and needs of the teaching context (Barkhuizen, 2017; Pennington & Richards, 2016) shape these identities. Teacher identity captures the changing external dynamics of their context for their core constructs to keep evolving. This paper presents the very initial phase of a research that attempts to capture the interactions of the internal and the external potencies of a group of primary level teachers as they try to perceive the nuances of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in their first connect with it, and the resultant triggering of fresh developments in their existing identity. Four emerging identity constructs have been observed, and the insights have been presented.

Keywords: LTI dynamics, teacher identity, NEP 2020, emerging identities

Introduction

Research on language teacher identity, LTI, a term used by Barkhuizen (2016a), has been in focus in research for some time. This concept explores teachers' awareness, expertise, and practice when they face new challenges in their work sphere. Most research identifies teacher identity to be "dynamic rather than stable, a constantly evolving phenomenon" (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 117). Teacher identities are multi-faceted that morph due to the impacts of various personal and

peripheral factors (Gee, 2001; Yazan, 2018; Fairley, 2020; Golzar, 2020). Understanding the dimensions of someone's identity vis-à-vis their responsibilities is complex (Song, 2016). The complexity increases when the responsibilities happen to be interactions between old dimensions with fresh ones, as occurs with teaching professionals. Several forces come into play in this process, working towards adopting new identities. Some of these forces are the narratives new groups of students bring, the impact of quickly emerging technologies, the evolving socio-cultural and economic pressures on education, the praxis to be implemented that emerge from recent policies, and, most of all, the attitudes that teachers carry.

This paper will discuss how certain new aspects, arising from the NEP 2020, and its expectations for teachers to adapt to fresh identities, can prompt language teachers to either seek change and progress (Kocabaş-Gedik & Hart, 2021) or stagnate in their comfort zone. Secondly, the early moments of struggle of the teachers in forming new LTIs to act in certain manners will be analyzed. Modifications in LTIs are expected since the new education policy provides not just directions for new identity formation (NEP 2020, p. 13), it also suggests new solutions for teachers to satisfy the responsibilities in their new identities (NEP 2020, p. 21). Without the appeal of new solutions, LTIs may remain stagnant, acknowledging the need for change but, sometimes, failing to act (Miller, 2009).

In general, policy makers and institutions invest significant time and effort in creating pushes and pulls towards new solutions (Dağtaş & Zaimoglu, 2022). For instance, NEP 2020 suggests the need to instil conceptual clarity and twenty-first century skills in students, and use an outcome-based learning system, which are the pushes. The pull is what NEP specifies:

The teacher must be at the centre of the fundamental reforms in the education system. The new education policy must help re-establish teachers, as the most respected and essential members of our society, because they truly shape our next generation of citizens. It [NEP] must do everything to empower teachers and help them to do their job as effectively as possible. (p. 5)

However, equally important is addressing these opposing forces in real contexts; otherwise, hindrances may occur in identity formation. The

first opposing force is the anxiety associated with the new roles and solutions expected. When considering a new option, Language teachers often worry about the potential limitations and uncertainties they may encounter. Questions arise, such as whether the solution would deliver on its promises, if they would be able to use it effectively, or if it would be uncomfortable for one's established security. Anxiety over the unfamiliar might discourage people from adopting new identities (Barkhuizen, 2016b).

The second force acting against a switch is the habit of the present. People tend to stick to familiar routines, thinking, "I'm used to doing it this way," or "I may not love the existing processes, but at least I know these factors function to an extent." The idea of transitioning to a new solution can be overwhelming, and individuals often prefer the perceived safety. Unfortunately, institutions often neglect to address anxiety or to inquire about language teachers' concerns in these situations.

Context of the Study

The Government of Odisha has started several processes to implement the NEP 2020 principles with a focus on the primary level education. This paper is a nascent attempt to investigate the language teacher identity formation in this regard, based on informal interviews of 40 primary teachers from government schools in Odisha, who attended teacher development programmes (TDPs) in ESL (English as a second language) in different groups at the State Institute of Languages and Teacher Training, Bhubaneswar to understand the implications of NEP 2020, and to implement those in their clusters. This was their first direct encounter with the principles and the expected language teaching practices proposed by NEP 2020. The primary level has been considered here because of the foundational language proficiency that NEP 2020 emphasises, and because that will be the foundation upon which the success of NEP 2020 in the later educational stages will depend.

The hypothesis in considering the primary level is that the emerging identities due to NEP 2020 and teacher expectations to enable them to adopt the responsibilities would not vary at each next higher level in the education system. The following is a profile presentation of the teachers, who were interviewed.

Table 1: *Profile of Teachers Interviewed*

Number of teachers interviewed	40 (F - 23; M - 17)
Basic educational qualification	BA, Diploma in Elementary Education (D. El. Ed)
Duration of each TDP they attended	5 days
Duration of each interview during the TDP	30 - 40 minutes

Research Methodology

The respondents were selected based on their willingness to participate in the process. The informal interview contained seven questions presented below. Each TDP was content- and practice-intensive, not leaving enough time to use more questions. Responses were mostly a combination of English and Odia. Since the purpose was to construct the identities the teachers wished to associate themselves with, use of either English or Odia did not matter.

- i. How would you describe your language teaching experience prior to this training?
- ii. How willing are you to adapt to change in your teaching practice?
- iii. In which of the following would you like to progress? Give reasons for your choice/s.
 - a. improving the language learning process and enhancing test scores of your students
 - b. attending to individual learner needs
 - c. using fresh approaches in classroom teaching
 - d. managing your new workload
- iv. What possible problems do you foresee in achieving what you want to attain?
- v. What support would you expect in advancing your objectives?
- vi. Which agencies do you think should support you in accomplishing your choices?
- vii. Would you like to see yourself leading your school/block/district?

During the TDPs, unstructured and informal interviews with 40

teachers were conducted that captured the teachers' earlier language teaching experiences and the factors that might have/not influenced their decision to switch to new instructional practices now. The duration of each interview was between 30-40 minutes. If anyone wanted to add or modify their responses later, they were allowed to do so because they required time for the ideas to sink in, and re-think their responses. Teacher responses were taken down in note form, then analyzed to create categories according to the aspects they chose in their responses. For example, some stated that they would prefer to use fresh approaches to ESL teaching with support from state agencies, and some wanted leadership roles, such as mentoring. Some were enthusiastic about progressing from their past experiences, while some wanted to continue in the security of their existing practices.

Analysis of the interviews led to classification of four identities that teachers wanted to undertake. Teacher anxieties and opinions, and the support they would essentially need to make these changes possible were also recorded along with researcher suggestions.

A statistical presentation of the data is not yet feasible since the basics of this research are in an emerging state of gathering and compiling further data. The effort here is to outline the preliminary findings for further exploration, get data, and coalesce findings from which new LTIs may emerge.

The Four Identities in LTI Formation

The following is an elaboration of each identity, the expectations of teachers in performing under each identity, their expectations, and our suggestions for institutional and administrative support to stabilize these identities.

A. The First Identity

The first identity chosen by the respondents was to be able to play an active role in improving the language learning process of their learners and enhancing their test scores. These 'early adopters' were not just fascinated by this role because they were enthusiasts for new technologies or for trying new things (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). They were motivated by the opportunity to contribute to meaningful changes in their schools. The most common anxiety among them about this identity was whether the new practices would be effective. For example, NEP initiatives

focused on project-based learning, and teachers wondered if they would be able to design authentic, engaging projects that effectively conveyed content. In the case of allowing students space for independent learning, teachers expressed concerns about higher test scores, and giving up the control of whole-class instruction, one of their entrenched habits.

The Expectations

To address these anxieties, the teachers expected school leaders to select practices and initiatives that would build upon their prior practices incrementally, rather than introducing radical transformations. The new practices should be straightforward enough for teachers to envision themselves eventually bringing their colleagues as well on board with the changes. They expected help in visualizing how the new instructional initiatives would lead to measurable improvements in student performance. Additionally, teachers with this identity wanted to have opportunities to contribute their own ideas and be involved in the decision-making process.

The Suggestions

Teachers willing to pursue this responsibility should feel that they are making a meaningful difference, not only in their own teaching experience but also in the overall performance of the school. School leaders should ensure that new initiatives allow these teachers to actively participate and have a voice in shaping the direction of the changes. To support the creation of this new LTI, school leaders can implement programmes to initiate teachers who align with this identity.

B. The Second Identity

The second identity detected was where teachers wanted scaffolds to engage and involve a broader range of students while maintaining manageable workloads. Teachers with this identity recognized well the diverse range of language achievement levels and interests among their students (Leigh, 2019; Golzar, 2020).

The following are some responses of this identity group.

- “I find my students have different ways of learning but I can use only the same materials and questions from the textbook for all.”
- “I prepare learning materials but don’t feel sure how efficient these are to meet the different learning needs of my students.”

- “Workload becomes a stress, and I cannot always prepare extra learning materials.”

Teachers in this category often faced challenges such as addressing individual student needs, managing classroom dynamics, and adapting instructional materials to cater to diverse learning styles. They believed that by expanding their repertoire of teaching strategies and activities, they could better involve a larger number of students in meaningful language experiences. They actively sought new ways to deliver the curriculum to ensure that students feel genuinely challenged.

These teachers were typically at a point in their careers where they were enthusiastic about trying new things and liked to incorporate new tools, resources, or technologies into their teaching practices. When new resources and training on innovative techniques were offered, they eagerly embraced the opportunity to broaden their teaching options. They took pride in staying up to date with the latest technology and instructional advancements.

The Expectations

Teachers with this identity did not perceive new strategies or technologies as fundamentally changing the way they taught.

- “Technology is a great support when it is available in my classroom. I have always been tech-savvy.”
- “The new approaches I learn in training programmes seem repetitive. I always like to know how to teach better than what I’m already doing.”
- “I feel fascinated with fresh ways of doing things but I must see that all the children learn everything in the textbook. That does not leave me with time to experiment. Even then, I always try to do things a little differently.”

They viewed initiatives, such as blended learning, as enhancements to their existing efforts to make learning more engaging. Unlike teachers under Identity 1, who might prioritize test scores over student engagement, teachers under Identity 2 considered students’ intrinsic interest in learning to be their highest priority. Additionally, this responsibility was not only about helping students but also about making teaching more enjoyable and taking pride in professional expertise. These teachers were willing to invest time and effort in

finding or creating new activities and resources because they recognized that their classrooms became more manageable and enjoyable when students were excited to be there.

The Suggestions

To minimize anxieties and create a pull for practices aligned with this identity, two elements are crucial. First, teachers need to see how specific language tools or practices build upon their existing teaching repertoire and enhance their perception of what it means to be an excellent teacher. They are not seeking to completely reinvent their teaching but rather to enhance it. If a new practice feels foreign and drastically different, such teachers may be hesitant to adopt it. Second, ongoing professional development should be embedded to support this responsibility. Opportunities for planning time are essential to alleviate anxieties about this identity. Providing teachers with time for planning and collaboration with colleagues can help assuage anxieties associated with change.

Encouraging these teachers to adopt new practices is relatively easy, as they are already actively seeking new processes to improve language learning. For example, if a school provides smart classrooms and training to use the equipment, teachers of Identity 2 would be among the first to implement them in their classrooms.

C. The Third Identity

The third identity involved teachers' desire to repair existing instructional models deemed ineffective or outdated (Song, 2016). Teachers favouring this identity did not wish for a complete overhaul of the conceptual design or approaches of the curriculum. They wanted innovations that deviated from the standard practice, mostly because of their perception of the changed cognitive and social demands that a curriculum must address. For them, innovations in language teaching must match the evolving objectives of education and societal issues. Such innovations must be rooted in comprehensive theories with efficient applicability in terms of time and resources. Teachers in this identity sought new practices that would enable them to address contemporary language needs more effectively.

- "I want my class to be a different experience for me and for my students. This need not happen every day. What I do is good

enough, still, I must know how to introduce them to recent practices.”

- “Most children in my classes use mobile phones from the pandemic times. Their language use has become somewhat different. The textbooks are yet to catch up.”
- “Parents are becoming more aware about their children’s ability. Children need challenges to learn better, even if the materials are not very innovative. How do I challenge them daily?”

The Expectations

Teachers of this identity expressed frustration with traditional instructional methods that limited their ability to meet the diverse needs of their students. They observed the varying levels of achievement among students and the struggle to keep up. Despite their hard work and perseverance, teachers felt that their efforts were not making a meaningful difference. Students appeared disinterested, bored, or disengaged, and their progress was slow or stagnant. Frustrated with these results, teachers realized the inadequacy of their instructional model. They wanted access to new instructional models for better language learning.

The Suggestions

Teachers under this identity understood that existing instructions fail to meet the needs and sought better approaches. They measured progress differently from teachers of other identities. They were not satisfied with general improvements in student engagement or average achievement. Instead, they wanted to see each student’s progress. Recognition from colleagues or administrators was of less importance to them. Their focus was solely on improving the language efficiency of their students.

School leaders should provide such teachers with autonomy and room to experiment. These teachers are not interested in minor adjustments to the current instructional model; they seek bold alternatives. However, promoting radical new practices as school-wide initiatives may clash with the interests of teachers under Identities 1 or 2. Instead, school leaders should grant these teachers a degree of autonomy from the rest of the school, allowing them to explore new practices in low-stakes settings such as after-school programmes, or supplemental remedial courses. Additionally, teachers in Identity 3 require strong administrative support to initiate this identity for them.

D. The Fourth Identity

Teachers categorized under Identity 4 seemed to consider a change when resisting it was no longer a viable option (Shapiro, 2010; Zembylas, 2018). They held back from adopting new practices, but stated that once other teachers' practices exhibited changes, they would adopt those. However, their compulsion arose from avoiding censure or to evade lagging behind. They might adapt to the changes to escape the risk of being transferred or receiving negative evaluations from administrators.

- "I am doing my best, and my students secure good marks. Why should I change my ways of teaching?"
- "With so much paperwork daily at school, I don't get time to think about doing things differently in class."
- "I don't think changing my teaching will lead anywhere. These new things come and go."
- "I'd think of changing if everyone changes. Or I may do things differently if the District Education Officer visits my class, which is rare."

For teachers of Identity 4, change was more about compliance than improving instruction. They met the minimum requirements of new initiatives in the past, such as using technology for the required tasks or time, without thinking of a compelling rationale for its use. Their strategy was to wait till they realized that they had to apply the changes or till the new practices became outdated.

The Expectations

When asked why they did not feel motivated to stay updated with the new initiatives, their main reasons were a lack of support and resources that would enable them to effectively implement and adapt to these new initiatives without feeling overwhelmed. They also wanted to see the results first, and then, include the changes in their practice. They did not recognize the inherent contradiction in their point of view that unless there is practice, there can be no result. At the same time, teachers in this identity expressed concerns about always keeping up with changing expectations and technologies.

The Suggestions

Teachers in this identity are not motivated for personal improvement or

student success but seek relief or escape from falling behind. Enforcing change may distract them from other student-focused motivations they may have. Schools should prioritize clear communication with such teachers offer ongoing professional development, and create collaborative opportunities to address their hesitancy. School leaders should avoid relying on Identity 4 as the primary means to drive change.

If school leaders find it necessary to compel such teachers, it should be done as a transitional phase. They should initially push these teachers to adopt new practices to keep up, but then shift the focus towards helping them progress to other identities. Through their experience with new practices, they may transit, seeking to engage and challenge themselves in a manageable way.

Conclusion

It is important to note that this discussion does not encompass every possible way a teacher may create identities to seek progress, but it has tried to provide an understanding of the most common motivations behind teachers' decisions to adopt new identities (Schutz & Lee, 2014). Forces of progress may be relevant to multiple identities as individual teachers accept or shift through these throughout their careers as their circumstances change (Dağtas & Zaimoglu, 2022). It is crucial to recognize that mapping to identities is not a solution in itself; rather, it provides guidelines for measuring the effectiveness of solutions (Barkhuizen, 2016b). Strategies and mechanisms for achieving desired outcomes should be developed separately.

Another crucial support for the new LTI formation is the freedom to fail. As teachers experiment with innovative teaching approaches, they should be assured that initial setbacks are acceptable, are a part of their learning process, and it may take multiple iterations to refine new practices. School leaders should foster a growth mindset among teachers by encouraging them to learn from their mistakes without censure. Teachers should be reassured that failing forward is acceptable as long as valuable lessons are learned.

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