

NOT EMPTY VESSELS: NEW ZEALAND PRE-SERVICE ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE TEACHER IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT *Researchers have identified the importance of understanding language teacher identity in order to understand more about language teacher education (Johnston, Pawan, & Mahan-Taylor, 2005; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). The role of previous experience in shaping language teacher identity and beliefs and practices has been commented on by many writers (e.g., Crandall, 2000; Freeman & Johnson, 1998). This paper reports on themes from semi-structured interviews conducted individually with four pre-service teachers of additional languages in the first stage of a longitudinal study of an Additional Language Teacher Education (ALTE) paper in a New Zealand tertiary institution. Results show that prior experience was pivotal to their conceptions of language teacher identity both prior to and after completion of the ALTE paper. The potential role of the ALTE paper in creating a wider net for students' experiences which could be drawn upon and incorporated into their conception of language teacher identity is discussed.*

KEYWORDS

Teacher identity, additional language teacher education, pre-service teacher education, immersion language experience

INTRODUCTION

The recent introduction of the Learning Languages learning area in the most recent New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) has given prominence and recognition to an area which has long been neglected in the New Zealand curriculum (see Spence, 2004, for a review of language teaching in the New Zealand curriculum context). The elevation of this area of the curriculum to a learning area in its own right, and the requirement by the Ministry of Education that in 2008 all year 7 and 8 students will have access to an additional language has implications for the need to ensure that the additional language teacher education available in New Zealand is of a high quality, and that additional language teacher educators are being reflective in their delivery of tertiary teacher education in this area. Work has already been done by the author (and a colleague) examining and developing the content and method of delivery of an additional language teacher education (ALTE) paper in New Zealand (Daly & Spiller, 2008; Spiller & Daly, 2008). The current article describes the first stage of a longitudinal study examining

the language teaching beliefs and identity of four pre-service additional language teachers in the New Zealand context, and discusses the implications for additional language teacher education.

Language teacher identity has been shown to be of critical importance in understanding how language teaching is done (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005) and thus it is recognised that understanding language teacher identity is also crucial in the education of future language teachers (Johnston, Pawan, & Mahan-Taylor, 2005; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). In their study of 12 EFL/ESL teachers through the use of extensive semi-structured interviews, Johnston, Pawan, and Mahan-Taylor (2005) discuss the dynamic nature of identity, how it is strongly related to social, cultural and political contexts, and how it is negotiated and developed through discourse. This lack of stability relating to teacher identity also makes the use of longitudinal studies particularly relevant to the study of additional language teacher identity (Tarone & Allwright, 2005).

In her overview of trends and issues in language teacher education, Crandall (2000) points out the link between prior learning experiences and language teacher identity: there is a “growing recognition that teachers’ prior learning experiences play a powerful role in shaping their views of effective teaching and learning and their teaching practices” (p. 35). This is summed up most eloquently by Freeman and Johnson (1998), who say that

Teachers are not empty vessels, waiting to be filled with theoretical and pedagogical knowledge. They are individuals who enter teacher education programs with prior experience, personal values and beliefs that inform their knowledge about teaching and shape what they do. (p. 401)

The validity of this observation is evidenced quite explicitly in several recent studies. For example, Hawkins (2004) analysed the narratives of five pre-service language teachers from 30 trainee students in a Master of Arts language teaching programme in the US. Repeatedly comments from the five participants showed the importance of prior experiences in these students’ understanding of theoretical and pedagogical issues related to language teaching. Most of them had successfully learned language through Grammar Translation Methods and this was evident in their struggles with the acceptance of Communicative Language Teaching as a pedagogical approach.

Another study supporting the importance of initial teacher education prior learning experiences is that of Erben (2005), who describes the development of a university immersion teacher education programme in Australia, a four-year degree in which between 50% and 100% of the courses were delivered in the medium of Japanese to native speakers of English. He commented that until the students did the programme, they had little or no real understanding of immersion, and the students themselves commented that they had to experience immersion to be able to learn through immersion.

Thus an understanding of the language teacher identity and beliefs of pre-service teachers of additional languages is an essential step in the development and delivery of effective additional language teacher education in the New Zealand

context. As has been described above, the role of language teacher identity and its importance in language teacher education has been discussed frequently in the international literature, but has not previously been examined in the New Zealand context. The methodology used for this study will be described before the findings are reported and discussed.

METHODOLOGY

Four students who had recently completed an optional second year paper as part of their Bachelor of Teaching degree volunteered to be interviewed upon invitation. Interviews were semi-structured and participants were asked to reflect on what they thought it meant to be a teacher of additional languages in a primary setting in New Zealand. The interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. The transcript of each participant's interview was read by the participant and if he or she wished to clarify or add any information, additional comments were made before the transcripts were analysed by the researcher.

This initial interview was the first in a planned series of interviews which aim to trace the development of the pre-service additional language teachers' identity through several stages: before the completion of an ALTE paper (results reported in this paper), immediately after completing the ALTE paper (results reported in this paper), and at 6 months, 12 months and 18 months into their role as a qualified primary teacher (interviews yet to be completed). Before a summary of the initial interviews and a discussion of the themes from the interviews, a short description of the four participants and their prior additional language learning and teaching experiences will be given.

Participants

Participant One (P1) was a 19 year old who had experience of several languages in addition to her first language, English. She learnt French songs and short phrases from an au pair who worked with her family when she was about five years old. She then learnt French at school from Year 6 (age 11 years) during which time she learnt numbers, some vocabulary lists, and some phrases. Just after she turned 11 her family moved to Brazil, so she stopped learning French and learnt Portuguese. She became fairly fluent in Portuguese through attending a school in Brazil. She did not have specific language lessons, but learnt through her immersion experience in the classroom. She resumed learning French through the New Zealand Correspondence School from the age of 15 years, until she was 18 years of age.

Participant Two (P2) also had experience of several languages in addition to her first language, English. She was also 19 years and at the age of 10 she learnt New Zealand Sign Language through a friend. In addition, she learnt Japanese at secondary school for five years, and she has learnt some Korean through her work with people at her church.

Participant Three (P3) was a 20-year-old young woman who learnt French for four years at secondary school, in addition to her first language, English.

Participant 4 (P4) was a 46-year-old woman who grew up speaking Swiss German and English at home. She arrived in New Zealand as a one year old with

her Swiss German family. When she was in her twenties she and her son lived in Switzerland for a ten-year period. While there she taught English in an after-school environment for six years, learnt German in some block courses, spoke Swiss in her daily life, and learnt some Italian.

FINDINGS FROM INITIAL INTERVIEWS

The four pre-service teacher participants were asked to comment on what they had thought it was to be a teacher of additional languages before they had completed the ALTE paper, and how this perception had changed since completing the paper. While the validity of their reported concepts prior to the ALTE paper can be questioned as participants were not interviewed before the paper commenced but asked to remember their pre-paper conceptions, it was deemed worthwhile to ask this question, and to interpret it with caution. Comments from the four participants will be summarised with regard to their reported pre-paper conceptions and their immediate post-paper conceptions, before the themes are discussed.

When asked what she thought being a teacher of an additional language in a primary setting was, P1 reported that before completing the paper, she thought it would be like what she had done in school: lots of vocabulary lists and copying things from the board; no talking to each other. She reported that what motivated her to continue learning French in this situation was her teacher talking about how she would be able to use French in the future. In correspondence school French she was motivated by her love of listening to the language on the tapes provided, and also by the encouraging feedback from her teacher in New Zealand: "... it was kind of nice when you're in another country to have messages from someone in English about how wonderful your French is" [P1:2].

When asked how her understanding of what it is to be a teacher of additional languages in a primary setting had changed since completing the ALTE paper, P1 reported that she saw it as being a lot less related to exercises and lists of vocabulary. She felt that teaching additional languages in a primary setting was about giving students the opportunities to use the language. She spoke about motivating her students for the immediate present (in the classroom) as well as for the future in the way that her teacher had done. In some of the classrooms she had observed (as part of the ALTE paper) she had seen children enjoying and wanting to talk in the target language: "They were really enjoying it just being able to talk in the language with each other and learn things about each other ... more than just repeating it after the teacher" [P1:3]. She felt that while grammar still needed to be taught it could be done through activities and talking in the language. She also became aware that the experience she had of learning a language in an immersion setting had some implications for classroom teaching. "I wouldn't have thought of teaching language like I learnt Portuguese, but I can see that it is possible now...you can just be exposing students to language and getting them to use language that they do have...just pushing their language" [P1:3].

Before completing the ALTE paper, P2 thought that language learning was about teaching snippets of language for basic everyday situations and maybe some cultural experiences (like sushi making for Japanese) around a certain language.

Since completing the ALTE paper, she described her understanding of what it means to be a teacher of additional languages in a primary setting as having broadened and developed. She now saw teaching language as more of a social thing. She spoke about an observation she had of language teaching during the ALTE paper: “The children were actually using the language rather than just learning that and being able to say things, they were actually communicating in the way that language is used socially. They were using it throughout the day and ... it was kind of ... within a holistic kind of feel of the classroom” [P2:2]. When she learnt a language herself, she felt she was learning grammar, but she felt that the children she observed during the ALTE paper were learning “to communicate and share ideas”.

P3 reported that she did not think there were such teachers as teachers of additional languages for primary schools before she completed the ALTE paper. Occasionally in her own school experience she had experienced an exchange student coming in to teach Japanese, and when language was taught it was informal and she might learn some numbers or a few phrases just once a week, like how to introduce yourself. Given the new requirement for Years 7 and 8 students to have access to learning an additional language, she thought there might be one language teacher in the school and all the Years 7 and 8 children would go to this person for language lessons. She imagined the lessons would be mostly communicative in approach as she could not imagine primary aged children being able to grasp grammatical concepts.

Having completed the paper, P3 reported that being a teacher of additional languages in a primary setting was about making “kids feel excited about learning languages...so they can use it in their everyday lives” [P3:3]. She also mentioned the importance of teacher passion and providing a purpose for the children’s learning. She reported that learning additional languages offered children a chance to understand more about English, to gain more multicultural awareness, and to engender a sense of consideration and understanding for students who come into the classroom without English language. She felt that the teaching of additional languages helped to create a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment.

P4’s understanding of what it was to be a language teacher was very much shaped by her experiences of teaching English to three to eleven year olds in Switzerland. In that work she described teaching ‘the basics’, like learning to say your name, numbers and colours. She recounted working through a textbook, and using lots of role-play, singing, and arranging activities for students to leave the classroom and complete tasks using English.

She reported that the ALTE paper she completed had deepened and extended her knowledge. It supported the approach she had already been using as an EFL teacher in Switzerland, but has also allowed her to reflect on the differences between being a language teacher of English in Switzerland and being an additional language teacher in New Zealand. One area she focused in on with regard to this was motivation:

They [New Zealand children] don’t understand why they should learn it. ... [they must be asking themselves] “What good is it me

learning French?” “Where am I going to use it?”, “ I can’t go over the border. I can’t be there in 10 minutes.”[P4:5]

She also mentioned a lack of role models in children’s lives with regard to language learning. She observed that the Swiss children she taught “had the role models, their brothers, their aunties, their uncles, their sisters. They are all talking about learning English, going off doing English tests. “Ooh I’m passing”, “Going off to England”” [P4:5].

Additionally, and of course related to a lack of role models and to motivation, P4 discussed a culture of multilingualism which exists in Switzerland but does not in mainstream New Zealand:

It’s [language learning] just available and people are doing it. There’s nothing unusual that children can speak three different languages and that’s the norm just about. The opportunities are available that you can learn ... and the thing is you can actually hear that language within an hour of driving somewhere. You’re in those areas. Everything is there signposts, buildings. It’s all there to reinforce faster what you’re learning and even the tradition. The cooking and all that ... that all reinforces that language for you. But here [NZ] when we learn any language we lose out because we can’t go out and eat that food in the next five minutes or hear that music, see them dancing down the road in that tradition, and that is part of culture too, you know going to these big festivals overseas and the tradition of the culture. [P4:6]

THEMES AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of the four pre-service language teachers’ interview data indicates that the pre-service language teachers’ conception of what they thought it meant to be an additional language teacher had developed significantly from before the ALTE paper to immediately after its completion (Johnston, Pawan, & Mahan-Taylor, 2005). The participants’ reported description of what it means to be a teacher of additional language before completing the ALTE paper was strongly based on what they had previously experienced in terms of language learning and teaching. P1 referred explicitly to vocabulary lists and copying things from the board, which is what she had done in her French classroom lessons. P3 thought that language teaching was about providing snippets of language or a few phrases, as she had experienced from visiting exchange students. P4 referred extensively to her experience of teaching English in Switzerland, teaching introducing yourself, numbers and colours, using the textbook, role play, singing and activities.

After completion of the ALTE paper all four pre-service language teachers reported a broadening of their conceptualisation of what it means to be an additional language teacher. P1 felt that rather than exercises and vocabulary lists, being a language teacher was about giving students opportunities to use language. She made comments related to the classroom observations she had experienced during the paper and to the possibility of incorporating aspects of immersion language learning from her own experience of this in Brazil into the classroom. P2

reported that rather than being the teaching of ‘snippets of language’, she now saw language teaching as a social thing, and she made specific references to the language teaching observations she had made during the ALTE paper. P3 reported a change from describing a language teacher as someone who taught numbers and a few phrases, to someone who excited children about learning languages. She also referred to the more generalised benefits of language teaching to the classroom. P4’s previous experience of teaching English gave her a very concrete idea of what it was to be a language teacher, but she reported that the course allowed her to deepen and extend her knowledge, and she had strong insights into the importance of motivation for the New Zealand additional language teacher who is working within a dominant monolingual culture.

While this is a small study of only four participants, it is nonetheless interesting to note that the two (P1 and P4) students who had experienced living in an immersion setting (P1 in Brazil and P4 in Switzerland) where multilingualism was the norm were able to bring their out-of-the-classroom language experiences into their conceptualisation of what being a teacher of additional languages in a classroom could be. There have been several studies which have considered the benefits of immersion experiences for practising language teachers (see Harbon, 2005, for a review). In this study examining the beliefs and identities of pre-service teachers, it is apparent that there are also many benefits of immersion for pre-service teachers. These experiences had a huge bearing on their understanding of what it means to be a teacher of additional languages. They were able to weave in a great deal of texture and richness not available to the students who did not have such experiences. These two students had very detailed observations to make about motivation, the place of role models, the culture of multilingualism, and creating an immersion setting within the classroom. This is, of course, not to say that only students with immersion experiences can become effective language teachers, but it suggests that having such experiences provides a wealth of knowledge to be drawn upon in their developing identity as additional language teachers.

This study also emphasises the importance of the previously neglected (Crandall, 2000) area of reflection in ALTE. The four participants’ reflections on what it is to be an additional language teacher indicate that their prior experiences and their in-paper experiences of language teaching and learning were central to their understanding of what being a teacher of additional language in New Zealand means. All four students made direct reference to the importance of observing language-teaching classes in action, and to specific learnings from these observations with regard to what being an additional language teacher means. P1 reported that her classroom observation helped her to see that language teaching could be enjoyable, and could be about learning about one another rather than repeating things after the teacher. P2 commented that she was really impressed by seeing (and hearing) children in the classroom actually communicating using the target language. P3 had observed the importance of giving children a purpose for learning a language when she observed the buzz and excitement of children getting ready for an exchange experience.

In the inaugural version of the ALTE paper completed by the four participants, reflection was not given great weight, but the very process of the research interview

allowed this reflection to occur, and demonstrated most clearly to the researcher (who is also the language teacher educator) the benefit of reflection in allowing students to bring to bear all relevant experience in developing their identity as a language teacher (Crandall, 2000). The importance of reflection in initial teacher education has been identified by other researchers, for example, Korthagen, Laughran, and Russell (2006), who conducted a meta-study of three teacher education programmes in Australia, Canada, and Europe, and who specifically discuss the need for teacher education programmes to allow students to create their own professional knowledge through structured reflections on their own experiences. The revised version of the ALTE paper delivered in 2008 (see Daly & Spiller, 2008, for a description of the revision) has reflection at the core of each week's work and all assignments.

CONCLUSION

This summary and discussion of reported pre-ALTE paper concepts of additional language teacher identity and post-paper additional language teacher identity have shown that, as has been found in previous studies (e.g., Erben, 2005; Hawkins, 2004), language learning and teaching experience is central to the language teacher identity of the four pre-service language teachers in the New Zealand context. It is also apparent that there is potential for ALTE papers to provide the discourse (Johnston, Pawan, & Mahan-Taylor, 2005) through which the students can develop their identity further, by providing experiences of observing language teaching and by providing room for reflection on these in-paper experiences, as well as the opportunity to draw more widely on any language learning and teaching experiences the pre-service language teachers bring with them, including any experience of learning language through immersion. It is expected that the identity of the four pre-service teachers of additional language will develop further in the discourse of their own classroom as they move out into their first positions as additional language teachers in primary settings in the New Zealand context. Future papers will report on this development.

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