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4. THE CONFLUENCE OF DOING, THINKING, AND KNOWING

CLASSROOM PRACTICE AS THE CRUCIBLE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER IDENTITY

IDENTITY AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

While identity has been a topic of interest within the field of general teacher education for quite some time, second language acquisition research - the knowledge base upon which foreign language teacher education relies - has historically confined studies of identity to language learners and learning (see, for example, Norton & Toohey, 2002; Ricento, 2005), rather than to studies of language teachers or teaching. Indeed, as Velez-Rendon (2002) concludes in her recent critique of foreign language teacher education research, there is still much we do not know of language teachers and their work: "what they do, how they think, what they know, and how they learn" (citing Freeman & Richards, 1996, p. 465). Varghese, Morgan, Johnston and Johnson (2005) have similarly identified the topic of language teacher identity to be "an emerging subject of interest" (p. 21) within the broader field of second language education, and conclude that future research in this area will ultimately depend upon studies that take into account conceptions of language teacher identity as both 'identity-in-practice' and 'identity-in-discourse':

In 'identity-in-practice,' teacher agency is seen as action-oriented and focusing on concrete practices and tasks in relation to a group and mentor(s). In 'identity-in-discourse,' agency is discursively constituted, mainly through language ... there needs to be a recognition that in language teacher education we must incorporate simultaneously a focus on shared practices in communities as well as individual 'meta-awareness' (Ramanathan, 2002).

While we concur with Varghese and her colleagues' fundamental premise that research on language teacher identity requires both an understanding of identity as concrete, action-orientated practice, as well as how that practice has been discursively constituted by the community within which it occurs, our point of departure in this chapter lies in their suggestion that these two lines of inquiry might somehow be understood as independent or separable. Instead, drawing on Vygotsky's thesis of human development which has as its core the dialectic between (practical) activity and the broader social, cultural-historic (discursive)
context from which that activity emerges, we propose an alternate frame of reference for understanding language teacher identity which captures both conceptions – practice and discourse – as inseparable domains of development within a notion of ‘identity-in-activity’.

IDENTITY-IN-ACTIVITY

Sociocultural theory is concerned with the social formation of the mind. In sum, the idea that (cognitive) mental development is not purely the product of biological maturity, but is dependent upon ongoing interaction with the (social) world around us (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). For Vygotsky, humans do not act directly upon their world but, through the use of mediatory tools and other cultural artefacts, they interact with the world around them to regulate their environment through activity.

While Vygotsky never explicitly dealt with the concept of identity himself (Varfolomeeva & Gearon, 2006), we would agree with Penuel and Wertsch’s (1995) assertion that a sociocultural theory nevertheless provides a useful basis for researching and understanding identity. By this, we understand identity to be a fluid and ongoing developmental process that involves the formation of one’s (individual) ‘self’ in relation to a broader set of social practices and shared cultural experiences. As Roth (2004) puts it, “identity is something that is continuously made and remade in [mediated] activity; it is a being in continuous becoming” (p. 8). Our orientation to identity therefore reflects an understanding of identity that occupies much of the literature on social and cultural theory; that is, identity as a culturally constructed sense of one’s self (Butler, 1990; Buzze}
practices construct for us ... They are the result of a successful articulation or ‘chaining’ of the subject into the flow of the discourse” (p. 6).

However, it must also be acknowledged that the constituent nodes of the system – the rules, community, division of labour, subject, object, and even the instruments themselves – have histories of their own. By bringing to the present the rules, community, division of labour, subject, object, and even the instruments themselves – have histories of their own. By bringing to the present, must be understood in relation to the wider social, cultural, and historic context from which it has emerged. Drawing on another concept central to Vygotskian sociocultural theory – genetic analysis – an understanding of activity also therefore requires an understanding of its ‘genesis’, or its social and cultural origins: “behaviour can only be understood as the history of behaviour” (Blonsky). This idea is the cardinal principle of the whole method” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 70).

Genetic Analysis: Linking Cultural-Historic Discourses to Individual Practice

Vygotsky’s genetic framework consists of four interrelated levels of analysis – the phylogenetic, cultural-historic, ontogenetic, microgenetic – which are distinguished by the nature of human development in relation to physical time (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). Cole and Engeström (1993) illustrate the nested relationship between each of the four domains in Figure 4.2 below, with the ellipse representing one specific event in time:

![Figure 4.2. Sociocultural theoretical domains of genetic analysis. (Cole & Engeström, 1993, p. 20)](image)

In broad strokes, phylogenetic analysis concerns the nature of human development over the course of evolution as a ‘natural’ species (i.e., the biological basis for human development), while cultural-historic analysis is concerned with the development of the ‘external’ world within which human activity unfolds (the social, cultural, and historic basis for development). Ontogenetic analysis shifts the focus from these two broader lines of development to the subject, as an individual, across their lifespan. Ontogenesis, itself, is the culmination of continuous and ongoing instances of microgenetic activity, or the moment-by-moment interactions the individual has with the world.

It is here at the microgenic domain of development that the teacher’s activity system occurs on an ongoing daily basis. From a sociocultural perspective, this is the basis for defining who the subject ‘is’ with respect to concrete, social practices (i.e., activity). To use Varghese et al.’s (2005) conceptions of identity, this alludes to ‘identity-in-practice’.

However, as we explained earlier, microgenesis can only be properly understood when considered in relation to its own genesis. In other words, it is necessary not only to understand the present form of the concrete, observable activity, but also the social, cultural, and historic context from which that activity has emerged (the cultural-historic domain). This might, for example, be expressed through public policies on languages and teaching (the discursive construction of identity), whereas the microgenetic domain examines how that activity then unfolds in the immediate context of a specific system of social and cultural relations (the concrete, practical construction of identity).

Thus, by focusing on activity as the primary unit of analysis – ‘identity-in-activity’ – we have a framework to understand identity as a synthesis of practice (microgenetic development, or ‘identity-in-practice’) with discourse (cultural-historic development, ‘identity-in-discourse’), rather than the suggestion (implied or otherwise) that the two are somehow separable or independent domains of analysis in their own right.

Up to this point, it might appear that we have neglected the issue of agency. However, given the dialectic nature of genetic development, agency is an inherent aspect of microgenesis. The participant, as the subject of that system of activity, brings to that activity his or her own experiences, history, and background (i.e., their ontogenesis) from which he or she makes sense of the system and, in turn, decisions on how to then act within it. While agency is therefore constrained, because of the limitations of the subject’s own experiences and background, as well as the nature of the activity system itself (e.g., the tools available or the role the subject plays within the division of labour), this constraint is indicative of a notion of agency which is a dialectic between social structures and the self, with “neither subject (human agent) nor object (‘society’, or social institutions) ... having primacy [since] each is constituted in and through recurrent practices [i.e., activity]” (Giddens, 1982, p. 8, emphasis in original).

The remainder of this chapter illustrates the application of this framework to language teacher identity using data from a larger study of language teaching in Australia (Cross, 2006). The teacher, whose classroom practice we draw on for microgenetic data, is a Japanese teacher in the middle years, Elle. We begin, however, with a brief discussion of the cultural-historic domain for Elle’s activity, by analysing the social, cultural, and historical context for teaching Japanese in the middle years in the state of Victoria, Australia.
The Activity of Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language in the Middle Years

Cultural-Historic Genetic Analysis

In the cultural-historic analysis we present here, the key sociocultural ‘tool’ we see as having landscaped the cultural-historic context for the genesis of Elle’s individual classroom activity is policy. This is not to suggest that policy dictates Elle’s practice. Rather, it reflects Vygotsky’s dialectic thesis on the nature of tools and social activity, in that policies “carry with them both possibilities and constraints, contradictions and spaces. The reality of policy in practice depends upon the compromises and accommodations to these in particular settings” (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992, p. 15).

Gale’s (1999) idea of “policy as ideology”, which extends Ball’s (1994) notion of policy as text and discourse, further clarifies the notion of policy as a cultural artefact of wider social and cultural practices. While acknowledging that policies are represented in certain ways as text, and interpreted in certain ways as practice, Gale’s point is that “policies are ‘ideological and political artefacts which have been constructed within a particular historical and political context’ (Burton & Weiner, 1990, p. 205)” (p. 399).

In this chapter, we appreciate King’s (1979) definition of education policies as those “whose implementation can reasonably affect the promotion of learning” (p. 60). As such, the two key areas of policy which we see as being relevant for the teaching of Japanese in this particular context are those concerning ‘teaching Japanese as a foreign language’, together with those on ‘teaching in the Victorian middle years’.

Teaching Japanese as a foreign language. As one of the authors has discussed in more detail elsewhere (Cross, 2005), the ostensible goal of the Victorian curriculum for Japanese (i.e., a subject in which students learn “to communicate in the target language” (Victorian Board of Studies, 2000, p. 5, emphasis added) seems to hold little relevance in the present social, cultural, political, and educational context for Australian schooling. Rather, the shift towards a focus on the ‘basics’ – literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking – has eroded the once assured place Japanese had as a subject with inherent value in its own right when languages were first introduced as a compulsory key learning area (KLA) in the mid 1990s.

While initiatives during the 1990s secured dedicated support from both state and federal governments which led to a decade of Japanese language teaching that Lo Bianco (1999) has dubbed the “tsunami” of Australian languages education, these same developments were also the cause of its eventual demise. Shifting from a moral and social rationale to one purely economic and material, the reformulation of the National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco, 1987) to Australia’s Language (Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education & Training, 1991) was censured by some as so narrow in its terms of reference that it become void of a balanced social and cultural argument that would continue to frame “language learning as a symbol of the way in which we understand our society” (Liddicoat, 1996, p. 7).

The result – a utilitarian relationship between LOTE (‘Languages Other Than English’, the curriculum for languages education as it is known in Australia) and partisan economic policy – left the status of languages education under a different political persuasion uncertain. Indeed, the orientation of the Howard Coalition government since replacing Labor in 1996 has seen a return to what Lo Bianco (2003) describes as “the primacy of English” (p. 25), and arguments for the development of communicative skills in Japanese (or any foreign language) in schools diminish. Rae (2003), for example, recently postured whether we should even “persevere with the concept of LOTE as a key learning area that demands every student’s participation over most of the compulsory years of schooling?” (¶1). The basis for his argument is one oft-heard: LOTE has done little to increase cultural diversity, with few students only ever achieving more than the most rudimentary level of proficiency. In response, Mueller (2003) advances a number of reasons why LOTE should be maintained as a core learning area but, in contrast to the rhetoric described earlier in terms of the conventional goal of foreign language learning (i.e., “to communicate”), she argues instead for a rationale based on the contribution LOTE makes to the development of higher-order skills (i.e., “sound study habits and a better understanding of how to learn” (¶10)), and its “benefit for student literacy in the first language” (¶10). In short, “the compelling reasons for learning languages reside in the intellectual enrichment of the individual learner” (Australian Literacy and Languages Council, 1996 cited in Mueller, 2003, ¶1).

This position reflects the general trend that has been observed by commentators on language education in Australia in recent years – despite curriculum rhetoric that languages be taught with communicative intent, the reality is that LOTE is now justified and defended on the basis of being “a useful support for other curriculum areas, most recently, literacy in English” (Liddicoat, 2002, p. 30). Such observations have been echoed by Lo Bianco (2003) and others in their analyses of globalisation and the effect of the primacy of English on languages education; namely, the tendency for advocates of languages education policy to “sharpen their justifications for mass language learning [by] advancing the interdependent effects of literacy in second languages with literacy in English” (Lo Bianco, 2003, p. 27), and a trend amongst schools to “[re-evaluate] the extent of their present commitment to languages in the context of the higher priority now devoted to increasing performance in English literacy assessments” (p. 27). One clear example of this in Victoria has been the Linking LOTE to the Early Years Literacy Program (Victorian Department of Education, Employment & Training, 2000), which states outright that LOTE has an important role to play in the curriculum given the contribution it makes to supporting the “literacy development of English” (p. 9).

While this alone provides some insight into the political systems at work for rethinking how the curriculum goals of Japanese might be realised in practice, there is also a need to consider policies that have further shaped the context for
‘teaching in the middle years of a Victorian high school’ itself.

Teaching in the middle years of a Victorian high school. The Victorian Department of Education began its Middle Years Reform and Development project (MYRAD) in the late 1990s, in line with national initiatives to counter student alienation and disengagement in the upper primary and early secondary years of schooling. A plan for state-wide reform was then announced in late 2000, concurrent with the State government targets for Education:

1. To reach or exceed national benchmarks levels for reading, writing and numeracy by 2005,
2. To have ninety percent of students to complete Year 12 (or its equivalent) by 2010, and
3. To increase students aged 15-19 in rural and regional Victoria by six percent by 2005.

(Victorian Department of Education, Employment & Training, 2001, p. 3)

The strategy for school reform advocated by MYRAD was a whole school approach that involved changes to the three interrelated areas of curriculum, pedagogy, and school organisation, with the central focus being a thinking-oriented, rather than subject-based, approach to teaching and learning. In particular, the focus was to be on the development of key cognitive skills (e.g., Bloom, 1956) and fundamental generic competencies (such as literacy, numeracy, problem solving, and critical thinking) through a variety of curriculum areas, rather than focusing on the content of the subject-matter itself.

Following from, and consistent with, the thinking-oriented curriculum, the Department similarly argued that teaching in the middle school embrace thinking-centred pedagogies, as exemplified in the following extract from a professional development module for teachers in the middle years:

It is important to use [thinking-based] strategies that cater simultaneously for
the range of learners. These include: mind-mapping (which uses both left and
right brain processes), open-ended tasks or inquiry learning (which promote
constructivism, and allow students to function at the level and in the manner
specific to himself/herself as a learner), or strategies that provide choice. One
successful approach to providing choice is the learning centre, a very
successful version of which utilizes both Bloom’s Taxonomy of Cognitive
Processes (Dalton & Smith, 1986) and Multiple Intelligence Theory
(Gardner, 1983) as organizing principles, and presents a wide variety of
activities, of which students complete only a selection, chosen in negotiation
with the teacher. This structure caters for the highly varied interests and
levels of development of young adolescents, provides room for student
choice and input, and fosters independent learning. (Victorian Department of
Education & Training, 2002a, §2)

The (re)organisation of schools was also identified as an important aspect of the
middle years reform initiative if innovations in curriculum and pedagogy were
expected to be successful in practice. The Department encourages, for example,
interdisciplinary team teaching to reduce the number of teachers students have
contact with, so that both teachers and students have opportunities to develop a
more personal knowledge of each other (Victorian Department of Education &
Training, 2002b). Similarly, subject teachers have had to rethink their own
pedagogy, and school organisation in relation to other subjects to ensure that thinking skills and
learning strategies are now integrated across the curriculum as a coherent whole
(Victorian Department of Education & Training, 2002c). Likewise, another
significant aspect of school organisational reform has been the need for schools to
identify and foster productive partnerships in relation to the needs of their
immediate community to enable students to see the relevance of what is taught in
schools with their own lives (Victorian Department of Education & Training,
2003).

Microgenetic Analysis

Having considered the social, cultural, and historic context within which Elle’s
activity as a Japanese teacher in the middle years of a Victorian high school takes
place – with its emphasis on the primacy of English literacy (and thus a diminished
emphasis on languages other than English), and the development of core, generic
competences (over an emphasis on discipline-specific competencies and outcomes)
– it is interesting to reveal that the microgenetic analysis indicated a teaching style
that seemed inconsistent with how language teacher practice is theorised in the
language teacher education literature. This was despite the fact that Elle was a
recent graduate of a language teacher education program and had been employed at
her school to be a (Japanese) language teacher.

While it is difficult to offer a concise set of methodological principles as to what
constitutes good, language teaching given that we have moved into what some now
describe as a postmethod condition (Kumaravadivelu, 1994), it is generally
acknowledged that language teaching is considered to be most effective when
teachers assume a ‘communicative’ orientation. That is, language teaching
approaches in which teachers emphasise:

- opportunities for target-language use for meaningful purposes;
- expressing meaning rather than accuracy of form;
- the ability to use language rather than knowledge about language;
- the use of (seemingly) authentic material, contexts and tasks.

(Pachler, 2005, pp. 11-12)

However, Elle’s classroom activity at the microgenetic level of analysis seemed
entirely inconsistent with these general principles for language teacher practice.
Instead, and in almost direct contrast to the conceptualisation of ‘good’ language
teaching summarised above, Elle typically:

- used very little target language for genuine classroom communication
- concentrated on target language form and structure, over meaning or the use of a
whole-language communicative approach
- taught about the target language (i.e., a focus on analysis over use)
- relied on repetition and practice as a strategies for language learning
- used few authentic materials, contexts, and tasks.

However, although Elle’s classroom practice appears inconsistent with how language teaching is understood from a theoretical perspective as to what constitutes good practice, it must be remembered that for her – as the subject of her own contextually specific system of activity – this approach to language teaching was ‘the right approach’ in this context. That is, and we emphasise that we are not suggesting that Elle’s approach was necessarily an appropriate method of teaching language. Elle’s teaching style did satisfy the particular activity system within which she practised as a ‘language teacher’.

To give one brief example, Elle explained that by teaching Japanese in this way, she felt she was then able to fulfil certain obligations that she had towards her wider (school) community. She spoke, for example, of the importance of contributing towards a “whole school” approach to discipline, since she saw discipline and classroom management as being “everybody’s responsibility” (Interview 2). By teaching Japanese in this way – without an emphasis on the use of target language to develop communicative competence – Elle was able to manage most of the classroom activity in English. At this point, it might seem reasonable to argue that the classroom discipline could have been administered in Japanese since this is a technique that seems to work well in contexts such as immersion classrooms. However, when Elle’s activity system is examined as a whole, it also became clear that local community and parental attitudes towards having students develop communicative competence in Japanese was not especially strong, either: both at the microgenetic level (i.e., Elle’s immediate context for practice), as well as at a broader societal level from which Elle’s activity has emerged (see the earlier discussion of the cultural-historic domain). When asked to reflect on a lesson she had just been observed teaching, for instance, Elle explains:

E: I don’t think we’ve got the community completely on side. We’ve still got a lot of people out there in the community who will say to their kids, “Don’t worry about German and Japanese”; that they’re not relevant. So there’s only Maths, your English, or your Science. So we’re fighting against that to some degree, that they’re not able to value LOTE. And try as we might to articulate the benefits of learning LOTE, and we’re going to do that much more actively next year, it’s been very difficult for us to reach some families. And so a lot of kids will be sitting there going, well ... and I have a classic example in another class of a boy who, from the beginning of second semester, every single lesson, kept saying to me, “Why am I doing this? Why am I having to learn LOTE?”. And I was going over the same ground over and over again, which got very tedious.

R: And that came through from parents, you’re saying?

E: I think that came through from parents. You know: “My dad or my mum doesn’t see any value in me learning Japanese”.

R: Okay.

E: So that’s one thing which is really quite detrimental to what we’re trying to do, and this is why I think a lot of these kids- why it’s difficult to get them to do any homework. They’re ... it’s not just Japanese homework, but it’s other homework, it’s actually that culture of bettering themselves that doesn’t necessarily exist amongst ... it certainly doesn’t exist amongst every single family from where these students come. These are people who aren’t terribly well educated themselves, and they don’t value education in the way that you and I do. And so language is seen as a very elitist academic type of thing, and they just don’t see it as important. (Interview 2)

In other words, the local community within which Elle’s teacher activity takes place (that is, the community which the objects of her activity (her students) are from and live their day-to-day lives), as well as the attitude of the students’ parents themselves, further influenced how Elle chose to use (or, in this case, avoid) the target language as a mediating tool for her own classroom activity. Moreover, as intimated in the extract above, the influence of the community and the attitudes of these parents contributed to what Elle described as a sense of “resistance” her students had to “learning Japanese” (Interviews 1 & 3), which was yet another reason she gave for choosing English as her primary tool to mediate classroom activity over Japanese, even though she is, ostensibly, a Japanese language teacher.

Another brief but instructive example was the nature of the division of labour that existed within the activity system that Elle had been positioned in as subject. In short, the planning processes at her school necessitated an integrated and collaborative whole school approach (which also reflected the cultural-historic context from which this activity system emerged, as we discussed earlier with respect to middle school reforms). This meant Elle was often expected to plan and develop units of work for Japanese with teachers of other Key Learning Areas who had little or no experience in language teaching. As a result, the language lessons Elle taught tended to be very ‘generic’ in nature. In contrast to language lessons with discipline-specific objectives to develop students’ Japanese communicative competence, for example, the objectives which formed the basis of Elle’s language lessons often focused on skills for ‘thinking’ and ‘learning’, as a means of developing students’ more general skills in (English) literacy and learning behaviours.
how teachers, as subjects of their activity systems (i.e., of ‘teaching’), have made sense of their role within their systems, and how they then choose to act within it.

Surprisingly, the analysis revealed that Elle’s activity, as a language teacher, was markedly different to how language teaching is conceptualised within the second and foreign language teacher education literature (i.e., a focus on the development of students’ communicative competence in the target language (see, for example, Macaro, 1997; Nunan, 1991, 1999; Savignon, 2002)). In contrast, Elle’s explanations of her activity lacked any significant reference to communicative goals or outcomes. To the contrary, there were numerous examples of English being broken down into structural components to be studied, analysed, and used in various activities for the development of thinking, group work and learning skills, and grammatical points and other stylistic features of English being explained and compared with Japanese in an effort to enhance the students’ competence in first language literacy.

However, as we argued earlier, this is not to suggest that Elle was doing something ‘wrong’. Rather, the analysis revealed that the discursive construction of her activity, together with ongoing instances of microgenetic activity within which Elle was positioned as a classroom teacher, created a completely different type of activity and outcome she was expected to satisfy as a ‘language teacher’. Elle was satisfying the system of activity she found herself positioned within in this particular context.

Interestingly, despite having been trained as a language teacher and employed at her school to teach language, when asked about how she sees her own role within her school, Elle stated emphatically that, “I don’t see myself as a Japanese teacher” (Interview 1). Rather, Elle sees her role as being that of a middle years teacher”, and assumes, with that, the associated notions of what it means to be a teacher in the middle school; namely, “teaching the content”.

IDENTITY-IN-ACTIVITY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

While we have not foregrounded the issue of professional learning in this chapter so that we could focus on the matter of teacher identity, we would like to move towards our conclusion by briefly returning to comments made in our introduction: that there is still much to know of language teachers and their work, “what they do, how they think, what they know, and how they learn” (Freeman & Richards, 1996, p. 1).

This study has revealed that what the literature often holds to be ‘good practice’ (and what, therefore, constitutes the basis for teachers’ professional learning), may not necessarily resonate with the reality of teaching as a sociocultural activity. That is, this study has demonstrated that teachers’ activity unfolds within a very real social and cultural context at both a cultural-historic level (in terms of the discursive construction of that activity), as well as the microgenetic level of immediate school and classroom practices. This has a significant effect on how teachers, in turn, understand their own roles which leads them to ascribe certain identities while rejecting others (e.g., ‘a middle years generalist’ cf. ‘Japanese language specialist’).

We would therefore argue the importance of producing and disseminating knowledge intended for teachers’ professional learning – whether pre-service or in-service – that remains mindful of the very real contexts within which that knowledge is to be applied. Without doing so, the knowledge base of teachers’ professional learning runs the risk of losing relevance to teachers who otherwise fail to identify its relevance to their own contexts for activity.

NOTES

1 Our thanks to Alex Kostogriz for his comments on a draft version of this chapter and, in particular, this ingenious play on words. Here, we also acknowledge a parallel with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) earlier notion of “persons-in-activity” (p. 51), a concept expanded upon in Lemke’s (1997) work on the ecocultural relationship between the biological organism, the social subject, and personal identity, which bears some overlap with our discussion in this chapter. In proposing the concept of ‘identity-in-activity’, however, our attention is directed towards how activity might be conceived of and used as a unit of analysis for understanding the relationship between activity and the formation of identity.

2 Pseudonyms have been used throughout the chapter to refer to the teacher, her school, and her students to protect anonymity.

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