

## **The Self-Defining Other – ESL Teachers Talk about their Students**

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### **Abstract**

*Teacher talk about their students is a powerful way of understanding the unstated ways in which teacher identity and work is constructed. This paper draws on the work of Bakhtin, Hall and Pennycook in an analysis of the part played by student as self-defining other. Data is drawn from a series of unstructured interviews with English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers working in the Victorian State secondary system and is part of doctoral research into ESL teacher identity and work. This section of the study – with its focus on teacher constructions of student identity – comes from the second of three case study interviews with nine ESL teachers of varying degrees of experience working in a range of different settings. Teacher perceptions of student identity influence the teacher identities available to these teachers. Their construction of their students in turn constructs them. Interaction between student ways of being and teacher ways of being may be complementary and enable preferred enactments of teacher identities. Mismatch may result in dissonance in the teacher-student relationship resulting in teacher behaviour at odds with preferred teacher identities.*

Identity as a tool for educational research provides an effective way of understanding the ways in which people work in, and experience, schools. Gee (2000:99-100) argues that identity is “an important analytic tool ... [which can be used] for studying important issues of theory and practice in education”. Notions of identity are central to the way in which these ESL teachers think about themselves and their work. They talk about the importance of feeling congruence between themselves and their work, the ways in which their values are able to be activated in their work. To express this notion in concrete terms, people who feel that they are ‘one who cares for others’ are able to demonstrate this in their work as ESL teachers. The similarities in the ways in which ESL teachers describe their work suggest that ESL teacher identities are, at least notionally, shared group constructs.

Constructing identity for oneself through an inner sense of self, the external presentation as an individual or as a member of a group, always involves constructing the identity of the other - that which is not me or us - which by its difference allows us to understand ourselves. The role played by, or assigned to, the other is fundamental to understandings of identity, both group and self. Power is present in all representations of self and other, as it is always present in conditions of unequal relations, relations such as those which exist between teacher and student, teacher and administrator.

Bakhtin argues that all meaning is constructed through the dialogic meeting between self and other. Identity is not something which exists outside dialogue and is revealed to the world through interaction with the other. It is brought into being through dialogue and can only exist in this process of interaction with other speaking beings:

It [dialogue] is not a means for revealing, bringing to the surface the already-made character of a person; no, in dialogue a person not only shows himself

[sic] outwardly, he becomes for the first time that which he is – and we repeat, not only for others, but for himself as well. ... Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence. (Bakhtin 1984:252)

This dialogue may be internal, between varying aspects of self, or between self and imagined other, but it is the dialogic interaction between two voices which, Bakhtin argues, creates identity. In this way, ESL teacher identity is called into being in dialogue, either real or imagined, with those who are part of this construction.

Hall (1997a) also explores the role of the other in identity construction and relationships of power. He describes the process of infantilization in relationships of power where the less powerful is reduced to the status of child:

This 'infantilization' of difference is a common representational strategy for both men and women. (Women athletes are still widely referred to as 'girls'. And it is only recently that many Southern US whites have ceased referring to grown black men as 'Boy!' while the practice still lingers in South Africa). (1997a:262)

He suggests that it is the positioning assigned to the other which establishes the positioning of the self. In creating the other in particular ways of being, we also create ourselves. The process by which students are assigned possibilities for being is a dual process of identity construction. Student ways of being also define teacher ways of being. Pennycook (1998) uses the Robinson Crusoe/Man Friday relationship in an exploration of the construction of civilized man and savage other, a construction which allows the other existence only in terms of deficit. Man Friday brings nothing to the relationship. He is a blank page, reliant on Crusoe for appropriate ways of being.

In each example the other is reduced, a child in interaction with adult, a 'savage' to be created only in terms of the colonizing self and each time the other reflects back, constructing both participants in the interaction. In the same way that Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday are co-constructions, ESL teachers both construct and are constructed by a multiplicity of others – teachers, administrators, students and the wider society. ESL students are fundamental to this construction of ESL teacher identity. It is not possible to conceive of teacher in the absence of the defining other, the student. The construction of ESL student identities impact on ESL teacher identities in that the ways teachers imagine their students to be influence the ways of being available to them as teachers. Interaction between student and teacher ways of being may be complementary in that student identity may enable an enactment of teacher identity which is a preferred identity. However there may be mismatch between teacher construction of ESL teacher identity and that made available by students. The enactment of ESL teacher as caring parent requires the ESL student to be compliant in the role of needy child. If this role is rejected, mismatch between teacher identity and teacher-constructed student identity may force teacher behaviour at odds with preferred teacher identity and cause conflict in the teacher-student relationship.

The data for this paper comes from interviews with two teachers, Tom and Vicky. (A total of nine teachers participated in this stage of the research in which teachers were invited to talk about their students). The data is first treated as transparent as the teachers describe their students. Then the focus shifts to the language used in construction of the student other and the implications of these constructions for

teacher identity. This analysis of language as opaque includes the use of student descriptors, the language of teacher-student interaction as reported by these teachers, self-descriptors and shifts in pronoun use. In each instance the focus is determined by patterns of language use particular to that conversation.

### **Tom**

Tom discusses a small group of year Nine students, six Vietnamese boys and one Samoan boy. Tom chooses to discuss these students because he sees them as typical of an increasing number of students in schools of high migrant density. The majority of these boys have been resident in Australia for an extended period of time and most have been part of the Australian education system since the beginning of primary school. Attempts to trace their educational history met with limited success but Tom has been able to establish a pattern of disruption – *“they had a string of seven ESL teachers last year”* and a shared primary school.

Despite the length of time these boys have been in Australia Tom believes that they have made limited progress with learning English:

They speak lexicalised speech and pay very little attention to form. Yawning chasms in their vocabulary. ... They're literate at a very basic level. But they're not interested in reading or writing anything at any length. ... They speak Vietnamese non-stop and when they speak English it's with an accent. ... When they don't know a word they just don't worry about it. They go for gist. If there are vocabulary items that are beyond them, [they] take a guess and then don't worry.

He suggests that this lack of progress in language learning is not seen as an issue by other teachers who are more concerned with behaviour and class control:

Apart from the fact they speak L1 [Vietnamese] the whole time in all classes, they're probably less of a problem than other kids acting out. ... They [other teachers] don't seem to worry much.

Tom has had little success in motivating these students. Attempts to engage them in active learning through increased use of multi-media have been largely unsuccessful:

They were happy to do that [but] I gave them a progress test after two or three weeks break ... and even the brightest one had by that time forgotten. ... I think their attention is on their social life.

There is little that is positive in the student descriptors in this discussion of Tom's students. The few individual descriptors focus on student weakness. One student is *“incredibly slow”*. Another *“seems OK on a conversational level”*, positive assessment of oral language ability qualified by the use of *“seems”*. One student's ability to function in the wider society is seen as *“street cunning”*. This individual descriptor is extended to become a group descriptor which threatens the educational success of these students – *“it's that kind of street cunning that undermines their high level stuff all the way through”*. A student regarded as sufficiently advanced to return to mainstream English *“has a kind of street level adulthood about him, sort of straight talking in a way”*. Again the positive descriptor is modified. The 'adulthood' is 'street level'. The 'straight talking' is 'sort of ... in a way'. Despite these modifiers, this student is positively positioned in contrast to another who has also returned to mainstream English:

I said to the English teacher don't let him sit next to another Vietnamese student who conned his way into the ESL class for a few weeks and yapped his head off in Vietnamese.

Group descriptors are equally negative with similar modification of positive descriptors. The Vietnamese students operate as a supportive friendship group:

They are very tight socially ... extremely close, which is nice to see but I think it has negative effects on their attitude to developing their skills in English.

Tom later commented that he did not regard 'street cunning' as negative. He saw it as an essential survival skill for these students and admired their ability to negotiate their way through the complexities of an unsympathetic and unsupportive host society.

The students "*talk Vietnamese non-stop*". Their English is "*accented and it's as if they're signaling their identification*". The validity of this 'identification' which Tom positions as 'identification as Vietnamese' is called into question in an extended discussion of the cultural alienation seemingly experienced by one student on a return trip to Vietnam:

Given their strong identification it's interesting the gaps in their knowledge and experience of their own culture ... the student was deeply shocked [by the difference between Australia and Vietnam]. He seemed to have very limited experience of his own customs. ... He was deeply alienated ... couldn't cope with that at all.

The students' English language skills – "*they speak fairly fluently*" – are survival skills – "*they've found a way to survive through that lexicalised speech*". Their ability to operate socially is based on their physical appeal, an appeal to which Tom is immune – "*they're cute in other people's eyes*". Students are "*friendly in an off hand way*" but Tom is blocked from any significant role as a group member:

I often comment on the running conversations of the Vietnamese. They just look blank at me and I said to them once 'there are two people in this room who don't speak that language. You are cutting them out of the group'. The answer was 'we are the group'. So the Samoan guy [the only non-Vietnamese student in the class] doesn't exist.

Neither does Tom but this is a statement not made.

Verbs used to describe first language use change in the course of conversation. Initially verbs are neutral, even if the modifying adverb is not – students "*talk Vietnamese non stop*". As the conversation progresses, this phrase becomes gradually more negative. First it is "*chatter in Vietnamese non stop*", then "*yapping away in Vietnamese*", student conversation reduced to the level of animal noise. (Tom rejects this as a 'too literal interpretation' of his words, words spoken at the end of a long and tiring day.)

The only other student in the class, a Samoan boy from New Zealand, is depicted in similarly negative terms:

He's just incredibly laid back. I mean you have to find a legitimate reason for him to walk every now and again, especially when you have a double period, because it's [the classroom] a bit like a cage.

The language of teacher interaction with this group is one of struggle, limited success and frustration. Tom *"had to drag it [information] out of him"*. Tom is *"trying to separate students, trying to get [them] to work independently"*. Attempts to contact parents are unsuccessful – *"I wanted to – wanted to .... But ..."*. Tom has *"several goes at"* one student for not having a library card. This was clearly unsuccessful – *"why hasn't he got a library card?"* Class work is a gamble in which Tom holds the losing hand – *"no matter how much I up the ante, it doesn't really make a difference"*. But despite this lack of success Tom persists – *"I wonder [why]. I mean they're there. You've got to do something with them"*.

The ESL teacher identity available to Tom in interaction with these students:

Monster ... stark staring mad and totally unreasonable ... One of them said 'How come you're the only teacher who corrects our English? How come you're the only one who ever comments on meaning?'

This role as the teacher who 'corrects English' and 'comments on meaning' is fundamental to Tom's ESL teacher identity. Much of the discussion concerns the students' English language and Tom's attempts to push them to improve and extend their existing language skills. He constructs the desired student other as 'learner'. This construction of student as learner has implications for student behaviours which are expected. Tom's criticisms of these students for what he sees to be inappropriate behaviour suggest what is expected in Tom's construction of the student other. These students *"pay no attention to form"* and have no interest in *"reading or writing anything at length"*. They seem not to worry about their limited skills and are unwilling to use English. The opposite of this unwelcome student behaviour is the desired student other – keen to learn, attentive to form, concerned to do well and willing to use the target language. This student other as learner allows enactment of Tom's desired ESL identity, that of pedagogue. He is able to be the knowing other, instructing and skilling the eager learner in what, for Tom at least, is the core business of ESL teacher work – the teaching and learning of English.

## **Vicky**

Vicky describes the small group of ESL students with whom she works as being *"very different to the regular type of mainstream student"*:

These kids have a different angle on life. They've seen different things. They've experienced different things. Their priorities are different. ... They're more ambitious. And in many ways they're more positive about learning.

There is some contrast between Vicky's comments above in reference to ESL students in general and her comments as she discusses individual students. She is concerned about two Serbian girls who have done little work in the second half of the year. Vicky is concerned that poor exam results will prevent them continuing on to tertiary

study. She contrasts the behaviour of these girls with that of another girl in the class, also from Serbia:

She's going to be one of my top A students in ESL. She's just brilliant. She speaks so many languages ... she's doing German, French plus English plus her native tongue.

A number of students in the class are from the former Yugoslavia and Vicky is aware of the potential for political conflict in class. She deals with this by refusing to discuss the issue:

In the class room I normally talk about where they're from, but it's just been an unusual sort of turn of events lately and I don't seem to want to talk about their background just in case there's a little bit of conflict.

Vicky's construction of the ESL student other as different leads to the construction of a different student-teacher relationship:

I just find I have a very different relationship with these ESL kids too. I find myself telling them stories that I wouldn't imagine myself telling students about myself or something personal, but it just makes it much more realistic for them and they can relate to it. Maybe because of my cultural background as well.

The ESL students are encouraged to see Vicky as she sees herself, that is as someone to whom they can 'relate' with similar background and experiences as their own. She positions herself as a member of the ESL class, aligning herself with the students. Tension between desire for inclusion in the student group and awareness of her teacher identity as distinct from this is signaled by pronoun shifts. Vicky moves between use of the inclusive pronoun 'we', as she positions herself as one with the students, and use of the first person pronoun 'I', as awareness of teacher identity is foregrounded:

Often I'm concerned about doing too much talking and having conversations with them and not enough of the actual work. In an ESL class you're not just learning about this novel or that English or that grammar or this structure, you're also – we might have a bit of a whinge about something that happened at school or something that happened at home or something on the news. Things like that. So we often just talk about all sorts of things and I'm often looking at the time and thinking maybe we should be on the topic. ... We're a small class so we have the opportunity to be heard.

The ESL teacher identity which Vicky constructs for herself is ESL teacher as friend. This in turn means that the ESL students are constructed as friends, rather than students, a construction which at least one student seems happy to accept:

One ESL student that I absolutely adored and I'm [still] in contact with her. I ring her and we keep saying we're going to go out as friends, not just teacher-student.

That ESL teacher as friend is problematic is made clear in Vicky's report of an incident involving one of the Serbian girls in her class. A classroom dispute over

what Vicky saw to be inappropriate clothing – a T-shirt with political slogans – saw Vicky change her ESL teacher positioning from friend to authority figure. Vicky made her positioning explicit as she called upon school rules to reinforce her stance. In this extract, the inclusive pronoun refers to Vicky as one with other teachers, rather than Vicky as one with her ESL students:

She wouldn't do it [remove the T-shirt] so I had to send her away. That fitted in with the kind of conduct [followed by teachers] because if the kids aren't in school uniform we have the right to send them to get changed and come back.

Since this conflict “*it hasn't been quite right between the two of us*”. Vicky has been unable to return to her preferred version of ESL teacher identity. She remains positioned as other than friend. She is also denied shared cultural identity with the students. Vicky's ESL teacher identity is one constructed on shared background and experiences with her students. This cultural identity as migrant is part of Vicky's ESL teacher identity which allows her empathy with her students - “*I know what it's like not to speak the language or understand how things work*”. The student construction which Vicky reports constructs her as Australian and other to the migrant group:

She's often commented about Australians being too lenient and being soft and having it in for the Serbians and I guess she sees me as part of that too.

Vicky also positions herself as teacher as authority figure rather than as friend in her relationship with this student, aligning herself with other staff members:

I spoke to a couple of other teachers and they also had sort of conflicting relationships with her. ... This girl made a comment to me about teachers. ... She felt that one of the teachers wasn't dressing appropriately. ... She [also] mentioned something about teachers having too much power. ... Some teachers being more lenient on students, having a better understanding and some teachers not being understanding of ESL students. So she's made comments like that. Of course I've defended my colleagues and myself.

The importance placed on appropriate dress is also an aspect of identity construction. Identity is signalled to others through dress and behaviour. The student's t-shirt is not part of Vicky's construction of student other. She is uneasy about discussion of politics, avoiding issues in class that may result in disagreements and confrontation between students. Appropriate student dress for Vicky is school uniform. The student also has an understanding of appropriate dress for teachers and is critical of teachers who do not conform to her expectations. Power is also an issue in this incident. If Vicky is ESL teacher as friend, her power is limited. By positioning herself as teacher as authority figure, she is able to call on the discipline structures of the school – “*we have the right*”. That the student is aware of the inequality of power in the student-teacher relation is also apparent – *teachers [have] too much power*”.

In a similar incident involving other students, Vicky's reaction was to accept their criticism as valid and confront the teacher on their behalf. With this student, criticism of teachers is rejected as an attack on Vicky as one of the teacher group.

Descriptors used for this student are negative. She is “*very outspoken*”, has “*a chip on her shoulder*”, “*very strong willed*”. Other negative descriptors are attributed to students rather than given as Vicky’s own opinion:

I know that other students in the class perceive her as a little too arrogant and very single-minded about things.

The conflict between ESL teacher as authority figure and ESL teacher as friend has resulted in a loss of agency for Vicky. She is undecided, unable to choose between ways of being which may resolve the issue:

I don’t know what line to take with them. Whether I take a firm or a sympathetic stance on these issues I don’t know. I’ve tried everything and it doesn’t seem to be working. ... I think maybe it’s me not effectively communicating with them.

Vicky’s preferred ESL teacher identity is one which positions her as separate from, and different to, other teachers, aligned with the ESL students in the school, students with whom she identifies very closely:

I just feel that if I’m an ESL person, then I’m an ESL person and these are the services that I provide throughout the school. I guess it’s part of my job description even though it’s not there in black and white. ... I was never an ESL student but I do know what it’s like. I can feel what it’s like with [a] different cultural background, struggling with so many other cultural things in life and life itself and adolescent woes and then having to deal with this other language thing as well. So I’m there and I can help.

The construction of ESL teacher as friend is central to Vicky’s ESL teacher identity. It is also a construction which can be problematic when placed in conflict with other aspects of her teacher identity.

## **Discussion**

The ESL teacher identity constructed in discussion of the ESL student other varies according to the individual teacher involved and the contexts within which they work. These contexts of place include the school, the ESL program, relationships with other staff and, most importantly, the ESL students themselves as these students are understood to be by the teachers. Despite these differences of person and place, there are some general patterns arising from this data. The ESL teachers all construct themselves as ‘helpers’ with responsibility for both immediate student progress and future success and happiness. A close teacher-student relationship is seen as fundamental to this progress, with teachers such as Vicky placing great emphasis on close emotional bonding with their students. There is awareness of external standards of teaching behaviour. These may be formal standards related to student assessment, such as those which concern teachers in their work with Year 12 students. They may be shared ways of being as an ESL teacher based on implicit understandings of appropriate teaching strategies. Tom signals these shared ways of being in reference to his work in the ESL classroom.

There is also concern to regard all ESL students positively, to construct all students as 'ideal' – hardworking, enthusiastic, open to overtures of friendship and cognisant of the efforts being made on their behalf. Students who reject this identity construction in turn risk rejection and negative interpretation of their behaviour, as teachers choose to focus their attention on students who are more responsive to the role of ideal student which has been constructed for them. Teachers who are less open in this rejection of the non-ideal ESL student struggle to maintain their preferred ESL teacher identity and to reconstruct student behaviour in ways which make this possible. Another aspect of ESL teacher identity is the perception of self as able to effect positive change for students. This can be denied by student refusal to be the ideal ESL student as has happened with Tom.

The ESL teacher identities constructed by this process of reflection from ESL student other as constructed by these teachers, position ESL teachers as administrator, helper, friend, parent, pedagogue, skilled professional and knowing other. That the enactment of these constructions of ESL teacher identity is dependent on context is apparent in the identities which some of these teachers feel have been imposed upon them. Vicky is denied membership of the ESL student group, a denial that refuses acknowledgment of her sense of self as migrant. The identity Tom feels has been constructed for him by his students is that of cranky old man – “*a monster ... stark staring mad and totally unreasonable*”. This is not an identity which sits well with Tom's sense of self as ESL teacher. It is also one at odds with the ways of being he sees available to him in contact with other groups of ESL students.

Understandings of teacher identity such as the understandings which come from this study are important because it is only in understanding the elements which construct work identities that we are able to articulate the nature of the work as it is understood by the doers of that work. Such understandings are also important because the ways of being available to us impact on the ways of being available to others. We are all part of the on-going construction of identities, our own and others, identities intimately related to the division of societal goods and services. Teacher constructions of student identity play a powerful part in determining the ways of being available to both student and teachers and it is only by explicit expression of these constructions that they are made available for examination, critique and change.

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