Identity and language teacher education:  
The potential for sociocultural perspectives in researching language teacher identity  
Russell Cross, Monash University

Draft paper presented at the symposium Languages, Teaching, and Education:  

Abstract

The knowledge base upon which language teacher education relies has tended to confine studies of identity to language learners and learning (e.g., Ricento, 2005; Norton & Toohey, 2002), rather than to studies of language teachers or teaching. Thus, although I concur with Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson’s (2005) call for further research on language teacher identity, as well as their assertion that it take into account both “poststructural and postmodern sensitivities to discourse and agency that the theory of the image-text provides [as well as] the nuanced conception of learning in social settings that community of practice theory offers” (p. 40), this paper problematises the “identity-in-discourse” and “identity-in-practice” (p. 39) dichotomy they offer for theorising language teacher identity. Instead, I consider the potential of a framework for understanding language teacher identity that draws on Vygotskian sociocultural and activity theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Leontiev, 1981; Engeström, 1987), in the notion of “identity-in-activity”.

Introduction

The issue I explore in this paper had its origins in an earlier study of language teaching which was concerned with understanding what language teachers “actually do” in their classrooms (Cross, 2006). Perhaps not surprisingly, the study found a schism between the theory which informs the knowledge base of language teacher education (LTE) and the actual practice of language teachers in classroom. However, rather than simply identifying the theory/practice divide, the study was able to trace the genesis of the problem to its sociohistoric origins through the use of Vygotskian sociocultural theory as a framework for genetic analysis.

The earlier study was able to establish that the nature of classroom language teacher practice was closely associated with the broader discursive domain within which language teachers were positioned as the subject of their (sociocultural) activity. In particular, it explicated how classroom language teaching, in practice, is influenced by the nature of the very real social, cultural, historic, and political contexts within which teachers are expected to perform their role.

While it might come as a surprise to those with backgrounds in the area of general teacher education, the influence of context has often been ignored within language teacher education. Studies of second language acquisition (SLA) – the knowledge base upon which LTE has historically relied – has tended to view the classroom as an acontexual “experimental laboratory” (Breen, 1985, p. 137) and, dominated by a psycho-cognitive view of acquisition, the process of (language) learning was understood to be largely independent of external influence (Block, 2003). Although we have begun to recognise this to be a seriously deficient view of both learning and teaching, the legacy of the cognitive paradigm continues to permeate mainstream language teacher education with its focus on “methods” as (supposed) blueprints for language teacher practice (Crandall, 2000; Adamson, 2004).

The lack of awareness of context on language teaching and learning has meant that the knowledge base of language teacher education has subsequently tended to neglect the need to understand what language teachers, themselves, bring to the classroom. Indeed, the literature has only recently reasserted the “need to know more about language teachers: what they do, how they think, what they know, and how they learn. Specifically, we need to understand more about how language teachers conceive of what they do: what they know about language teaching, how they think about their classroom practices” (Freeman & Richards, 1996 in Valez-Rendon, 2002, p. 465). This has given rise

---

1 From January 2007, I will take up a new appointment at the University of Melbourne and correspondence should be addressed to the Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne VIC 3010.

2 My appreciation to Alex Kostogriz for suggesting this ingenious play on words, and also to Margaret Gearon for her comments on an earlier version of this paper.
to a related interest in the topic of language teacher identity which Varghese and her colleagues (2005) identify as an “emerging subject of interest” (p. 21) within the broader field of LTE. In their recent article on theorising language teacher identity, they conclude that future research will ultimately depend upon studies that account for conceptions of identity in relation to both practice and 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). (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 39)

While I agree with Varghese and her colleagues’ call for more studies of language teacher identity, and also the importance of considering identity both in terms of concrete practice as well as through discourse, there are two issues I wish to address in this paper. First, the problem that the “practice/discourse” dichotomy presents in its suggestion (whether implied or otherwise) that these two lines of inquiry might somehow be separable or independent and, second, the lack of any overarching meta-theoretical framework that unites these two conceptions.

My aim in this paper (which, I should stress, is still very much a thinking piece in progress), is to suggest a complementary theoretical framework that overcomes both of these problems by building on several key ideas from Vygotskian sociocultural theory and its related theory of activity (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Leontiev, 1981; Engeström, 1987). I will begin by outlining how sociocultural and activity theory is useful for conceptualising identity in a way that unifies practice with discourse, and then provide an example with data from a larger study of language teaching in the middle years of high school in Victoria, Australia (Cross, 2006). The paper concludes with a discussion on how this approach to understanding identity might be useful for resolving some of the problems mentioned earlier on the dissonance between the knowledge base of language teacher education, and the nature of language teachers’ activity in practice.

Identity-in-Activity

The fundamental premise of Vygotskian sociocultural theory is the idea that the mind develops through interaction with the world around us (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). A key concept within this framework is the notion of mediated activity: the idea that we do not act directly upon the world, but through the use of mediatory tools and various cultural artefacts (e.g., the language we use to communicate our ideas, and the implements we use to record them).

Within Vygotsky’s work, his focus remained on understanding the role of tools in the formation of thought and human development. Leontiev (1981) later expanded Vygotsky’s unit of analysis to include the broader context within which tools were used – the basis for activity theory. Activity theory can perhaps be best understood as moving away from a “world of objects”, to a world of social relations which constitute a context for the use of those objects (Lantolf & Appel, 1994, p. 16).

Engeström (1987) presents Leontiev’s concept of activity in the form of an “activity system” (Figure 1 below) to highlight the nature of the relationship between the subject, tools, and their object (i.e., the focus of their attention) in relation to the community, the rights and responsibilities which exist for members within that community (the division of labour), and the rules which govern the system as a whole:

![Figure 1. The structure of human activity (Engeström, 1987, p. 41).](image-url)
However, each of these constituent nodes of the system which form the activity, in the present, have pre-existing histories of their own. The implication here, then, is that any activity we observe in the present can only be understood with reference to the wider social, cultural, and historic context from which that system has emerged, giving rise to the Vygotskian principle of *genetic analysis*. As Vygotsky (1994) himself puts it, “behaviour can only be understood as the history of behaviour” (Blonsky). This idea is the cardinal principle of the whole method” (p. 70).

Vygotsky’s genetic framework of analysis is comprised of four levels – the phylogenetic, cultural-historic, ontogenetic, and microgenetic – which Cole and Engeström (1993) illustrate below in Figure 2, with the ellipse representing one specific event in time:

![Figure 2. Sociocultural domains of genetic analysis (Cole & Engeström, 1993, p. 20).](image)

In brief, phylogenetic analysis concerns the nature of human development over the course of evolution (i.e., the human as a natural or biological species), while the cultural-historic domain is concerned with the development of the “external” world (i.e., society and culture) within which human activity unfolds. Ontogenetic analysis shifts the focus from these two broader lines of development to that of the individual subject across the human lifespan. Ontogenesis, itself, is the culmination of momentary instances of microgenetic activity that the subject engages in on a continual basis with the world around him or her.

It is within the microgenetic domain of development that the teacher’s activity system occurs on daily basis in the classroom. From a sociocultural perspective, it is the foundation for defining who the (ontogenetic) subject “is” in relation to concrete, social practices. To use Varghese et al.’s (2005) conceptions of identity, it alludes to a sense of “identity-in-practice”. Microgenesis itself, however, can only be understood in relation to its own genesis, which means having to understand not only that which is observable now in terms of concrete, practical activity, but also understanding how that relates to the broader social, cultural, and historic context from which that system has emerged (i.e., the cultural-historic analysis of that activity). By focusing on activity as the primary unit of analysis in the notion of “identity-in-activity”, we therefore have a meta-theoretical framework that unites a concrete understanding of identity in the idea of microgenetic development (“identity-in-practice”), together with the discursive, cultural-historic construction of that identity (“identity-in-discourse”).

The next section of this paper illustrates an example of the application of this framework for understanding identity using data from a study of Elle⁵, a Japanese language teacher in the middle years of high school in Melbourne, Australia. However, before turning to an examination of Elle’s microgenetic data, I begin with a brief outline of the cultural-historic analysis from which Elle’s classroom activity has emerged.

**An example: The case of Elle**

*Elle’s cultural-historic domain for activity*

In this (truncated) analysis of Elle’s cultural-historic context, I focus on policy since I see this as the primary “tool” which has shaped the wider context for Elle’s individual activity at the classroom level. In saying this, I am not suggesting that that Elle’s activity is dictated by policy but, reflecting Vygotsky’s

---

⁵ Pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper to protect the anonymity of the participant.
own dialectic understanding of tools, I would argue that policies “carry with them both possibilities and constraints, contradictions and spaces” (Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992, p. 15). Indeed, Gale (1999) extends Ball’s (1994) idea of policy to suggest 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).

The two primary areas of policy which I see as relevant for the teaching of Japanese in the context that Elle has been positioned here 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**

Although the ostensible goal of Japanese in the Victorian curriculum is to have students learn how to “communicate in the target language” (Victorian Board of Studies, 2000, p. 5), the recent shift towards a focus on the “basics” – literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking – has eroded the place Japanese had as a subject with inherent value in its own right when it was first introduced as a key learning area (KLA) of the core curriculum in the mid-1990s.

As I have argued elsewhere (Cross, 2005), this shift had its beginnings in the reformulation of the *National Policy on Languages* (Lo Bianco, 1987) to *Australia’s Language* (Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education & Training, 1991) in the early 1990s, with the change in policy signalling a corresponding shift towards a utilitarian relationship between foreign language education and partisan economic policy under the then governing Australian Labour Party. Since replacing Labor in 1996, the Howard Liberal-National Coalition has seen a return to what Lo Bianco (2003) describes as “the primacy of English” (p. 25) in schools and, since then, arguments supporting the development of communicative language skills in Japanese and other foreign languages have significantly diminished. Instead, foreign languages have been repositioned within the curriculum as a useful support for other KLAs including, most notably, the development of (English) literacy (Liddicoat, 2002). 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 the importance of foreign languages in the curriculum lies in the contribution they make towards enhancing students’ “literacy development of English” (p. 9).

While this alone provides some insight into the broader political context which currently exists for rethinking how the curriculum goals of Japanese might be realised in practice, it is salient to consider the further influence of policies concerned specifically with the “teaching in the middle years of a Victorian high school” itself.

**Teaching in the middle years of a Victorian high school**

The Middle Years Reform and Development (MYRAD) Project began in Victoria in late 1990s to address the problem of student disengagement during early adolescence. By 2000, the government had initiated a state-wide plan for middle years reform which was announced in tandem with the government’s long-term goals 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 middle years reform strategy in Victoria is based on a whole school approach that involves the three interrelated areas of curriculum, pedagogy, and school organisation. Focusing on a thinking-orientated (in contrast to subject-based) approach to teaching and learning, the essence of the strategy is exemplified in the following extract from a professional development module for teachers:

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)

Similarly, the reorganisation of schools was also identified as being important if the innovations to curriculum and pedagogy were to be realised in practice. Interdisciplinary team teaching, for example, has been encouraged as a way of reducing the overall number of teachers that students come into contact with so that smaller teacher/student groups can develop closer relationships (Victorian Department of Education & Training, 2002b). Teachers have also had to rethink their own teaching area in relation to other KLAS to ensure that thinking and learning skills are now integrated across the curriculum as one coherent whole (Victorian Department of Education & Training, 2002c). There has also been an increased emphasis on the need for schools to foster productive partnerships with their immediate communities so that students can see the relevance of what is taught in schools with their own lives (Victorian Department of Education & Training, 2003).

**Elle's microgenetic domain for activity**

Having now briefly considered the cultural-historic domain within which Elle's activity as a teacher of Japanese in the middle years in Victoria takes place, it was interesting to see that the microgenetic analysis of Elle's individual classroom practice revealed a style of teaching that seemed entirely inconsistent with how language teacher practice is theorised in the language teacher education literature.

Although it is difficult to offer a set principles as to what constitutes “good language teaching” given that we have now entered an era that some have described as the “postmethod condition” (Kumaravadivelu, 1994), language teaching is generally understood to be most effective when teachers adopt a communicative orientation which has an emphasis on:

- 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)

In contrast, the microgenetic analysis of Elle's teacher activity in the classroom revealed:

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

(Cross, 2006)

It is essential to remember, however, that although Elle's practice seems entirely inconsistent with how language teaching is typically understood from the theoretical perspective that underpins LTE, this approach to language teaching was the “right” approach for Elle in this context. Put simply, her teaching style satisfied the particular activity system within which she was positioned “to be” the language teacher. Elle explained, for example, that by teaching Japanese this way, she was able to fulfil certain obligations she felt she had towards her wider school community, such as the importance of contributing towards a “whole school” approach to discipline (Interview 2). By teaching without an emphasis on using the target language (i.e., to develop communicative competence), Elle said she felt better able to manage classroom discipline and behaviour by using English.
Another example concerns the attitudes of the local community towards having students develop communicative competence in a foreign language. As Elle explained,

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 (in this case, the community within which the objects of her activity (her students) live their day-to-day lives), including the attitudes of the students’ parents themselves, have further influenced how Elle chose to use (or, in this case, avoid) the target language as a mediating tool for her classroom activity. Moreover, as intimated in the extract above, Elle also explained that community and parental attitudes contributed to what she felt was a sense of “resistance” that her students had towards “learning Japanese” (Interviews 1 & 3), which was yet another reason Elle gave for choosing English as her primary tool to mediate classroom activity over Japanese.

Another example relates to the nature of the division of labour which existed within the activity system that Elle had been positioned as subject. In short, the planning processes at her school necessitated an integrated and collaborative whole school approach. This meant that Elle was often expected to plan and develop units of work (for Japanese) with teachers from other KLAS who had little or no experience in language teaching. As a result, the focus of Elle’s language lessons tended to be very generic in nature, with objectives that were often concerned with “thinking” and “learning” as a way of developing her students’ more general skills in (English) literacy and learning behaviours.

Making sense of identity: Elle being ‘a Japanese language teacher’

Having approached the study of identity formation from the perspective of Vygotskian sociocultural theory, this paper has examined the “discursive” construction of identity in relation to how that was subsequently realised in “practice” at the microgenetic level of concrete, practical activity. The teacher’s identity resides in how they, as the subject of their activity system, makes sense of their role within that system and how they act within it.

---

1 Languages Other Than English (LOTE) is the acronym used in the Australian curriculum for foreign languages.
2 Given the specific scope and focus of the present paper, it is not my intention to engage in an extended discussion of agency here, except to emphasise that I am not suggesting that identity formation through activity is a unilateral process in which the activity system “dictates” the subject’s identity. Quite opposite: the subject of activity brings to that system his or her own experiences, history, and background (i.e., their ontogenesis) from which he or she then makes sense of the system and decisions on how to then act within it. While agency is therefore constrained (both 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)), such constraints are indicative of a notion of agency that is a dialectic between
The analysis of Elle’s activity revealed a markedly different style of teaching in comparison to how language teaching is generally theorised within the LTE literature. Whereas language teachers are assumed to have as their primary orientating focus the development of students’ communicative competence in the target language (Savignon, 2005), Elle’s explanations of her activity as a language teacher lacked any significant reference to such goals or outcomes.

In contrast, there were numerous examples of English being used to establish and maintain classroom order, and of Japanese being used as an object of analysis so that it could be compared with English to enhance students’ competency in first language literacy, as well as to develop more generic skills in thinking, learning, and group work.

However, as I emphasised earlier, this is not to suggest that Elle was therefore doing something “wrong”. Rather, the discursive construction of Elle’s activity as a language teacher, as well as the ongoing instances of microgenetic activity that she engages in at the classroom level in practice, created a completely different type of activity that she was expected to satisfy as the subject of that particular system. In short, by teaching the particular way she did, she satisfies the activity she has found herself positioned, given what it means “to be a Japanese teacher” within this particular context.

Implications

In moving towards a conclusion, I would like to return to the issue raised in the introduction of this paper: the relationship between the knowledge base of language teacher education and language teachers’ classroom practice. As this analysis clearly illustrates, the dissonance between the language teacher education and teachers’ actual practice is significant. How, then, might understanding language teacher identity be useful?

First, this study has revealed that what the literature often holds to be “good practice” (and what, by implication, therefore constitutes the basis for language teacher education), may not necessarily resonate with the reality of teaching as a socioculturally constructed activity which, instead, emerges from a very real social and cultural context that we cannot continue to ignore. An onus therefore lies with those involved in the production and dissemination of the research that informs the knowledge base of LTE to remain mindful of the contexts within which that knowledge is to be applied.

Still, this is problematic. How can we expect to address the multitude of different contexts that language teacher graduates might go on to encounter? A language teacher trained in teach Vietnamese in a community language school with large numbers students from Vietnames-Australian backgrounds will need different skills and knowledge in comparison to a teacher of English as a foreign language at a private language institute in Tokyo for adults learners and corporate clients. Indeed, even the “same” contexts are subject to continual change and transformation over time.

I believe, however, therein lies the problem. Debates over the knowledge base of LTE have typically centred around arguments of “what” to teach (i.e., content) (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, 2005; Yates & Muchisky, 2003; Tarone & Allwright, 2005), given that our focus, until the recent past at least, has been learners rather than teachers, resulting in a dearth of substantive literature that might otherwise represent a base of knowledge that describes (“good”) language teaching. However, what language teachers do, in practice, is not contingent on selecting the “right” content about how to teach language. Rather, “who language teachers are” – and, by extension then, “what language teaching is” – is grounded within, and emerges from, their contextual social, cultural, and historical circumstances.

In conclusion, I would therefore argue that the key to rethinking the knowledge base of LTE is less a matter of defining “what” language teachers need to know (although that remains a significant consideration, and a point to which I will return to later), than the need to educate language teachers to understand and be aware of the contexts within which they are positioned as language teachers, since this plays perhaps the most significant role in constructing what they then “do” in that role. This resonates with Varghese and Strinikus’s (2005) recent call for language teacher education to “specifically address how teachers can respond to, change, and even create policy” (p. 84).
This is not to suggest that a knowledge of SLA related research on what constitutes effective language teaching is not essential – to the contrary: such knowledge is invaluable for creating a basis from which teachers are then able to critique and respond to the contexts within which they have been positioned. However, by understanding the formation of language teacher identity, and especially the relationship this has for teachers’ classroom practice, it is clear that we need to rethink how that content knowledge of teaching can be infused with an understanding of the influence that teachers’ broader contexts have for classroom practice. To assume that content knowledge about language teaching, alone, can result in effective classroom practice is clearly a fallacy if we aim to improve the outcomes of language teacher education with regard to teachers’ classroom practice.

References


