

Identity Construction in a Remote Learning Context during the COVID-19 Pandemic: BA versus MA Students in a Teacher Training University

Abstract

The outbreak of Covid-19 has brought about a sudden shift from in-person to online classes. In such a remote teaching and learning context, the students were no longer able to meet their instructors and classmates in person. The current study aimed to investigate how the BA and MA students of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) constructed their identity at the onset of the academic year while introducing themselves. To this end, the recorded video files of 22 BA and 15 MA students were analyzed and the recurrent themes and moves were identified from a critical perspective. The results revealed several commonalities and discrepancies between the two groups in terms of the constituent discursive practices. The findings can have practical implications for reinforcing the acceptable patterns of identity construction in academic communities. Moreover, the results raise the educational programmers' consciousness about the significant role of the teaching and learning experiences in shaping the learners' identities and the importance of the classrooms as social places for shaping the learners' identities.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, identity construction, Teaching English as a foreign language.

Introduction

The outbreak of Covid-19 has brought about a sudden shift from in-person to online classes. The educational institutions were closed to avoid the spread of the disease (Zhu & Liu, 2020). As a result, the educational programs were rearranged and online platforms were used to continue the instructional procedures. Being located in new educational settings, the teachers and learners have faced numerous challenges and have been provided with ample opportunities (Mousavi, Saidi, & Mahmodi, 2021). Accordingly, a wide range of studies have focused on investigating the emergent remote teaching and learning experiences within the global pandemic (Toquero, 2020). In such a new and unknown context, the way the learners introduce and present themselves seems to be interesting.

Previously, the rapid globalization trend has redrawn the boundaries among various communities and has reshaped the learners' self-images (Lobaton, 2012). The immediate change in the mode of instruction has obviously accelerated the changes in identity construction and

reconstruction in the educational institutions across the world (Crawford et al., 2020). Learners as social beings are constantly involved in creating and establishing their identities in the classroom (Lobaton, 2012). The classroom is an environment where the learners are given the chance of interacting and communicating with their peers and reflecting on their own perceptions and practices (Tsui, 1995).

The term "identity" seems to be undeniably relevant in an interaction-laden environment like a classroom. This concept gains further importance when learning aims to develop one's ability to use another language to communicate with people in various communities (Zacharias, 2010). Acquiring and deepening one's understanding of the target language and culture clearly shadow the learning experiences in English as a foreign language (EFL) class (Lobaton, 2012). The existing literature has highlighted the significance of the EFL learners' identity (Zacharias, 2010).

Identity has been viewed differently and has been defined as a stable core self (Hall, 1996) as well as a dynamic construct (Block, 2007). Regardless of the wide range of definitions, it has been shown to have numerous dimensions (Norton, 2000). Numerous scholars conceived it as a construct which undergoes changes over time (Kramsch, 1993) and across various contexts (Lobaton, 2012). Evidently, identities do not exist in a vacuum and are the result of a complex interplay of factors in the classroom, and are discursively constructed (Le Page, 1986) to pinpoint who we are and what roles we play.

In the pre-pandemic period, the EFL students used to introduce themselves to the new classmates in in-person educational contexts. The abrupt shift to online learning has influenced the norms of communication. The teachers and learners no longer meet each other in person, and hence, they have to urgently seek for alternative strategies. This leads to new patterns of interaction. Viewing identities as a "complex, contradictory, and multifaceted" construct (Norton, 1995, p.419), which is supposedly context-bound and situation specific, the current study strove to explore the discursive strategies used by the undergraduate and postgraduate EFL students in a teacher training university. The study attempted to cast light on the way the students construct their identities at the onset of the academic year, when there is no chance of face-to-face interaction. The study further aimed to reveal the possible commonalities and discrepancies between the two groups of participants in terms of the identity construction strategies.

Method

The study adopted a mixed-method design. The participants of the study consisted of 22 undergraduate and 15 postgraduate students who started passing B.A and M.A courses in the academic year 2020-2021 following the university closure due to the pandemic. Their age ranged from 18 to 26. They were B.A and M.A students of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Shahid Rajaei Teacher Training University.

The participants were asked to record a video, introduce themselves, and share the information they would like their instructor and classmates to know. They were given a time limit of at most three minutes for recording their introduction file. They were asked to send the video files at their convenient time on WhatsApp. It is worth noting that this was a voluntary task assigned in these classes at the beginning of the academic year. The recorded video files were received and were analyzed by the researchers separately in terms of the recurrent themes adopting a critical genre and discourse analysis approach. The inter-coder reliability was calculated as 0.98. The sample quotations are presented. For the sake of considering ethical issues, the results of the analysis are presented anonymously. The percentage values were calculated and presented for the extracted themes.

Results and Discussion

The study aimed to explore the generic and discursive features of the recorded video files in which undergraduate and postgraduate students introduced themselves at the onset of the academic year when it was impossible for them to meet each other in person. The results are presented below and some examples are given for clarifying the extracted themes. In order to detect the differences between two groups of students' parlance, the introduction videos of 15 MA students and 22 BA students were coded. The results revealed a bundle of major similarities and some minor differences.

Greetings and introductions were among the vivid commonalities among the participants. Almost all the students started presenting their identities by greetings and introducing themselves by saying their first and last names. Only one student introduced herself without her first name.

Naturally, the first constituent of an individual is the given name. The one which avoided saying her name may have implied her own definition of power relation and the way she wanted to be perceived by her classmates. She may want others to have a formal relationship with her.

This is how even including or excluding one word (e.g. the first name here) can influence the way individuals construct their identities (Belsey, 1980).

Furthermore, both MA and BA students told their ages as well as their province of residency. Out of 15 MA students, 10 (% 66.66) and out of 22 B. students, 20 (% 90.90) students told their ages.

Also, more than half of the MA students (N=17, %77.27), and approximately half of the BA students (N=8, %53.3) desired to mention their province of residency.

Individuals' age and residence are both considered as the major constituents of their identity. Belonging to a particular generation (which is defined in terms of the peer groups) reflects the way ones perceive themselves. On the other hand, where ones live represents their affiliation with the social groups. Through mentioning such details, the students may seek for finding friends in the same neighborhood and demonstrating that they were proud of their residential settings. According to Wenger (1998), identity is constructed by relating ourselves to others, our past and the presumed future. Referring to their place of residency and age is justified by the way identity is expected to be shaped.

Moreover, participants were inclined to talk about their English background. In this regard, more than half of the MA students (N=10, %66.66) and around one third of BA students (N=8, %36.36) referred to their background in English language.

M.A. 1: "I have majored in English translation in B.A. "

M.A. 2: "I graduated with a bachelor's degree in TEFL. "

B.A. 1: "I started learning English at the age of 6 and finished it when I was 13 years old. I got my IELTS certificate back then. "

B.A. 2: "For the last two years, I've been studying English translation, before I got accepted into Rajaee University. "

Learning a language is a social process in which the learners share their experiences and knowledge with the members of their discourse community (Wenger, 1998). By being accepted in BA and MA exams and studying TEFL as their major, the participants present their professional self and the prepared academic self for joining this community of practice. They claim their affiliation with the large applied linguistics community by elaborating on their English language background.

Another distinctive feature to which the students referred was their experience in teaching. The results showed that MA students explicitly pointed out their teaching experiences while BA students tried to talk about their love of teaching instead. All the MA students stressed their teaching experiences, whereas only few BA students (N=2, %9.09) noted their experience in teaching. Some examples are presented below:

M.A. 1: "I've been teaching for about 8 years and at the moment I'm an English teacher in public high schools."

M.A. 2: "I've been teaching English for 4 years now, and I'm currently teaching English in an institute."

M.A. 3: "I've taught English for 3 years but generally speaking I have been teaching English since I was 18. So it's around 8 years of experience."

B.A. 1: "I've been an English teacher in different institutes for 2 years, which means I've started teaching English since I was 16."

B.A. 2: "I have a partial experience in teaching. I've been working as a sub-teacher for about a year."

It was expected to find differences between the two groups of participants in terms of their discursive practices about teaching experiences. Mostly, MA students have been involved in teaching English following their graduation. Entering a higher level in the same major requires both knowledge and experience. Highlighted their teaching experiences, can be justified by the way they view the purposes underlying higher education. On the other hand, the BA students' expressions reflecting their zest for teaching indicates their tendency to claim for their membership in the new community. The difference is justified by the nature of discursive strategies expected from the novice (BA) and semi-established (MA) members of the TEFL community. Individuals adopted various strategies to signify their different selves. Indeed, they have different social identities by being a university student and a pre-service or in-service teacher and this entails multiple identities (Luke, 1996). Moreover, MA students seem to adopt a knowledge holder identity by expounding on their teaching experiences (Lebaton, 2012).

The results also indicated that BA students tended to talk about the reason for choosing English language studies. However, no traces of these reasons were noticeable in MA students' introductions. Out of 22 BA students, 12 (%54.54) talked about the reason for choosing their major.

B.A. 1: "I chose this major not just because I love English, also because I love teaching. So I thought that the combination of both would be a great idea. "

B.A. 2: "I like to learn new things and share my knowledge to my students. "

B.A. 3: "I chose this major because I like teaching as a job and I like English as a language."

Since their entrance into the teaching discourse community, the students are involved in constant struggles related to the way they are perceived as a university student and a pre-service teacher (Lebaton, 2012). The BA students included their reasons since they are novice members and they are not confident enough. Hence, they prefer to share their personal histories and rationales for expressing their internal voices through discourse (Ahmadi, Abd Samad, & Noordin, 2013).

Furthermore, researchers also noted some deviations in speech of both groups. For instance, students frankly talked about their family members or even about their parents' jobs particularly BA participants.

B.A. 1: "Since my father is teaching at a university, I planned to be a university student myself in the long term. "

B.A. 2: "My mother is a teacher and she loves her major, teaching Arabic... I wish to become a dedicated teacher like her. "

People perceive their roles in the familial, academic, and social contexts differently. In fact, various constituent selves are highlighted or suppressed depending on the students' personal perceptions of their own identities. (Lebaton, 2012). They extend their introduction since they feel less established in the community and need to present more of their own identities explicitly.

Finally, due to the pandemic, some students in both groups, 6 MA (%27) and 2 BA (%9.09) students expressed their willingness to meet their friends and professors in-person as the ending. However, 7 BA students (% 31.81) tended to wish good luck for their friends and ended their videos.

M.A. 1: "I hope to meet all of you in-person."

M.A. 2: "I hope to see you soon in-person."

B.A. 1: "Good luck to you all."

B.A. 2: "I wish you the best and good luck."

The results revealed the similarities and differences among BA and MA students in terms of discursive strategies for constructing and reconstructing their identities. They used different words and themes to present their selves to their instructor and classmates. It was shown that identities were context-dependent and community-bound.

Conclusion

The current study aimed to explore the identity construction strategies used by undergraduate and postgraduate students of TEFL in a teacher training university within the global pandemic by analyzing the recorded video files in which they introduced themselves. The results showed the commonalities and discrepancies that existed among the participants in the two groups. The findings proved the multifaceted nature of the identity and the EFL students' constant struggles related to the way they are identified and acknowledged by the members of their academic discourse community (Lebaton, 2012).

The findings raise the instructors' awareness of the dimensions constituting their students' identities. Teachers' cognizance of the learners' various selves has been highlighted in the existing literature (Zacharias, 2010). Furthermore, the results increase the students' consciousness about the strategies they may adopt and the way using different discursive practices are conceived by others. Indeed, language classrooms are both learning and social places (Markee, 2004). Accordingly, the students must be given enough opportunities to negotiate, create, and reconstruct their identities (Ahmadi et al., 2013).

The study investigated the TEFL university students' identity construction in online classes within the global pandemic. Future studies can focus on the non-stop reciprocal identity construction during the semester by scrutinizing the recorded files of different classes to extract the patterns of interaction and models of identity construction across online platforms- and different subjects.

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