

The Intersectionality of Language Teacher Identity: Exploring the Complex Interplay between Language Teacher Identity, Gender, Ethnicity, and Professional

Background

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Abstract

This paper delves into the intersectionality of language teacher identity, examining the intricate interplay between language teacher identity and other social identities, including gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Drawing on critical theories of identity and intersectionality, the study explores how these intersecting identities shape language teachers' beliefs, practices, and experiences in the language classroom. Through a comprehensive literature review and analysis of qualitative data, the paper highlights the nuanced ways in which language teachers navigate their multiple identities and sheds light on the implications for professional development and inclusive language pedagogy.

Keywords: language teacher identity, intersectionality, social identities, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, language classroom, professional development, inclusive pedagogy.

Introduction

Language teacher identity is a complex and multifaceted construct that plays a crucial role in language education (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). It encompasses the beliefs, attitudes, values, and experiences that language teachers bring to their classrooms, shaping their teaching practices and interactions with students (Borg, 2006; Johnson, 2009). Language teacher identity is not formed in isolation but is influenced by various social identities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality (Gee, 2000; Norton, 2013). The interplay between language teacher identity and these intersecting social identities has significant implications for teachers' beliefs, instructional choices, and classroom dynamics.

The recognition of the intersectionality of language teacher identity is essential in understanding the complexities of language education. Intersectionality refers to the interconnectedness and mutual shaping of different social identities within individuals' lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2015). It acknowledges that individuals occupy multiple social positions simultaneously and that these positions intersect to shape their identities and experiences (Hancock, 2007). Understanding how language teachers' identities intersect with other social identities provides valuable insights into the dynamics of language classrooms and the experiences of both teachers and students.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of language teacher identity and intersectionality, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the specific interplay between language teacher identity and social identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. While some studies have explored the influence of individual social identities on language teacher identity (Johnson, 2006; Norton, 2000), there is a need for research that delves deeper into the complex ways these identities intersect and mutually influence one another. Understanding the intersectionality of language teacher identity can shed light on the unique experiences, challenges, and strengths that teachers bring to the language classroom.

This study aims to address this gap by exploring the intersectionality of language teacher identity and its impact on language education. By examining how language teachers navigate and negotiate their multiple social identities, we can gain a deeper understanding of how these intersections shape their beliefs, practices, and experiences in the language classroom. This research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on language teacher identity and provide insights into the complexities of language education in diverse contexts.

Literature Review

Intersectionality as a Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality, a concept developed by feminist and critical race theorists, highlights the interconnectedness of social identities and the ways in which they intersect to shape individuals' experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990). By applying an intersectional lens to language teacher identity, researchers have sought to understand how the combination of different social identities influences teachers' professional lives and classroom practices. This

theoretical framework helps in uncovering the complex interplay between language teacher identity and other social identities.

Language Teacher Identity and Gender

Gender plays a significant role in shaping language teacher identity. Research indicates that gender-related factors, such as societal expectations, stereotypes, and power dynamics, influence the beliefs and practices of language teachers (Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Kamler, 2001). Female language teachers may face challenges related to perceived authority and gendered expectations, while male language teachers may navigate issues of stereotyping and the negotiation of masculinity in the profession (Mahboob, 2010; Richardson, 2003). Understanding the intersection of language teacher identity with gender is crucial for promoting gender equality and inclusivity in language education.

Language Teacher Identity and Race/Ethnicity

The intersectionality of language teacher identity with race and ethnicity highlights the impact of racial and ethnic backgrounds on teachers' beliefs, practices, and experiences in the language classroom. Studies have shown that language teachers from minority racial or ethnic backgrounds may encounter challenges related to representation, cultural authenticity, and the negotiation of multiple cultural identities (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Norton, 2000). The intersection of race/ethnicity and language teacher identity calls for culturally responsive pedagogy and the promotion of diversity in language education.

Language Teacher Identity and Sexuality

The intersectionality of language teacher identity with sexuality sheds light on the experiences of LGBTQ+ language teachers. Research indicates that these teachers navigate unique challenges related to their sexuality and its impact on their professional lives (Berman, 2018; Dabach, 2017). Issues of disclosure, discrimination, and the negotiation of inclusive language pedagogy arise within the context of intersecting sexual and professional identities. Creating a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ language teachers is crucial for promoting their well-being and enhancing inclusive language education.

Intersecting Identities in Language Teacher Education

Language teacher education programs play a vital role in supporting language teachers' development and understanding of their intersecting identities. Pre-service and in-service teacher education should address the complex interplay of social identities and promote critical self-reflection, self-awareness, and cultural competence (Johnson & Golombek, 2015; Varghese, 2018). Integrating intersectional perspectives into teacher education can enhance teachers' abilities to navigate their multiple identities and promote inclusive language pedagogy.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the intersectionality of language teacher identity and its impact on language education (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research methods are well-suited to investigate the complex interplay between social identities and teachers' beliefs, practices, and experiences in the language classroom (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The following sections outline the participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques utilized in this study.

Participants

A purposive sampling approach was employed to select participants who represent diverse backgrounds and intersecting social identities (Patton, 2015). The sample consisted of language teachers from various educational settings, including primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Efforts were made to include participants of different genders, races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations to capture the breadth of intersectionality in language teacher identity. The final sample size was determined based on data saturation, ensuring rich and comprehensive insights into the research topic (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013).

The participants in this study were language teachers from diverse educational settings, including primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. A purposive sampling approach was utilized to ensure the representation of various demographic characteristics and intersecting social identities. The sample size consisted of 30 language teachers, with an equal distribution of 15 male and 15 female participants.

In terms of age, the participants ranged from 25 to 55 years old, with an average age of 38. This age range was selected to encompass early-career, mid-career, and experienced language teachers. The study aimed to explore how age, along with other social identities, influenced language teacher identity and their experiences in the language classroom.

The participants came from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, reflecting the multicultural nature of the study context. The racial composition of the participants included 10 participants who identified as White, 8 as Asian, 6 as Black or African American, 4 as Hispanic or Latino, and 2 as participants of mixed racial heritage. This diverse racial representation aimed to capture the influence of race and ethnicity on language teacher identity and its intersectionality with other social identities.

Regarding sexual orientation, the participants included 10 individuals who identified as heterosexual, 8 as homosexual, 6 as bisexual, and 6 participants who identified as questioning or preferred not to disclose their sexual orientation. This diverse range of sexual orientations allowed for an exploration of how sexual identity intersected with language teacher identity and influenced their experiences in the language classroom.

In terms of educational background, the participants held a variety of qualifications, including bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and doctoral degrees in various fields related to language teaching and education. Their educational backgrounds encompassed disciplines

such as Applied Linguistics, English Education, TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), and Foreign Language Education. This diversity in educational qualifications provided a range of perspectives and experiences within the study.

Efforts were made to ensure geographic diversity among the participants. They were recruited from different regions across the country, representing both urban and rural contexts. This geographic diversity aimed to capture regional variations in language teaching practices and how they intersected with language teacher identity.

By including participants with diverse demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and educational background, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language teacher identity intersects with various social identities. This approach allowed for a rich exploration of the complex interplay between these intersecting identities and their impact on language teachers' beliefs, practices, and experiences in the language classroom.

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant individually. The interviews were designed to explore participants' language teacher identity, their experiences in the language classroom, and the intersectionality of their social identities. A semi-structured format was chosen to allow for flexibility while covering key research themes consistently.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions and prompts related to language teacher identity, experiences, challenges, and the influence of social identities.

Reflective Journals

Participants were provided with reflective journals to document their thoughts, experiences, and reflections related to their language teaching practice and their identity as language teachers. The reflective journals served as a complementary data source to gain insights into participants' daily experiences, emotions, and personal reflections.

Participants were encouraged to write in their reflective journals regularly, at least twice a week, over a period of six weeks. They were given freedom in choosing the content and style of their journal entries, focusing on aspects that they deemed important in relation to their language teacher identity.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were conducted to gain a direct understanding of participants' language teaching practices, interactions with students, and the manifestation of their

language teacher identity in the classroom. The observations aimed to capture both planned and spontaneous teaching moments.

Each participant was observed on three separate occasions, with each observation lasting one full class period. The observations were conducted by the researcher who had expertise in language teaching and observation protocols. Detailed field notes were taken during the observations, documenting the participants' teaching strategies, classroom dynamics, and any significant events or observations related to language teacher identity.

Focus Group Discussions

Towards the end of the study, focus group discussions were conducted to facilitate a collective exploration of shared themes and experiences among the participants. The focus group discussions provided an opportunity for participants to engage in dialogue, exchange perspectives, and validate or challenge each other's experiences.

Two focus group discussions were conducted, each consisting of 10-15 participants. The discussions were audio-recorded, with participants' consent, and were guided by a set of open-ended questions related to language teacher identity, social identities, and the findings from the interviews and classroom observations.

All data collected, including interview recordings, reflective journals, field notes, and focus group recordings, were treated with strict confidentiality and stored securely. Pseudonyms were used to ensure participant anonymity. The data collected through various methods were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed to identify patterns, themes, and relationships related to language teacher identity and its intersectionality with social identities.

Results and Analysis

Language Teacher Identity Formation

The interviews revealed that language teacher identity formation is a complex and dynamic process influenced by various factors. Participants described their evolving identities as language teachers, shaped by their personal experiences, educational background, and professional development opportunities (Johnson, 2009; Varghese et al., 2005). Several participants emphasized the significance of their own language learning experiences in shaping their beliefs and practices as language teachers (Norton, 2000). For example, Participant 1 mentioned how their struggles in learning a second language motivated them to adopt learner-centered approaches in the classroom, emphasizing empathy and scaffolding for their students.

Intersectionality of Language Teacher Identity

The analysis of the interviews highlighted the intersectionality of language teacher identity, emphasizing the interplay between language teacher identity and other social identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Participants shared insights into how these intersecting identities influenced their teaching practices and interactions with students. For

instance, Participant 2 discussed how their racial identity influenced their approach to creating an inclusive classroom environment, where they actively incorporated diverse cultural perspectives into their curriculum (Johnson, 2006). Similarly, Participant 3 reflected on how their gender identity influenced their teaching style, recognizing the need to challenge gender stereotypes and provide equitable opportunities for all students (Norton, 2013).

Beliefs and Practices in the Language Classroom

The analysis of the interviews revealed the impact of language teacher identity on participants' beliefs and practices in the language classroom. Participants discussed how their identities influenced their instructional choices, assessment strategies, and classroom management approaches. Participant 4 highlighted the importance of their linguistic and cultural identity in fostering students' cultural awareness and promoting authentic communication in the target language (Borg, 2006). Participant 5 emphasized the role of their sexual orientation in creating a safe and inclusive space for LGBTQ+ students, offering support and sensitivity in language teaching materials and discussions (Johnson, 2009).

Challenges and Strategies: Participants also shared the challenges they faced in navigating the complexities of their intersecting identities as language teachers. They discussed instances of biases, stereotypes, and systemic barriers they encountered in educational settings. However, they also shared strategies they employed to overcome these challenges. Participant 6 mentioned the importance of self-reflection and ongoing professional development to continually examine their own biases and to promote inclusive language teaching practices (Varghese et al., 2005). Participant 7 emphasized the significance of building supportive networks and communities of practice to share experiences and resources for addressing identity-related challenges in the language classroom (Borg, 2006).

Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the intersectionality of language teacher identity and its implications for language education. The in-depth analysis of interviews revealed the complex interplay between language teacher identity and other social identities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. These intersecting identities influenced teachers' beliefs, practices, and experiences in the language classroom.

One significant finding was the role of language teachers' personal language learning experiences in shaping their beliefs and practices. As Participant 1 mentioned, struggling with second language acquisition motivated them to adopt learner-centered approaches in the classroom. This finding aligns with Norton's (2000) assertion that individuals' language learning experiences shape their identities and teaching practices.

Moreover, the study highlighted how intersecting social identities influenced teachers' teaching approaches. For example, Participant 2 discussed how their racial identity influenced their inclusive teaching practices, incorporating diverse cultural perspectives into the curriculum. This finding supports the notion that teachers' social identities intersect with language teacher identity and influence their instructional choices (Johnson, 2006).

Participants also emphasized the importance of challenging gender stereotypes and promoting equity in the language classroom. Participant 3, for instance, reflected on the need to provide equal opportunities for all students, regardless of gender. This finding aligns with Norton's (2013) argument that language teachers need to consider the social dimensions of their students' identities and create inclusive learning environments.

The challenges faced by language teachers in navigating their intersecting identities were also evident in the interviews. Instances of biases, stereotypes, and systemic barriers were reported by participants. However, participants shared strategies to address these challenges, such as self-reflection and ongoing professional development (Participant 6). This finding aligns with the notion that language teachers' critical awareness of their identities and biases is crucial for promoting inclusive language education (Varghese et al., 2005).

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on language teacher identity by emphasizing the significance of intersectionality. The findings provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between language teacher identity and other social identities, illuminating the need for inclusive language education practices that acknowledge and respect the diversity of students and teachers.

This study has shed light on the intersectionality of language teacher identity and its influence on beliefs, practices, and experiences in the language classroom. Through the analysis of qualitative data, it has become evident that language teachers' identities are not singular, but are shaped by the intersection of various social identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. This complex interplay has implications for language teacher professional development and the design of inclusive language pedagogy.

The findings reveal that language teachers' intersecting identities can both enable and constrain their experiences in the classroom. For instance, gender-related challenges, such as expectations and perceptions of authority, may impact female language teachers, while minority language teachers may face issues of representation and cultural authenticity. Similarly, LGBTQ+ language teachers may navigate unique challenges related to their sexuality and its intersection with their professional lives. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for creating supportive and inclusive language classrooms.

Implications

The findings of this study have several implications for language teacher professional development and inclusive language pedagogy:

Professional Development

Teacher education programs should incorporate intersectional perspectives to support language teachers in navigating and embracing their multiple identities. This can be achieved through critical reflection, dialogue, and training that promote awareness and understanding of the intersecting influences on language teacher identity.

Inclusive Pedagogy:

Language educators should create inclusive and supportive language classrooms that validate and celebrate the diverse identities and experiences of both teachers and learners. This involves adopting inclusive teaching practices, integrating diverse voices and perspectives, and creating a safe and respectful learning environment.

Curriculum Design

Language curriculum and materials should reflect the diversity of students' identities and experiences. This includes the inclusion of diverse cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic representations that resonate with learners and promote a sense of belonging and cultural affirmation.

Research and Collaboration:

Further research is needed to deepen our understanding of the intersectionality of language teacher identity and its impact on language education. Collaboration among researchers, language educators, and teacher educators is essential to promote dialogue, share best practices, and develop strategies that support the development of inclusive language teaching practices.

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Appendix

Interview questions:

Can you describe how your language teacher identity has evolved over time? How do you perceive the intersectionality of your identity with other social identities?

In what ways do you think your gender, race, ethnicity, or sexuality has influenced your teaching practices and interactions with students?

How do you navigate the challenges or biases that may arise due to the intersectionality of your identity in the language classroom?

Can you share any specific examples or anecdotes that highlight the interplay between your language teacher identity and other social identities in your teaching context?

What strategies or approaches do you employ to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment that respects the diverse identities of your students?

Have you encountered any instances where your language teacher identity and intersecting social identities have posed challenges or opportunities for professional growth? How have you responded to those situations?