Using metaphor to explore the professional role identities of higher education English language instructors

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Abstract

While the teacher professional role identity of pre-service English Language teachers has gained popularity recently, that of practicing teachers is less well-researched. This study aims to reveal how a group of Turkish university English Language instructors (n=35) perceived their professional role identities. To this aim, the participants were asked to describe how they saw their roles as English teachers using a metaphor of their own choice. Content analysis of the metaphors revealed 9 overall themes. The most common theme was ‘guide’; followed by ‘flexible’, ‘nurturer’, ‘frustrated’, and ‘authority’; then ‘entertainer’ and ‘challenger’; and finally ‘novice’ and ‘other’.

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1. Introduction

With the emergence of the post-method era (see, e.g. Kumaravadivelu, 2001) over two decades ago, research in the field of English Language Teaching (henceforth ELT) moved its focus from the search for the perfect language teaching method to the contributions brought to the learning/teaching process by the learners and teachers in complex and diverse sociocultural settings. Within this new climate, language teachers are seen as more than technicians who are defined in terms of expected behaviors and knowledge. Instead, teachers’ personal selves and the social and institutional contexts in which they work are recognized as crucial aspects of language teaching (Miller, 2009). As a result, the field of ELT has witnessed a considerable body of research in areas which put teachers at the centre of the language teaching/learning process, such as reflective practice (see, e.g. Farrell, 2007), teacher cognition (see, e.g. Borg, 2007) and more recently teacher professional role identity (henceforth TPRI) (see, e.g. Farrell, 2011).

Burns and Richards (2009) define TPRI as the various cultural and social roles that teachers adopt in interactions with students and colleagues during the learning process. Varghese, Morgan, Johnston and Johnson (2005) summarized three central notions in the construct. First, rather than being fixed, stable, unitary and internally consistent, TPRI is a multiple dynamic concept which is in contradiction and conflict. Second, it is essentially related to the social, cultural and political context in which the teacher is working. Third, it is constructed and

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maintained through language and discourse. Hence, studies which have been carried out on TPRI in both the field of ELT and mainstream education are generally language or discourse-driven and situated in a particular context in order to facilitate the more complex observation of the teacher and allow for the inclusion of contradiction and conflict (see, e.g. Duff & Uchida, 1997; Farrell, 2011; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011; Tsui, 2007; Urzua & Vasquez, 2008; Varghese et al., 2005).

There is also an increasing body of research in both the field of ELT and that of mainstream education which uses metaphor analysis to investigate TPRI (see, e.g. Ben-Peretz, Mendelson & Kron, 2003; Farrell, 2011; Fenwick, 2000; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). Metaphor is a means of understanding one concept in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). According to Munby and Russell (1990), “the essence of metaphor seems to be the way in which casting particular experiences brings a richness of vocabulary to describing the experience” (p. 117), and thus metaphor is built on the relationship between language and thought. Moreover, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that the human conceptual system is essentially metaphorical in nature. Hence, metaphor can be considered as a powerful tool which can help us gain insight into levels of intuition otherwise inaccessible to the rational consciousness (Fenwick, 2000), and is thus useful in revealing the complexity of identity and teaching (Hunt, 2006; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011).

Specifically, these studies mentioned above found that teachers conceptualize their professional role identities using metaphors that can be categorized under certain main headings. For example, based on a study with 65 adult educators in Canada, Fenwick (2000) categorized the metaphors generated by her participants into four images: Adventure Guide, in which the teacher’s job was to lead the students through difficult terrain; Outfitter, in which the teacher’s role was to equip the students with the necessary knowledge and skills; Firestarter, in which the teacher acted as a catalyst in raising the students’ motivation; and Caregiver, in which teachers emphasized the creation of nourishing environments to enhance students’ learning. More recently, in order to investigate the development of the TPRI of novice teachers in Canada, Thomas and Beauchamp (2011) asked their participants to use a metaphor to describe themselves as a teacher at two different times: immediately before graduation from a teacher education program, and then 6 months into their first year of teaching. They found that as pre-service teachers, the participants focused on supporting, nurturing and protecting students, and helping them to find their way. However, after six months of teaching, the participants focused more on themselves, their own classroom experiences, the challenges they faced, and survival. More specifically related to the field of ELT, in a discourse-driven study with 3 practicing native speaking English language college teachers engaging in group discussions for professional development, Farrell (2011) found that the 16 main teacher role identities emerging from the group discussions could be categorized under the main headings of Teacher as Manager, Teacher as Acculturator and Teacher as Professional.

However, as Miller (2009) pointed out, the TPRI of language teachers is still an emergent area. Moreover, Farrell (2011) remarked that research on the construct has largely focused on prospective and novice teachers, and that the TPRI of experienced language teachers in particular has largely been overlooked. In the Turkish context, in which the current study is set, research using metaphor has been carried out with prospective teachers from different domains (e.g. Saban, Kocbeker & Saban, 2007), and with both prospective and practicing language teachers (e.g. Seferoğlu, Korkmazgül & Ölcü, 2009). However, these studies concentrated on the participants’ conceptions about teaching and learning, rather than about themselves as teachers. Hence, it can be said that there is a gap in the research of how Turkish practicing teachers of English perceive their professional role identities, particularly in a higher education context. Thus, the overall aim of the current study is to examine how Turkish university English language instructors view their present professional role identities by means of metaphor. The following research question has been formulated to this aim: ‘What are the patterns (if any) that emerge from the metaphors that practicing Turkish university English language instructors use to describe their professional role identities?’
2. Method

2.1. Context and participants

The context of the current study is the English language preparatory schools of universities in Turkey. These schools provide a year of English language instruction to students before they continue their studies in the departments to which they have been admitted by means of the central university entrance examination.

The participants of the current study were 35 English language instructors (23 female, 8 male) who were employed at the schools of foreign languages of two state-run universities in the Western Black Sea region of Turkey. They were all non-native English speaking Turkish nationals. Their teaching experience ranged from one to over 20 years. They held degrees in English Language Teaching, English Language and Literature, and Translation.

2.2. Data collection and analysis procedures

The data were collected by means of an interview form consisting of two parts. The first part was aimed to collect demographic information. In the second part, participants were required answer the following question giving as much detail as they wished: ‘What metaphor would you use to describe yourself as an English teacher at this time?’ following the Thomas and Beauchamp (2011) study. In order to collect the data, permission was first requested from the administration of the institutions involved. Then, the semi-structured interview form was distributed to the 90 instructors working at both schools of foreign languages in the Spring semester of the 2010-2011 academic year. A total of 35 forms were returned (39% participation). These 35 participants constituted the sample of the current study.

Content analysis was used to analyze the data. Due to the small number of participants, the data were coded by hand. In order to answer the first research question, the researcher identified the metaphor used by each participant. Then, using an iterative approach, the metaphors were grouped according to categories of TPRI that emerged from the data. This process was carried out with the help of a colleague who was blind to the aim of the study to ensure the reliability of the process.

3. Results and Discussion

The results of the content analysis revealed that the 35 metaphors could be grouped under nine headings. The categories in order of the most common to least common are ‘guide’ with nine metaphors; ‘flexible’, ‘nurturer’, ‘frustration’ and ‘authority’ with four metaphors each; ‘entertainer’ and ‘challenger’ with three metaphors each; ‘novice’ and ‘other’ with two metaphors each. The inter-rater agreement on the categories was satisfactory (Cohen’s Kappa – $k=0.87$), suggesting that the metaphors could be well represented by these categories. It must be emphasized that the explanations of some metaphors overlapped in category, so the dominant category was chosen in the coding process.

Within the ‘guide’ category, one instructor said she saw herself as an ‘overhead projector’, because her job was to ‘illuminate and guide’ her students. Another instructor said he was a ‘weathervane, because his job was to direct his students to become individuals. Yet another described herself as a ‘whisper’, because she believed that her role was to inspire her students to discover their strengths. Finally, one instructor saw himself as an ‘elevator’ whose job it was to help his students go up. However, there was also a hint of frustration as he added ‘I wish they had the necessary motivation to press that button!’ The metaphor of the teacher as a guide was also reported widely in the literature (Fenwick, 2000; Saban et al., 2007; Seferoğlu et al., 2009; Farrell, 2011; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011).

Examples of the ‘flexible’ category include ‘vegetable soup’, chosen by an instructor who said she had to ‘combine writing, listening, speaking, reading, and grammar abilities’ to teach her students from different socio-
economic and cultural backgrounds. Another instructor chose the metaphor of a ‘river’, saying that a river ‘conforms
to different geographical structures. Through conformity, a teacher can become a better educator’. There was also an
element of ‘guide’ in this metaphor, as he added that he also wanted to carry his students ‘to their destination in
English learning.’ Two instructors saw themselves as a ‘chameleon’ because they had to adapt to different situations
and change their strategies and teaching styles as necessary. Similarly, Thomas & Beauchamp (2011) observed that
in-service teachers often remarked on the changeable nature of teaching and the necessity for the teacher to adapt to
different situations.

The metaphors in the ‘nurturer’ category included ‘mother’, ‘parent’ and ‘babysitter’, in addition to ‘solar energy
system’, chosen by one instructor who said that she thought her role was to ‘keep the classroom warm enough for
the students so that they do not want to leave’. The nurturer metaphor also occurred frequently in the literature
(Fenwick, 2000; Ben-Peretz et al., 2003; Farrell, 2011; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011).

The metaphors categorized as ‘frustration’ included ‘hamster’, chosen by an instructor who remarked that he
could not see any improvement in his students’ progress despite all his efforts. Another instructor described herself
as an ‘ant’, because she worked very hard, but her students were not willing to learn. Yet another said she was
‘Pollyanna’ at the beginning of every new term; however, she became disappointed when her students showed
negative attitudes to learning English. Finally, one instructor described himself as ‘a person screaming and shouting
but not being able to make others hear’, and he emphasized the difficult conditions in which he was working, such
as crowded classes and unmotivated students. In a similar vein, Thomas & Beauchamp (2011) reported that when
teachers first embark on their profession they can feel a sense of frustration as they struggle to survive in the face of
unpredictable situations. The source of frustration in the current sample appeared to be unmotivated students.

The ‘authority’ category included metaphors such as ‘craftsman’, chosen by an instructor who saw his students as
apprentices in language skills; ‘queen bee’, which referred to the role of the instructor in designating tasks in the
language classroom; ‘chief commander’, in which the instructor was responsible for choosing the strategies to help
the students; and ‘orchestra conductor’, whose role it was to ‘keep harmony in the orchestra’. Again, this category of
metaphor was reported in the literature (Ben-Peretz et al., 2003; Saban et al., 2007; Seferoğlu et al., 2009)

The metaphors grouped under the ‘entertainer’ category include ‘actress’, which was given by two instructors
who emphasized the necessity for a language teacher to be able to take on different roles in the classroom. Another
instructor described herself as a ‘pop singer’, because she needed to attract her students’ attention. Farrell (2011)
and Saban et al. (2007) also noted that teachers saw their role as to attract their students’ attention and keep them
amused.

The three metaphors categorized under the heading of ‘challenger’ included ‘challenger’; ‘motivator’, whose role
it was to increase the intrinsic motivation of his students; and ‘warrior’, whose role it was to struggle to make her
lessons interesting for her unwilling students. This category resembles that of Fenwick’s (2000) ‘Firestarter’, which
focused on catalyzing students’ motivation to learn.

The two metaphors of the ‘novice’ category include ‘blossom’ and ‘chrysalis’, which were given by two recently
graduated instructors who emphasized that they needed time and experience to fully develop as language teachers.
The ‘other’ category included ‘student’, chosen by an instructor who was not an ELT graduate and who stressed the
fact that she was learning her profession by reflecting on her students. ‘Security camera’ was the metaphor chosen
by another instructor stated that she examined her students carefully to reflect back their language performance.
These two categories show similarity to Farrell’s (2011) ‘Teacher as a Professional’ category, in which the teachers
focus on their professional responsibilities.

The results of the current study show that the metaphors provided by the participants could be categorized under
certain headings. Moreover, these patterns of metaphors displayed similarities with the international literature on
metaphor and TPRI. This concurs with Saban et al’s (2007) conclusion that culture does not have a significant role in the conceptualization of teaching in Turkey.

4. Conclusion

This study has shown that asking practicing teachers to think about their TPRI in terms of metaphor gives important insight into how these teachers see themselves as professionals. However, as Korthagen (2004) pointed out, unless asked to, teachers do not generally think about their TPRI. Thus, the construct tends to exist as an unconscious body of beliefs, needs and values. Hence, it would be helpful to raise teachers’ awareness of their TPRI in order to help them make informed choices related to their professional development (Korthagen, 2004; Hunt, 2006). This can be realized by providing opportunities during teacher education to raise pre-service teachers’ awareness of their developing TPRI. For practicing teachers, this can be done by engaging in reflective practice (Hunt, 2006; Farrell, 2011), life-path activities (Korthagen, 2004), and exchange of stories through narrative inquiry (Tsui, 2007).

There are of course a number of limitations to this study. First, the sample was quite small and limited to the English language instructors of two universities in Turkey. A larger sample would provide more insight and more possible categories of metaphor. Moreover, the participants were asked to choose only one metaphor. However, as Saban et al. (2007) stress, complex and abstract ideas, such as TPRI, require multiple metaphors to describe them fully. Hence, further research could allow for teachers to provide alternative metaphors.

References


