

INVESTIGATING TEACHER IDENTITY REPRESENTATION IN CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the significance of applying an ethnographic action research to investigate the teacher identity representation. It is quite common to do an action research for improving the quality of our teaching learning processes, with a wide range of topics and scopes. Combining an action research with an ethnography creates much broader coverage and longer term effect as well. Investigating teacher identity representation can be an alternative for an ethnographic action research. Some notes, however, should be made considering the complexity of an ethnography and the 'practical short term' nature of a classroom action research to acquire the expected outcomes.

Key terms : *teacher identity representation, ethnographic action research, short-term, long-term effect*

1. BACKGROUND

Identity building is actually the ultimate goal of education but in many ways we tend to ignore this important aspect. Teachers seem invest most of their time and energy to deal with teaching materials and strategies to fulfill their minimum standard of their subject. As soon as the target is achieved, their mission is accomplished. It is getting more seriously misleading when teachers concern too much with such a 'product-oriented' business, the National Examination. It seems every single effort should be for making students pass the exam and, to a particular extent, put aside other important aspects, among other identity shaping. In fact, it is getting more and more significant to inoculate identity in our class. Today, the world tends to be geographically and culturally borderless and becomes the melting pot in which

everything seems to be uniform requiring people to expose their identity. Within this global interaction, it is always our uniqueness which becomes something to expose.

Identity shaping in classroom becomes an important 'business' for teachers for at least two reasons. First, classroom is a fruitful arena for cultivating students' identity. Classroom mirrors the nature of real life. Classroom interaction reflects the complexity and heterogeneity of the real world and, therefore, is effective in preserving values and identity (Norton, 2000). Classroom activities also revitalize community identity because the activities can create complex heterogeneous but systematic contexts for every member of the class to negotiate different values and beliefs. It is further stated that the negotiation of 'sense of self within and across different points in a time' provides a learner an access, through a language, to powerful social networks that give them the opportunity to speak (p.5). Second, teacher is the sole agent of identity shaping in classroom context. Teachers' language reflects their identity and simultaneously shapes their pupil's identity through classroom interactions. In addition, power relation in class interaction also creates certain social structures which may determine learners' identity (Ellis, 1997). In a broader sense, Fought (2006) asserts that selection of teachers' linguistic features indicates their commitment of revitalizing particular values and beliefs. Investigating teacher identity representation is then worth doing.

Identity representation in classroom is perceived by both teachers and students. Teachers, consciously or subconsciously, make effort to shape their students' identity (Susilowati, 2010a). It can be done even before the teaching is executed, ranging from designing classroom activities, material selection, or conducting follow up activities. Susilowati (2008) found out that the materials on the textbooks tended to be value and culture laden, which are significant in representing the community identity speaking the language. From the students' point of view, they also confirmed that they detected their teachers' identity representation through the use of a particular language and some linguistic features (2010b). In addition, they also perceived teacher identity representation, to a certain extent, may influence their identity shaping. These findings require empirical proofs to provide more

convincing conclusion of the effect of teacher identity representation to the student identity shaping. An ethnographic classroom action research is one of the alternatives.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section discusses two relevant theoretical bases, namely the concept of identity, ethnographic action research. The first covers the definition and classification of identity as well as the importance of teacher identity representation. The following two parts will be a brief review on ethnography and action research. The details are as follows.

2.1. Identity

Scholars working in identity define the term identity as socially shaped, fluid and therefore multiple. Hall (1997) states that identity is relational as it is shaped through social relation and symbolically marked. For example, if someone does not keep something which is considered taboo as a taboo, that will have a real effect to this particular person because s/he can be excluded from a member of a group and lose any characteristics which attach to the community. In this case, identity of a particular member relies for her/his member on something outside of this person. In addition, Hall further contends, identity is fluid in the sense that it is flexible. The same person may possess several types of identity simultaneously due to different roles the person plays. Ivancic in Joseph (2004) defines identity as everyday word for people's sense of who they are. She further sees other terms such as subjectivity, positioning, and possibilities for self-holds as the relevant terms to identity as 'carrying the connotation that identity is socially constructed and that people are not free to take any identity they choose but adding a sense of multiplicity, hybridity, and fluidity' (p.10). Following the two definitions above, Bucholtz and Hall (2005), who see identity from a socio-cultural linguistic point of view, perceive identity as the social positioning of

self and other. This definition treats identity as a product of social cultural practice rather than internal psychological phenomenon because identity is viewed as ‘a product rather than the source of linguistic and other semiotic practices’ (p.588). The nature of such definitions posits identity as culture-laden and tends to flexibly change from time to time. The definitions then may create classifications of identity such as personal identity, ethnic identity, group, and national identity.

In many cases, people tend to make use language as the main instrument of labeling their identity. For quite long people often say that language represents their identity. History witnessed how Bahasa Indonesia successfully united all existing local languages and until today it is strongly perceived as the representation of Indonesian. Hall (1997) portrays this relation in his circuit of culture to indicate how language as the main medium produces and exchanges meanings, which are obtained through a language as the representational system, using sign and symbols to shape as well as express people’s identity. The relation between language and identity is sometimes ‘so strong that even a single feature of the language suffices to identify someone’s membership in a given group’ (Tabouret-Keller, 1998 p 317).

There are some other aspects of language which construct identity such as a heritage language, borrowed variety, suprasegmental and discourse features, and code switching (Fought, 2006). Switching from one language to another reflects the speakers’ way of indexing their identity to a certain community speaking the language they are switching to. Bhatt (2008) has showed that code-choice ‘serves as a linguistic diacritic to signal ‘difference’ among various sectors of the middle class, especially between the English-knowing bilinguals and ‘other’ bilinguals’ (p 1). It is further stated that there is a sociolinguistically significant generalization that ‘members of speech communities in vastly different societies use their linguistic resources

sometimes to present a social identity, to set boundaries linguistically, to overcome the strong forces of conquest' (p.1).

Furthermore, identity is also closely related to discourse. Paltridge (2006) states that identity is recognized by participants involved in the interactions. It is further stated that the identity someone shows depends very much on the context, occasion, and purpose of the discourse. Fought (2006) highlights some significant discourse features, which covers how people make use of indirectness, norms of exchange of conversations (turn taking, silence, and backchannelling), jokes, complementing, and acquisition of language norms.

2.2. An Ethnographic Action Research : Investigating Teacher Identity Representation

Ethnography is commonly classified under qualitative paradigm. It is by definition a research procedure for describing, analyzing, and interpreting 'a culture-sharing group's shared patterned of behavior, beliefs and language which develop over time' (Cresswell, 2008, p 473). Ethnography has an overarching characteristic, namely its devotion to study cultural interpretation.

Ethnography usually exhibits several characteristics which are glaringly different from other designs. Punch (2005) proposes six main features. First, it begins with an assumption that the shared cultural meanings of the observed group are significant to understand the member's behavior. Secondly, the ethnographer is sensitive to catch the issues under the study from the eyes of the research subjects. Thirdly, the research is done in its natural setting. Fourth, it tends to be 'unfolding and evolving sort of study' so it may not be done under very strict plan. The last, the data collection of an ethnography is generally prolonged and repetitive.

These above cultural nature of an ethnography can be possibly mixed with an action research as basically classroom can be a reflection of real community. It is the fact that classroom may consist of students with different characteristics which are culturally inherited from their descendants. In nutshell, the members of classroom community can be seen as the representation of a real community.

Action research is often considered 'a new comer' as a research method. Previously, many people perceived action research academically weak considering the objectivity and ethical issues as it involves 'insider' as the researcher. The participant researchers are actively engaged and heavily valued in the process of the research. But today, these are not any longer considered obstacles as the procedures have significantly coped these two strands.

Despite the agreement on defining the concept, the diverse theoretical contexts and geographical settings where action research is applied create different classifications. Seen from the objective and theoretical framework underlying its practicality, Mills (2007) proposes two: critical and practical action research. The first is heavily influenced by critical theory in the social sciences. Mills explains that critical theory within these two areas share at least three commonalities, namely (1) a shared interest in processes for enlightenment, (2) a shared interest in liberating individuals from the dictates of tradition, habit, and bureaucracy, (3) a commitment to participatory democratic processes for reform (p.6). Further Mills also contends that action research is very much influenced by postmodernism which concerns with taken for granted assumptions of daily classroom activities. This challenges the notion of truth and objectivity and claims that knowledge is always an outgrowth of previous experience. This provides greater spaces for teachers to access research for their own through reflective process and action plan as well.

Action research can also be classified depending on the impacts of the action research. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) categorize an action research into two, namely participatory and political action research. The first requires Action research also fills the gap between real practice teaching and research. The existing research may not be accessible and comprehensible to teachers. Or, research may not be relevant to the teachers' need. It is an action research which can 'bridge' 'real world' classroom and 'theoretically-based' research.

The combination of ethnography and action research can be practically applied in our classrooms. The nature of classroom which mirrors the genuine cultural aspects outside of the classroom provides space for an ethnography while the function of teacher as the researcher who seeks for solution of classroom problems indicates the common feature of an action research.

3. DISCUSSION

The ethnographic substance can be actually poured in every stage of doing an action research. The spiral nature of doing an action research, in many ways, basically requires an ethnographic sense. In fact, an action research can be fruitful 'domes' for exploring ethnographic nature. It is especially true when teacher identity representation becomes the main concern. This topic implicates a wide space for teachers to work on an ethnographic action research with both short and long-term periods.

A 'short-term' ethnographic action research is generally conducted when we explore a practical problem which can be immediately solved with one cycle without necessarily a need of a follow up procedure. For example, when my English students always address me 'bu mei' and hesitate to use 'you', it can be possibly handled only by one short term or cycle of an ethnographic action research. In this identity case, the awareness of different ways of addressing older respected people between the native language and the target language is

pertinent. This awareness is then ended with ‘changing’ the students’ way of addressing their teacher. Long term period ethnographic action researches are essentially required when we deal with a problem which requires ‘step by step’ procedure and necessitates longer time span to see the impact of any treatment. Identity shaping is a crystal-clear example. It embeds a tedious work with lots of cycles as the ‘shaping’ procedures can only be detected after a series of actions. Below is an alternative of doing an ethnographic action research which focuses on one particular area, namely investigating teacher identity representation.

As an ordinary action research, this particular area requires some ‘general’ steps of doing an action research. In this paper, I will report how I blend every stage of my action research with an ethnographic sense as basically the nature of the topic needs the two. For doing so, I subsequently follow Mill’s four systematic stages of exploring teacher identity representation, namely (1) determining area of focus, (2) data collection, (3) data analysis, and (4) planning action. Below are the details.

3.1. Determining the area of focus

Investigating teacher identity representation is quite broad due to its complexities. Theoretically speaking, it may involve different ways of identifying and types of identity the teacher may expose and explore. Therefore, I primarily focus on how the teacher represents their identity, with this very broad sense, through their linguistic features. For searching an area of my ethnographic action research, I go through two stages, reflecting my own experience and explaining what my focus is. These two steps should be carefully done to expose the scientific side of my research.

a. Reflection

My enthusiasm of executing teaching springs my interest to look at the other sides of interacting with my students in the class. In many ways, I often ‘deviate’ my teaching to talk about something which is sometimes beyond my teaching objective. Even more, I may spend certain amount

of time ‘chatting’ with my students to share my personal experience. As the conductor of my classroom orchestra, I intentionally do that with a particular aim. I may simply react to my student’s comment on particular case or purposively do ‘a story telling’ hoping these may give a certain impact on my students’ point of view or way of thinking. These may be consciously or subconsciously internalized by my students and, much later, I may realize that my students take the point what I previously did. This tends to be sporadically done and, of course, me and my students may take the benefit or we just forget it.

Then, I do a careful and critical evaluation whether the things which seem ‘out of context’ really matters for me and my students. I have to objectively reflect to my own perspective whether exposing my personal point of view on what is going on in the class truly can be a learning input, or whether these ‘messy’ things should be ended and thrown to the recycle bin. It turns out that the reflection requires me to do more than just a ‘critical flashback’ of my past experience. In this stage, I have to equip myself with critical reflection on my cultural values which embed with them a mixture of religious and experience mingling with people with different background. I realize that what I have reflected can be a sample of what my community may do. From my students’ response to my doubt, it turns out that what some people think as ‘irrelevant small chat’ or ‘rubbish talk’ benefit my students in different ways. Some students say my words are stimulating, some other feel ‘you kick me out but drag me to the track’ while other conceive it as a matter of ‘something to remember’.

This reflective process provides space to scientifically explore how actually teachers represent their identity in their classroom interactions. Within this zone, I can convincingly arrive to the point that it is beneficial to investigate any teachers’ utterances which can be an indication of teacher identity representation.

b. Explanation

My personal experience can be perceived as an ordinary vignette of daily life. I have to wrap the pieces of my interaction with my students into a fruitful and significant area to investigate. Therefore, I have to put those personal matters into a scientifically acceptable focus of a research.

Theoretically speaking, what teachers have done in the class can be a very productive enhancer of student identity shaping. Connely and Cladinin (1999) observed that teachers have actually made efforts to reflect their identity. It may be subconsciously done and then attached to their selected teaching materials, designed classroom activities, their evaluation, and even their follow up stages which mostly should be done outside of the class. In addition, referring to Norton (2000), Ellis (1997) and Fought (2006), it is empirically proved that classroom interaction can be used as a systematic and well-designed identity shaping. It is further explained that some linguistics features can be used to express their identity. Furthermore, identity representation is closely tight to cultural aspects. Hall (1997) clearly shows how actually culture is represented and influences someone's identity. Within this framework, I hypothesize teacher makes use of their linguistic resources to represent their identity which may be perceived by the students and affect their students' identity shaping

3.2. Data collection

The present ethnographic action research is conducted in a content course class of English Department of UIN Malang. This involves a Discourse Analysis teacher and her 36 students. In this research, I put myself flexibly both as the teacher and the researcher simultaneously. In other words, I

function as ‘insider’ in the ethnography sense and as the teacher researcher within action research framework.

The above hypothesis indicates the needed data which necessitate ethnography interview and observation to the students. The interviews gather qualitative data how actually students perceive their teacher’s identity representation in their classroom interaction through certain linguistic resources to do so. This stage of data collection goes through what they do not commonly realize without being stimulated even when they have already reflected on their observable behaviours. Informal ethnography interviews can possibly obtain these types of data.

Active participation observations are also done to record how the teacher makes use of particular sessions and ways of identity representation. This is also necessary for noting students’ responses to what their teacher has exposed.

3.3. Data analysis

Data analysis is done by presenting the collected data in the forms of rich and thick description on teacher identity representation. The nature of ethnography requires an extensive exploration on the cultural aspects of identity representation while the action research indicates how teacher’s treatment may, to a certain extent, affect the students’ opinion and attitude toward their teacher identity representation and their own identity shaping.

From the observations on the classroom interactions, it turns out that teacher identity representation tends to spontaneously done. Even though teacher has already integrated this through the selection of teaching materials, it seems obvious that any well planned scenario can not be smoothly applied in classroom interaction. In terms of using the language, teacher often code-switches from English as the target language to

Indonesian as the first language. In a very specific circumstance, teacher may also utilize their local language, in this case Javanese. Within these classroom interactions, code switching does not merely change from a language to another but intentionally indicates particular values the teacher wants to expose, depending on the context of the conversations. In many situations, the teacher makes use of the target language for indicating the teacher's identity which brings some universal values and Indonesian for strongly exhibiting her personal identity. It is interesting to note that Javanese is always associated with teacher's identity which is closely connected with local values.

From the students' point of view, teacher identity representation is strongly related to teacher's perspective on particular issues. It is heavily bound to any values and beliefs, rooted from culture and religion, which may influence their opinion, way of thinking, or even their way of life. When they are engaging in classroom interactions, they may perceive their teacher identity representation as a part of their classroom activities which may be closely relevant to the topic being discussed or something which is out of context. When the last case happens, the students consider it as an 'intermezzo' session which can amuse them. It is especially true when their teacher uses Javanese because it implicates humorous sense. Most students, however, strongly state that they may internalize the values and beliefs of teacher identity representation as well as get the essence of teacher's messages which are jokingly transferred.

From the two parties, it is shown that teacher identity representation can be seen as an enrichment of their teaching learning processes. Teacher confess that identity building should have a wide space in classroom interaction while students emphasize the significance of equipping their personal characteristics which later will be of great help preparing them to survive in their 'real world'.

3.4. Planning action

From the findings, I identify several points which indicate the actions that should be planned in the following cycles. This covers both short term and long-term projects which may involve both individual teachers and institution.

a. Short term

Considering the above finding, a careful integration of identity shaping is important. It requires systematic and well sequenced stages of inoculating particular values and beliefs. Teacher can start from the very early stages of teaching planning and stretch that to after-class activities. It is not necessary to formally integrate identity shaping to the existing syllabus but can be hidden curriculum of any subject. When this can be continuously done, the short term cycles should be followed up by more long term-oriented projects.

b. Long term

Proposing the long-term follow up of this ethnographic action research needs to involve more parties outside of the class. Basically, it requires the institutional policy for obtaining stronger and wider impacts of identity shaping. It is recommended to have identity shaping as the 'prerequisite' so teacher will eagerly attach this matter on every course the students should enroll without necessarily having repetition. It needs meticulous and tedious cycles for preparing such well-sequenced hidden curriculum.

4. CONCLUSION

In this global world, teacher's business is not any longer delivering the materials proposed by a particular curriculum. They have to concern with something which goes beyond their four wall classroom territory. One of the crucial issue deals

with identity shaping. Despite the fact that it is not teacher's major concern, it is identity building which is as the 'main course' of classroom menu. However, a very careful notice should be taken into account considering the transferability and generability of the present study. These may be applied to quite similar contexts.

The findings of this present ethnographic action research indicate that teacher identity representation exists in the classroom and is perceived as beneficial business. In spite of its short span of conducting the research, it can be a promising starting point for the next ethnographic action research. For long term projects, it needs other parties such as stake holders, who are also supposed to be aware of the significance of identity shaping in classroom interaction. In other words, identity shaping is not any longer the teacher's personal business.

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