

8 Personal pronouns as linguistic features in the construction of pre-service language teacher identity

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1. Introduction

One of the affordances of the proPIC project is the opportunity to create a transnational community of teaching practice (Guo & Lei, 2019) and to foster collaborative professional development between pre-service language teachers at different European universities. The project also provided a suitable framework in which pre-service teachers could engage meaningfully in ‘identity work’ (Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). The study of teacher identity is a key area of research into teaching-learning processes in foreign language learning and is intrinsically necessarily linked to professional development. Analysing this facet of teaching practice helps to understand how pre-service teachers, from the earliest stage of their training onwards, learn to become teachers and develop as professionals.

Reflective practice can help student teachers to comprehend the educational setting into which they are transitioning and to understand their own identities as teachers. Traditionally, the activities used to facilitate reflective practice have been largely based on written reflections, for example, in the form of class diaries or teaching portfolios. However, several authors have stressed the value of interactive reflective practice deriving from collaborative and dialogic reflection (Farr, Farrell, & Riordan, 2019; Mann & Walsh, 2017). Particularly

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important in this type of ‘identity work’ is the stimulation of reflective practice through multimodality (Yazan & Lindahl, 2020), especially when this includes the use of images (Bessette & Paris, 2020). This approach to reflective practices enables trainee teachers to develop personal practical knowledge based on their own teaching and learning experience and, in particular, the awareness of their individual teaching identities that has been attained through this experience (Clandinin, 2013). Reflection stimulated by the description and interpretation of images generally takes the form of metaphorical and argument construction, establishing a connection between what is observed in the image and the pre-service teacher’s personal experience (Birello & Pujolà, 2020).

In order to discern how reflective practice functions in an interactive context (Mann & Walsh, 2017), this chapter offers an initial approach to understanding how pre-service teachers construct and represent their teacher identities, using a series of interactions designed to stimulate joint reflection in the framework of the proPIC project. The analysis focuses on the use of personal pronouns as a means of understanding the arguments on which the participating students construct their individual teacher identities (Farr et al., 2019). We first identify the personal pronouns that the students use to transmit their teacher identities and then provide examples of how these identities are developed by using the pronouns in the course of the reflective interaction. Due to restrictions in space, findings will only be shown along one sample description.

2. Method

Data were collected during the study week of the second cohort of the project at the University of Barcelona, in May 2019. Participants were 12 foreign language student teachers (aged 20-44) from five other institutions in the proPIC consortium. The corpus contains a total of nine video-recorded interactions with a total length of one hour and 47 minutes and 14,594 words. All of the interactions were developed as semi-structured discussions carried out to encourage the student teachers to reflect on diverse self-selected images that represented different ways to understand what it is to be a foreign language teacher and

its implications for foreign language teaching (see [Pujolà & González, 2022](#), Chapter 9 this volume).

The analysis draws primarily on Corpus Linguistics-Conversation Analysis (CL-CA) as an approach to understanding teacher professional identity ([Walsh, Morton, & O’Keeffe, 2011](#)). This approach allows us firstly to consider the range of personal pronouns used by the student teachers in interaction and the associated components that constitute the emergence of their teacher identities. This first phase of the analysis was carried out from a CL perspective, using the AntConc programme. In the second phase, interactions were analysed following a CA approach to examine in depth the relationship between the emergence of teachers’ identities and the interaction in which it unfolds: the reasons why the student teachers use the pronouns in a certain way and at a certain moment.

3. Results

Analysis of the data reveals a significant use of personal pronouns: as illustrated in [Table 1](#), they account for five of the 30 most recurring words in the corpus. The most frequent is ‘you’ (n=370), followed by ‘I’ (n=262), ‘we’ (n=105), and ‘they’ (n=84). The figures provide the basis for preliminary observations about the use of the pronouns, although they will not be covered in detail in this chapter. More systematic corroboration of these findings will be given in further studies, using a CL approach combining occurrence analysis with the study of lexical combinations.

First, we see that ‘you’ recurs more frequently than ‘I’. This suggests that the student teachers tend to engage more readily in group interaction than expressing their views in direct statements. Instead, they put forward arguments that establish a position. They speak less about their experiences and more about their reflections on a given learning context, seeking to involve the interlocutor using the first-person plural ‘we’. Attempts to involve the interlocutor in group discussion are articulated more commonly with the pronoun ‘you’ than with

‘we’, suggesting that the pre-service teachers do not consider themselves a group *per se* but they wish to encourage their interlocutors to discuss a specific reality: the experience of being a teacher.

Table 1. Top 30 recurring words in the corpus

1	541	the	11	236	is	21	105	what
2	399	yea	12	212	so	22	95	but
3	370	you	13	200	em	23	94	ok
4	336	it	14	175	mm	24	91	language
5	309	that	15	147	of	25	90	can
6	268	a	16	146	this	26	87	or
7	262	I	17	143	in	27	87	think
8	257	and	18	116	are	28	86	one
9	257	to	19	111	have	29	84	they
10	240	like	20	105	we	30	83	do

Figure 1 invites us to imagine a fight between two sumo fighters of different ages, which the participants extrapolate to the relationship between a teacher and their students. As we can see in the extract from the interaction (Figure 2), the participants disagree as to whether a contest is established between teachers and students. This idea, formulated by S (details not shown), is questioned by M, who asks S to confirm whether she agrees or not with the underlying notion of competition (lines 01-02). This request prompts a clarification by S (line 05), in which she confirms that she does not agree with the idea that teachers and students are in competition. Despite the change-of-state token used by M (line 06), S goes on to provide an explanation in which she clarifies the reasons for her misalignment with the image. In formulating her arguments, S displays a particular teacher identity that can be classed as a ‘language-related identity’ (Pennington & Richards, 2016, in Farr et al., 2019), since it is rooted in her linguistic difficulties as a non-native speaker of the language that she teaches.

Figure 1. Image used as the basis for reflective interaction

Source: 呂布の痔: <https://bokete.jp/odai/3234998>

Figure 2. Extract from reflective interaction activity

Extract (1) ID1_SZMO_1'17''-4'08''

01. M: >but but< (.) did **you** mean exactly when **you** said **you** would
 02. not agree with the with the message?
 03. S. (**I** see) (.) em:
 04. Z: [()
 05. S: [to the- to the fact that they are competitives.
 06. M: ah (.) ok=
 07. S: =so (.) it's- (.) because it's like: (.) em: for- for **me** it's
 08. not (1.0) language learning is not really like:
 09. Z: like a: [yea
 10. S: [yea- (.) >**you're**< challenging yourself (.) that's
 11. true but (0.3) language is challenging **you**
 12. M: ok=
 13. S: =**you** know what **I** mean?
 14. M: yea
 15. S: so (0.5) **you** are challenging yourself to: (.) em: (.) get on
 16. (.) >get on (hard)< (.) get- get updated and em: learn: the
 17. vocab but- (1.0) basically (.) the language (.) itself
 18. shouldn't be (0.8) em:: (0.5) em (.) shouldn't be a challenge
 19. itself (.) as language em: (0.5) is (so) too pragmatic to
 20. †be a challenge
 21. M: mhm
 22. S: or too- too pragmatic (.) to em:: to say (.) that **I** hav- **I**-
 23. (0.4) **I** can't take this challenge
 24. M: mhm

As observed in the extract, three personal pronouns are involved in the construction of teacher identity. First, in setting out her argument, S begins by stressing that what she is saying reflects her own view (for me, line 07). However, in presenting a situation to exemplify her point and explaining the reasoning behind it, S uses the second person personal pronoun (>**you're**< challenging yourself, line 10). The argument, then, is developed using a pronoun with which all the participants in the conversation can identify: S is exemplifying a specific

reality but constructs it as a shared reality rather than a personal one (in the latter case they would instead use the first-person personal pronoun). This form of argumentation with the personal pronoun ‘you’ involves the interlocutors in the scenario, encouraging them to see themselves reflected in the specific reality it depicts. However, once S has set out the argument that exemplifies her epistemic status, she returns to the use of the first-person singular pronoun (**I** can’t take this challenge, line 23).

In the extract, teacher identity emerges in interaction through the way in which the speaker explains her understanding of the reality presented in the image. S sets out a specific position using the first-person pronoun but goes on to give the reasons for her argument in the second person. This reasoning, in the form of exemplification, is a strategy for sharing personal practical knowledge with the interlocutor with the aim of establishing a shared epistemic position. With ‘language is too pragmatic to be a challenge’ S seems to share her own understanding of foreign language learning as a ‘practical’ endeavour, further than an ‘abstract’ or theoretical challenge unaffordable by the language learner. The teacher’s language-related identity (Pennington & Richards, 2016 in Farr et al., 2019) is co-constructed through this process of argumentation and search for shared epistemic positions with the interlocutor.

4. Conclusions

The notion of transnational continuing professional development promoted by proPIC Europa has made it possible to examine how the participating pre-service teachers construct their language teacher identities through reflective practice and interaction. This preliminary approach to the data has allowed us to observe how the identity of a language teacher is established through the construction of epistemic arguments and standpoints in which pronouns play a decisive role: Speakers use them to denote a position and to situate others in the arguments they construct. Further extracts and research are required, however, to learn more about the use of personal pronouns in interactive reflective practice from both CL and CA approaches.

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