TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF FAITH IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE TEACHERS’ IDENTITIES

A Modest Proposal for Extending the Research Agenda

Magdalena Kubanyiova
UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM (UK)

The last decade or so has seen a resurgence of interest in the interface of Christian faith and English Language Teaching, and the chapters presented in this section build on this research by focusing on Christian language educators’ identities. I first reflect on themes emerging from this empirical work that, in my view, hold promise for deepening our understanding of the role of Christian beliefs in developing teachers’ identities as language educators and shaping their practices. Situating my discussion in the wider debates in applied linguistics, I then offer my take on possible future directions in this growing domain of inquiry.

Introduction

Applied linguistics research has increasingly begun to appreciate that who language teachers are striving to become (Kubanyiova, 2009), who they are allowed to be (Creese, 2005), how they come to view themselves as they learn to teach (Kanno & Stuart, 2011), and how they envision and re-envision themselves throughout their professional development (White & Ding, 2009) exert a powerful influence on the kinds of learning opportunities they create in their language classrooms. At the same time, in the context of the continuing emphasis on reflective practice in language teaching (Edge, 2011; Farrell, 2009), there is now a growing consensus among language teacher educators and researchers that reflecting on the philosophies, values and moral purposes that guide language educators’
practices (Crookes, 2009; Johnston, 2003) should be part and parcel of any language teacher education and development. This collection of papers makes it clear that religious faith can be a key source for facilitating such reflection. It appears, therefore, that understanding the development of language teacher identity in relation to a philosophy of teaching that is informed by religious faith is a very timely pursuit in the current domain of applied linguistics.

The studies presented in Part I of this volume adopt a range of different approaches and angles on this theme. To start with, Wong (Chapter 2) examines two sets of interview data gathered 10 years apart of three North American Christian teachers working in China and considers factors impacting on the development of their identity and pedagogy, linking these to the teachers’ multiple communities of practice, including missionary, professional, personal and political. Wang-McGrath (Chapter 3) takes a more ethnographic look at the collaborative dynamics in the pairings of Christian native speaking teachers of English recruited through a Christian agency and their Taiwanese colleagues, with a particular focus on the balance of power in their professional interactions. Pasquale (Chapter 4) engages in an interview-based exploration on how faith shaped the perceptions of North American novice as well as veteran teachers of English, Spanish, German and French by focusing on the research participants’ views on professionalism, care for students, the teachers’ own motivations to learn a second language, and their reflections on the curriculum content as a platform for enacting their identities as Christian educators. And finally, Wu and Wong (Chapter 5) focus their lenses on thirteen TESOL students’ narrative journals, with the aim to examine evidence of the interconnectedness between the development of the students’ ‘global competence’ and their spiritual formation during their summer teaching practice in Myanmar.

The themes that these four studies have generated are rich and varied. Rather than discussing each chapter separately, I will first focus on key areas of interest that have emerged from this empirical work and that I see as potentially fruitful pointers for extended inquiry in this domain of research. In the second part of my discussion, I will outline more specific theoretical, as well as methodological, directions and challenges for future research that, if addressed, could further contribute to the development of this important field of study.

Emergent Themes

The Centrality of Religious Beliefs in the Formation of TESOL Educators’ Identities

We know from research in the language teacher cognition domain that beliefs play an important role in shaping teachers’ classroom practices, but we are much less certain about the kinds of beliefs that are at the center of language teachers’ belief systems (cf. Borg, 2006). The studies presented in this volume have begun to put a spotlight on religious beliefs as potentially central in guiding how Christian
language educators approach their work. We have learned from the four studies, for instance, that Christian beliefs may be a key source for constructing teachers’ images of good teaching. This is a particularly intriguing finding in the context of recent research that has demonstrated that teachers’ images of good teaching and, more specifically, their future-oriented images of selves are not only key in influencing teachers’ professional development choices (Hiver, in press), but are ‘firmly imprinted in what the teachers do in the classroom, what concerns them about their practices, which classroom events they are determined to act upon and to which, in contrast, they, subconsciously or deliberately, turn a blind eye’ (Kubanyiova, 2012, p. 122). The research presented in this collection of chapters has suggested that religious beliefs may be a key catalyst in the development of adaptive images for classroom practice and a systematic effort to understand how they shape the visions of Christian language educators and, consequently, what these mean for students’ language learning opportunities could constitute an important line of future inquiry.

Another current gap in the research on TESOL educators that the present collection of studies have begun to address concerns ways in which language teachers approach tensions between their beliefs and the normative pressures of their work environment (Crookes, 2009). It has emerged from the present research (most notably in Chapter 2) that religious beliefs may play a central role in strengthening teachers’ resolve and commitment in the face of adversity, in coping with the emotional challenges that working in new professional and sociocultural environments often brings and in instilling an attitude of acceptance as a way of approaching various contradictions and imperatives imposed by teachers’ institutions.

**The Complex and Dynamic Relationship Between Christian Beliefs and Language Teaching Practice**

Teacher beliefs have been defined in the teacher cognition literature as complex, dynamic and highly situated constructs (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011; Feryok, 2010), and the findings presented in the four studies demonstrate that Christian beliefs are no exception. While Christian believers would undoubtedly unite around a core set of beliefs that they espouse, the picture becomes much more complex when we start interrogating Christian educators’ own interpretations of what their beliefs imply for their classroom practice. We have learned, for example, that different teachers attach different, and at times even contradictory, meanings to their religious faith in relation to their pedagogical decisions. A good illustration of this are the practices and reflections of Cynthia (Chapter 2), a language teacher who consciously decided not to include specific Christian-oriented topics in her lessons as they were not part of the curriculum, which was evaluated by Wong as an expression of Cynthia’s Christian faith. Carol (Chapter 3), on the other hand, clearly experienced an internal conflict between her religious beliefs and the pressures of her teaching context when she was not able to integrate
Christian-related content into her syllabus, and therefore felt she acted against her convictions about what her faith implied for classroom pedagogy. And finally, we have also seen evidence of a Christian language educator (Josie, Chapter 4) who did not believe there was a ‘Christian’ way of teaching, even though this, of course, may not necessarily imply that her Christian identity was in no way reflected in her classroom practice.

In addition to these diverse interpretations of how Christian faith translates into classroom pedagogy, we have also witnessed examples of significant shifts in teachers’ understandings of their Christian faith through their increased and deepened engagement in their personal and professional communities of practice. For example, Jacque’s (Chapter 2) growing acceptance of people of other faiths through his experiences of generosity of people around him provides evidence of deepening his own understanding and identification with his Christian beliefs. Chapter 5 complements this finding by documenting the role of the student teachers’ cross-cultural experiences in their reassessment of the meaning of their faith convictions.

This research has shown that teachers’ beliefs about what their Christian identities imply for language teaching are a result of a complex and dynamic relationship between the teachers’ sociocultural and educational backgrounds and spiritual-formation histories, on the one hand, and the specific professional and cultural contexts in which their identities are invested, on the other. While the studies presented in this part mostly focus on ways in which teachers’ religious beliefs may contribute to the formation of their professional identities, understanding how the teachers’ growing perceptions of themselves as language educators may shape, nurture or deepen their commitment to Christian identity could be an equally profitable direction for future research accounting for the complex, dynamic and interconnected relationship between the two.

**The Problem of Power**

The issue of power has been an enduring theme in research on Christian educators in ELT and, while only one study (Chapter 3) focuses on power directly, this theme recurs in the discussion of findings across the four chapters. The reasons behind the prominence of the topic is clearly rooted in the problematic historical and political context of imposing Western ideologies alongside Christian missionary work in the developing world and in the moral questions being raised by the TESOL professional community about the legitimacy of the use of English language education in the pursuit of a missionary project (Varghese & Johnston, 2007).

In the context of the studies presented in this part, these concerns make sense; the majority of teachers participating in this research are North American evangelical Christians pursuing ELT as a platform for missionary work mostly in developing countries. It is only right, therefore, that the current studies make the effort to engage with and address these important moral questions. Yet, it is also
clear that the almost default tendency of linking Christian ELT practitioners with the position of power and privilege runs a risk of leaving out from our investigations significant populations of Christian educators who find themselves at the opposite end of the power spectrum. This concerns, for instance, Christian English language educators who do not work for missionary organisations, are multilingual speakers with English being their additional language and who live and teach in contexts in which some of their deeply cherished professional and religious identities are marginalised (for example, a Christian teacher from Eastern Europe teaching English as an Additional Language in a state school in England).

Thus, while the efforts to deal with important moral questions must not disappear from the Christian language teacher identity research agenda, future research will need to ensure that concerns with power do not overshadow other, equally significant themes that could enhance our understanding of the values that underpin Christian language educators’ practices in a wider range of contexts and power dynamics.

**Future Directions**

I have looked at the centrality of religious beliefs in the formation of TESOL educators’ identities, the complex and dynamic relationship between Christian beliefs and practice and the issue of power as three key themes emerging from the current research. I have also hinted at possible directions that could enhance the current research agenda even further. In the remainder of my discussion, I will build on these pointers for future research and propose three broad tasks for enhancing our understanding of Christian language educators’ identities and firmly building on relevant domains of inquiry in the broader field of applied linguistics.

**Constructing Rich Portraits of Christian Language Educators**

One of the first and, in my view, most urgent tasks that Christian language teacher researchers face concerns a systematic work on the empirical construction of multi-layered and textured portraits of who Christian language educators are, where they come from, and what they are striving to accomplish in their interactions with their students, teaching partners, colleagues, and their students’ parents. We need to further our inquiry into how Christian language educators forge new identities, linking their Christian selves to ‘the new worldly demands’ (van Lier, 2007, p. 62) and how they negotiate and, even more importantly, transcend conflicting images of desired practice available in the social, cultural and historical macro-structures of their teaching worlds. We have seen some important examples of this direction in the current studies, but it will be important to continue in these efforts.

It may be crucial, for instance, to unpack more fully the notion of ‘calling to teach’ (Chapter 2) and what meaning this has for different experienced, as well as
inexperienced, Christian educators with diverse life histories and whose work is embedded in a range of educational, sociocultural and geographical contexts. Linking this inquiry to the growing body of research in second language teacher education and identity development in applied linguistics, we will also need a deeper understanding of how Christian teachers navigate transitions from students to teachers (Cross, 2010; Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Kanno & Stuart, 2011) and how their understanding of being ‘called to teach’ may change over time.

It seems to me, therefore, that if this field of study aspires to deepen our understanding of who Christian language educators are, it will need to continue in generating in-depth portraits of Christian teachers’ past personal and professional histories, present beliefs, emotions and dispositions, as well as their future images in relation to the multiple contexts in which their activities are situated.

**Generating Thick Descriptions of Christian Language Educators’ Practices**

One of the most notable features in research on Christian educators in general, and in the four papers in this part in particular, concerns an almost exclusive empirical focus on ‘narrated’ as opposed to ‘enacted’ identities (cf. Kanno & Stuart, 2011). Focusing on the former can, of course, contribute in significant ways to enhancing our understanding of the ‘who’ of Christian language teaching. At the same time, however, a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of Christian language teachers’ practices, as evidenced through a host of instructional procedures, classroom management decisions, classroom discourse patterns and general interactions with the students or colleagues, can often be equally, if not more, illuminating in this respect.

It is certainly true that some of the four studies have alluded to these aspects of the teachers’ practices. It appears, however, that moving beyond anecdotal evidence and incorporating a thick description of Christian language educators’ practices into the research designs will be an important next step in facilitating our appreciation of the ways in which Christian educators’ practices are informed by their Christian beliefs and, ultimately, what this means for the quality of learning opportunities in their language classrooms. The four research articles in this part have shown potential for such work and I look forward to seeing an extended empirical focus in this direction in future research.

**Enhancing Methodological Rigor**

My final proposal is methodological, and I would particularly wish to highlight the need for dealing with contradictory evidence and researcher reflexivity as two ways of enhancing the trustworthiness of the research findings. We have seen in these four studies impressive examples of Christian language educators’ friendly interactions with their non-Christian colleagues (Chapter 3), their development
in desired directions (Chapters 2 and 5), and the positive impact of their Christian faith on various aspects of their beliefs and practices (Chapter 4). Yet, the question remains about the ways in which deviations to these findings should be approached and, more generally, how to engage with negative evidence that may, at times, run counter to the researchers’ expectations.

Reflecting on Josie (Chapter 4), whose data have been excluded from the analysis since they did not fit in with the overall argument of the paper, I wondered, for example, whether this finding was in fact an important analytical opportunity that would allow us a glimpse into the complex and dynamic interplay of Christian beliefs and language practices—a theme I touched on in my earlier discussion. Similarly, it was truly heartening to see the positive evidence of the student teachers’ spiritual formation in Chapter 5. Yet, I kept asking myself whether a more explicit engagement with the conflicts, struggles and evidence of a ‘shake-up’ in the participants’ faith convictions that Wu and Wong have alluded to could be a way towards the construction of multi-layered and textured portraits of Christian language educators that I mentioned earlier.

The second issue concerns the need of the researchers to reflect on what they bring to their research and how their identities, personal and professional histories and research relationships may shape how they look at their data and what they see. Chapter 2 was the only one in this part that has dealt with the researcher identity and potential bias in interpreting the data in an open manner. In order to increase the transparency and trustworthiness of the findings, future research will benefit from following this example. I also believe, however, that a more explicit reflection on the researchers’ practice (Hawkins & Norton, 2009) and, in particular, how their identities may shape the power relationships between them and the teachers they examine (Norton & Early, 2011) will be an important next step in enhancing the methodological rigor in this domain of inquiry.

Conclusion

We have seen in this collection of chapters that investigations into Christian language educators’ identities constitute a fascinating and timely area of inquiry within research on the interrelationship of religion and ELT and applied linguistics more broadly. I have outlined here three modest proposals for extending the current research agenda, including constructing rich portraits of Christian language educators, generating thick descriptions of practice and enhancing methodological rigor. I believe that approaching these challenges will not only contribute to deepening our understanding of the themes that the four studies have already highlighted in their findings, but also generate new avenues for further inquiry and thus contribute to the constructive dialogue that has been initiated in this domain (Varghese & Johnston, 2007) and that, I hope, will include an interest in a broad range of contexts in which Christian language educators of diverse backgrounds and aspirations do their work.
References


