Title
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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/65b284ns

Journal
Issues in Applied Linguistics, 25(1)

ISSN
1050-4273

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Publication Date
2024-05-02

DOI
10.5070/L4.7222

Peer reviewed

In Conversation with Gary Barkhuizen about Language Teacher Identity

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Gary Barkhuizen, Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Auckland, is a prominent scholar studying narrative inquiry and language teacher education. With academic roots spanning South Africa and New Zealand, his journey began with studies at the University of Essex and Columbia University, where he earned his Master's and Doctorate degrees, respectively. His influence extends far beyond his classroom, with numerous publications in esteemed journals such as TESOL Quarterly, RELC Journal, and Australian Review of Applied Linguistics. Renowned for his co-authored books such as "Analysing Learner Language" and "Narrative Inquiry in Language Teaching and Learning Research," he continues to shape discourse in applied linguistics with his work on language teacher identity. On January 16, 2024, he was interviewed by Huseyin Uysal. In their conversation, Gary reflects on pivotal career moments, emphasizing the power of connections in teaching. He explores the dynamic interplay of self-perception and external descriptions in identity formation, introducing facets like reflexive and projected identities. Dilemmic aspects during transitions, coping practices, and the impact of early experiences on identity are discussed. Gary extends the focus to broader socio-political contexts, highlighting the influence of external realities. Regarding future research, he suggests exploring teachers of multiple languages, heritage languages, and Indigenous languages. He emphasizes the need for self-study, addressing ideological spaces and practical implementation of identity research in language teacher education.

Introduction

My motivation for conducting the current interview stems from a desire to expand my research agenda beyond the focus of my doctoral dissertation, which centered on how state-mandated standardized tests influenced the identities of students classified as Long-Term English Learners (LTELs). Transitioning from student identities to those of their educators, I recognized the significance of investigating language teacher identities, particularly in schools with LTEL

populations, to gain a deeper understanding of how teachers perceive themselves and are perceived by others within their institutional contexts. My curiosity about the factors shaping language teacher identities and their implications for advocating for LTEL-identified students drove my interest in conducting this interview. The purpose of this endeavor is twofold: to provide insights for early-career scholars and doctoral students interested in language teacher identity research and to advocate for exploration into new areas of inquiry within this field, thereby contributing to its advancement.

On December 14, 2019, during my doctoral studies, I initiated an email correspondence with Gary Barkhuizen regarding language teacher identity research. Subsequently, I wrote a review of his co-authored book "Communicating Identities" (see Uysal, 2021), marking my initial substantial engagement with his work on language teacher identities, which significantly influenced my subsequent research endeavors. On January 16, 2024, I conducted the current interview with Gary. Following our conversation, I transcribed it verbatim and then collaborated with Gary on editing. Together, we opted to eliminate filler words to enhance clarity and conciseness. Gary made minimal content changes during the editing process, ensuring the integrity of the interview while improving its readability.

The Interview

Huseyin: *In your career that spans almost three decades, I see that you have studied various issues that are crucial for the development of applied linguistics as a field. Can you share a pivotal moment in your career as a language teacher educator where you experienced a significant realization or "aha" moment that profoundly influenced your understanding of language teacher identity or language teacher education?*

Gary: Perhaps there are two or three of those, but I will start with one and see how it goes. I graduated with my doctorate from Teachers College, Columbia University in the United States. I am originally from South Africa. After my doctorate, I returned to South Africa and I got a job as a high school English teacher in a fairly remote town up on the northwest border of the country, teaching English as a second language at a high school. I did that for a number of years, and really enjoyed the teaching experience. The school gave us a lot of freedom to be creative and to generate materials and approaches to teaching and so on. So, it was a good community.

I enjoyed doing my teaching and felt that I learned a lot and I could apply what I had learned in my study abroad experiences in the U.S. as a doctoral student. After a few years of that, I managed to get a job as a language teacher educator at the university where I was in fact an undergraduate student: Rhodes University, in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. I was teaching a number of graduate courses. This was a fairly new program, and in these graduate courses I was teaching, the students were experienced teachers, just like I was. Some were vastly more experienced than I was, in fact.

I was teaching two courses, sort of methods and assessment, very much related to my experience of being a classroom teacher. And I remember the first semester or two of teaching these courses and connecting with these teachers. It became a very strong word for me, this "connection", to be able to connect with these teachers, drawing on my teaching experience. And that connection I had with them based on that experience enabled very productive conversation. So, connections and conversations I think were a sort of "aha" moment for me. If you make connections, you can have conversations on a different level from just what you read or what you theorize. So that drawing on each other's experiences became very powerful for me for all my years as a teacher educator. This idea of experiences and particularly shared experiences.

Much later, the idea of story and narrative became important for me in my work as a teacher educator, but also as a researcher. The experiences told through story and experiences shared with others through story became very important for me in what I do in my language teacher education courses and the work I do as a teacher educator, but also as a researcher. So, having those connections, having those conversations, the telling of stories based on our experience, our professional experiences as teacher, that I was able to do that based on my actual classroom experiences were important for me and have been important for me for many years.

Huseyin: *In your work, you have discussed how language teacher identity is a dynamic interplay between self-perception and external ascriptions. Can you elaborate on how language teachers construct their identities, considering the complex interrelationship between personal beliefs, institutional expectations, and societal discourses?*

Gary: That is a big question, and it is quite a theoretical question, especially these questions about definitions. What do we mean by teacher identity? What do we mean by what being a teacher is? It is an extremely complex question. But I want to go back to my narrative work. I like the idea that David Block (2017) has spoken about in his definitions of teacher identity, where he talks about being a teacher as an ongoing narrated process. When I think about this narrated process, I think about three key words in this process: Who are we? Who are the participants in this narrated process? So, we are teachers, but there are also other people, like leaders and supervisors, students, learners, colleagues and so on. This question of who is very important.

There is also: Where does the action of teaching take place? These social spaces, physical places of classrooms and so on, and they are different for all of us. All teachers have different "who" and "where" experiences. If you think of language teachers around the world, teaching in very different circumstances with very different groups of students, with very different colleagues… If you think about this dynamic interplay, self-perception and external descriptions, the external descriptions, which are these other people who have perceptions of who we are or who we should be as teachers. Then, of course, there is this time dimension as well: how we change over time, how our identities change over time in these places and social spaces, working

with material objects, which is another important aspect of how we construct our identities. What technology do we have? What facilities do we have?

I have written about this a number of times, including with other colleagues (Barkhuizen & Strauss, 2020). I would like to think of identity as having a number of facets. This is making up this narrated process of being a language teacher. One of these different facets of identity is reflexive identity. This is who we think we are. This is our own self perception of our identity. I would like to simplify the whole definition of identity in this way. Reflexive is about looking inwards, who we think we are as a teacher. We all have ideas about our own selves as teachers. Then, we also project an identity the way we want to show our identity and who we are as teachers to others, to our students, to our colleagues, and so on.

Then, the counterpart of that identity that we project is how that is recognized, how it is received. There is a recognized identity, but there is also an ascribed identity. Sometimes we get ascribed an identity, and sometimes that ascribed identity is not how we reflexively see ourselves as a teacher. There is some contestation that happens there. Of course, as teachers, we also imagine ourselves. We have an imagined identity. We see ourselves in different places, in different spaces, and in a future time. So, we have these reflexive identities looking inwards. We have these projected identities that we show all the time in what we say, by using language and other semiotic resources like the way we dress, the way we use facial expressions and so on. These are recognized identities, or sometimes these identities are ascribed. And then, we also imagine identities in the future. That is why we engage in professional development to improve our practice potentially, or to gain tenure or to get promotion or whatever the case may be.

I like to see those different facets as facets of identities that are constantly shifting. We do not stick with a reflexive identity all the time, or we do not project the same identity. These facets are constantly shifting back and forth. Not only are they shifting by themselves, but they are interrelated. Those facets are affecting each other. It is almost like a complex dynamic system that itself is developing and progressing over time. These different facets are interconnected. They are changing themselves, and they are changing the other parts or the other facets of this complex dynamic system. And so, identity is always moving, it is always changing, it is always shifting, and it is doing so in a changing environment, which in turn is affected by our identities on both micro levels and expanding outwards levels to quite macro levels, which are complex macro levels with global ideas and theories about education, teaching, language, what is fair and not fair, often embedded in policies which are then implemented in institutions, which infiltrate all the way down into the classroom and what we do as language teachers and what our learners do with us in the classroom. There is this constant back and forth movement from these smaller, intimate levels to these bigger, larger debates and global issues that are happening. Let us imagine a classroom in some rural area, in some geography somewhere far away. It may appear it is not affected at all by any of this, but in fact, it is. Everything is connected because technology seeps through all of these different issues of debates. Even what could be perceived as a sort of "mono" type classroom or school—monolingual, monocultural, mono whatever—is not at all like that. They are diverse, they are shifting, they are dynamic, they

are changing. So, bigger global ideas are finding their way everywhere all the time like the movie *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022). That is what is happening with us as language teachers in our language classrooms.

Huseyin: *Your research highlights the dilemmic nature of language teacher identity, especially during transitional phases. Could you share examples or insights into how language teachers navigate identity tensions during significant changes or transitions in their professional lives? How does this impact their self-image and professional practices?*

Gary: The word dilemma means there is sort of a push and pull as part of your identity. We are talking about a dynamic identity, it is a situation where you want to go in one direction, but you are pulled in another direction, and then you are not sure, then you go somewhere else. This idea of equilibrium… You are being pulled back and forth in different ways. I spoke just a minute ago about this idea of having a reflexive identity by being ascribed an identity that you would contest. That is one type of dilemmic situation.

This happens a lot during times of transition where these dilemmas are often accentuated because the equilibrium, whatever that may mean, is disrupted in some way. Moving into a teacher educator position from being a language teacher or moving from being a student teacher into a teaching position, or moving from being a language teacher into a teacher leader or a leadership position, or entering a new job as a language teacher… These changes particularly emphasize these differences in a way of thinking about who we are, and how others see us as well, because often a particular role is assigned to these different changes or to these different positions. One example I can give you is—I have actually written about this—a particular case (Barkhuizen, 2021) where a language teacher educator working in Bogota, Colombia applied for a position at a university because she wanted to become a full-time professor at this university.

She had a number of jobs. She was a teacher educator, and a language teacher, but wanted this full-time job at a university. She did not have a PhD, but she had a master's degree. She applied for the job but was told that she was not successful because she did not have the right type of research experience. You can immediately see there are some dilemmas set up here for her, because she did have considerable experience herself as an action researcher working in her own classrooms and in fact supervising her own students' action research projects. She had a type of research that was not acceptable for this particular university job. She tells the story about this whole experience of not only applying for a job, but also her perceptions of what she believes they wanted from her and the type of research they wanted from her.

She goes into this long story about how they wanted a particular type of research that could be measured in terms of metrics and against the academic standards of the institution. That means counting the number of publications, what journals they are published in and so on. I think I called that "academic institutional research" in the article that I published on this study (Barkhuizen, 2021). But on the other hand, the type of research that she valued and called 'meaningful' research was research that she would do in her classroom with her student teachers

that would be valuable for that community, that would be about the practice of teacher education, and that could be fed back into the practices of teacher education.

She was very emotional. The emotions came through very strongly in the story she told about the tensions she was experiencing in this situation where she could not get the type of job that she wanted and felt she deserved based on her experience, because of the restraints and limitations set up by these neoliberal conditions that existed in the institution. In fact, her answer to the dilemma was to enroll for a PhD where she felt she could then learn to do the type of research that the institution required. In a way, she conformed to these requirements by enrolling in a PhD to be able to secure one of these full-time positions as a professor at the university. Her identity was going in all different directions—pushed and pulled—as she was making decisions that she probably was not happy with, but felt she had to do.

It is the complex shifting or the complex dynamic system of those facets of identity that comes into play here. You can see she reflexively sees herself in one way, she gets ascribed an identity by the institution, which is quite different from not only how she sees herself, how she wants to project herself to her community, to her students, and so on, but also how she imagines herself in the future as a professor at the university. Those facets are constantly shifting back and forth and up and down and affecting each other, interplaying, interconnecting. That complex system is dynamic and moving and changing, as her narrated life story as a teacher moves forward over time.

Huseyin: *How do early experiences shape the identities of beginning language teachers as they are entering the profession? Additionally, how does the concept of "coping" play a role in their identity development during this phase?*

Gary: Once again, this is a phase of transition, a phase when one's identity becomes disrupted because of the change in the way we are living, and you are living your life as a professional. There is a scholar called Gregory Bateson (1972), who, in his book, talks about people's life in general as often being in a state of disequilibrium. He says, what we do is try to restore that disequilibrium, try to get back to equilibrium, and we are constantly shifting back and forth, and that during times of transition, this equilibrium can be accentuated. I have looked at a number of different practices in my research over the years, in teaching and also in teacher education, particularly for beginning teachers, which, in fact, I did my doctoral research on many years ago.

These different practices are ways in which we try to deal with this equilibrium in our lives. One of these is what I call coping practices. Coping practices can be on the level of cognition. We think about the situation that we are in. If there is a state of disequilibrium, something is unsettling us, some tension or dilemma, we try to make sense of that situation. There is a level of cognition, there is also a level of emotion. What do we feel about that tension or this equilibrium? And then action. What are we going to do about it on a performative level? So, there are those three levels… Then there are two types of coping practices. One is instability-

preventing practice. This is where you do something to prevent something from happening in the first place.

Often but not always, you will be quite cautious as a beginning teacher, and you do not want to get involved in something because you think that might create an issue or something may go wrong. You tend to hold back. It happens in all aspects of our life. If you go on study abroad, you, in the beginning of your study abroad, may live your life in a way that is a bit more cautious because you do not want to get into a situation where you may have to use a language which you are not perhaps too proficient in, or you are unsure how a particular cultural group works, so you do not go to an event. You are avoiding potential instability in your life. And we do this in the classroom. For example, if your classroom is very crowded, you will make space in the classroom before you start an activity in order to prevent some disruption or some problem like falling over desks and not being able to do group work because it is too crowded.

A different type of coping practice is instability-reducing practices. This is when instability or disequilibrium happens, and then you have to reduce it in some way. As a beginning teacher or as someone moving through transition, we encounter unfamiliar situations, and we have to deal with it, we have to cope with it, so we try to reduce it. We move students around. We may use less material in a lesson or add more material if we are running out. You do something that tries to reduce. This is one of the practices. There are a number of others. I will just talk about two quickly although I have got about five of them.

Another one is generating practice. This is doing something that may be innovative or creative or something new, different, or opposite to what you normally do, something you have not tried before. These, of course, relate to your identity. I will get back to that in a minute. I am leading up to that. There is also conforming practice. This is where you start to do things in a way maybe because of pressure or constraints or because the school requires it, or maybe because students are forcing you in a way or because there are policy decisions that you have to follow. So, these are conforming practices. You start to conform in many ways even though you may not agree with them, but you have to do things in a certain way. For example, you have to follow the syllabus or complete assignments by a certain date even though you would rather be doing other content in the course.

So, we have got coping, conforming, generating. And there are other practices as well, like opposing practices. This is where you go against the practices of a particular institution or a school not in order to change them, but you do show some opposition to what the practices are even in your classroom. You can perhaps not do what is required in some cases. And finally resisting practices are going further than opposing. This is with the aim of actually making changes to the practices within an institution, school, your classroom, or your life. These are resisting with a level of activism attached to it. These multiple practices—I sometimes call it social or professional work because it is what we *do* in our professional life—could be seen as a complex dynamic system because these different practices are shifting all the time, and they all relate to each other and affect each other. This system is constantly shifting, moving about. There is no linear direction of change, they are up and down and backwards and forwards.

We have got this sort of complex dynamic system, which—this is the point I want to make here—is intertwined with the complex dynamic identity system. You have the two systems, perhaps forming a network of complex dynamic systems: the identity with the facets of reflexive identity, and the complex dynamic system to do with the coping, generating, conforming behaviors that interrelate with each other. They are sort of interconnecting with each other and affecting each other. And there may be other systems, as well. All of them are related to and affecting how we develop as language teachers, in other words, how our identity changes over time and how others see us.

Huseyin: *Your work emphasizes the sociopolitical context influencing language teacher identity. Could you discuss how broader sociopolitical, economic, and material realities, along with local/global discourses, impact which teacher identities are valued or contested within a given context? How do language teachers navigate and negotiate these influences?*

Gary: I think I have answered this quite a bit already because I have given you an example with Ana from Columbia where the neoliberal institution did not give her the job, and their reason why not affects her dynamic identity situation. The way I like to look at identity and those two complex dynamic systems that I have spoken about, these practices and the different facets of identity both of those are operating within a broadening sociopolitical context. The work where The Douglas Fir Group (2016) talked about a micro (interactional) context, a meso (institutional) context and a macro (ideological) context. That is one way of thinking about it. Those three levels very much merge into each other and are very much interrelated.

I like to think about it more from a narrative perspective because I have said that teacher identity is an ongoing narrated process. I look at different levels of stories. The stories we live on an interactional and personal level are these micro stories that we live in smaller interactional spaces. But these stories that we live, of course, also take place in institutional physical places, as well. What we do in the classroom as a language teacher or in a teacher education classroom where we are training teachers is not only what we do with them in the classroom, it also has to do with what the institution requires and more broadly what is going on in teacher education debates and teacher education discussions. So, these things are all interlinked.

For example, the dilemma that teacher educators face and where they are trying to divide their time between their teaching and their research is an interesting one. A lot of teacher educators work in institutions where they are required to do teaching and research and then institutional service and that sort of thing. More and more, over the years, there has been a requirement that researchers show evidence for the research that they have done almost to the point where it has become quite destructive. We see that early-career researchers have to show evidence for the research that they have published every year, and the evidence has to be evaluated in quite detailed metrics that they have to show to the point where it has almost become ridiculous that it requires so much knowledge about how the system works.

They have got to know exactly how to not just get this information, but how to present it in a way that is going to enable them to be promoted or to get tenure. This is not only for early-career researchers. I have reviewed applications for tenure and applications from all around the world. I see some of these portfolios that come through to me, and I am just astounded at the detail of how one's research performance is measured. These conditions really do have an influence on how we perceive ourselves as teachers or teacher educators. They have an emotional influence. I was the head of a school for a number of years and did annual performance reviews. On many annual reviews of academic staff, you measure against the university standards. I see this constant monitoring of what the outcomes are and what they mean, and I see how it affects the identity, the emotional wellbeing of particularly these early-career researchers and teachers. I think it can be quite devastating. I am not sure how that can change, but I would certainly like to see that change in some way. I know it is different in different geopolitical contexts around the world. There is this recent thing that has come up where they quote the top 2% of the cited social scientists. But you get people who are saying, "Oh my God! I am not on that 2%." or "I am on it. How am I going to stay on it?" They have nightmares about this. It is just ridiculous that they are so driven by these metrics that this affects who they are and how they see themselves, how worried they are about how other people are going to see them, and how their job will be affected. I just feel that there is just so much more that we could be paying attention to in our teacher lives.

Huseyin: *Considering your expertise in language teacher identity, what do you see as the most pressing and understudied aspects that warrant further exploration and research in the coming years? What advice would you offer to emerging scholars and doctoral students interested in delving into these areas of study?*

Gary: I think it is wide open. The focus on language teacher identity has gained a lot of traction over the years, and it is a very popular topic to explore for researchers. I think it is also very important that language teachers explore the topic of identity in their own classrooms in terms of not only teacher reflection, but also action research and exploratory practice. The problem is that identity is quite a difficult concept and people get quite concerned about what we mean by identity and where they can find the definition that they can work with. I actually teach a graduate course on identity and language teaching and learning, and a number of students take the course, and even by the end of the semester-long course, they are still grappling with this idea of what identity is.

I think it is something that perhaps we should not be that concerned about all the time because it can take up a lot of time. I think we need to have ideas about what identity is, of course, especially if we are going into this topic to do our research. But I think we need to go rather beyond that and look at other things we can explore. For example, looking at teachers of multiple languages… Recently I have reviewed a book on teachers who teach multiple languages (Ku, 2023), and teachers of heritage languages… What are their identities? How do they

construct their identities? Why is it important for us to know about their identities? Teachers of Indigenous languages, as well, in different geographies around the world. I think self-study is important, too. Researching our own spaces, our own ideological spaces, how we fit into them, and how our colleagues and how our language learners or our student teachers fit into these ideological spaces which you, as a self-study researcher, are a part of such inquiry. There are a lot of autoethnographies and so many more are coming out. They do not all focus on identity, but I think there is a lot of opportunity here to focus on identity. In the work on identity and ideology, I think there is a lot of potential there, particularly looking at ideologies of language like standard varieties and ethnic accents. There is a lot of work coming out on ideology and race. Ideologies of place and space, and how that relates to identity are also interesting to look at. Then, of course, intersectionality is another one: Intersectionality of gender and sex, and ableism and body and so on. These are very interesting areas. But perhaps I just want to finish on this point: These are interesting topics, but they are hard to understand. When we talk about pedagogizing language teacher identity, bringing language teacher identity into the classroom… How do we do that for language teachers and for language learners? There are a lot of these big words that I have been using and a lot of good ideas, a lot of good topics. But I think the most important is: How do we bring it into our teacher education and our pedagogy? Another question that is worth researching is: Should we do that? Are teachers interested? We cannot just say they should be. Do they have time? If we feel that they should have time and they should be interested, how do we deal with that? I think it is all very well saying we have studied our teacher identity and learner identity at a theoretical level, and it is all very interesting. Researchers focus on interesting topics and some potential new topics. Very interesting… But what do we do with that? How does it get into the work we do, the teacher education and the language teaching, and the reflection of who we are for professional development? How do we do that? And that is worth researching because, I think, that is a very difficult question to answer.

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Author Bio

Huseyin Uysal obtained his PhD degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a specialization in ESOL/Bilingual Education from the University of Florida. His research interests include fairness, justice, and equity in language assessment, and plurilingualism at public schools. He is serving as the Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Education for Multilingualism, and the Associate Editor of the Journal of Education, Language, and Ideology.