

73. Researching Language Teacher Identity Towards Critical Pedagogy¹

Fatma TOKÖZ²

APA: Toköz, F. (2023). Researching Language Teacher Identity Towards Critical Pedagogy. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Arařtırmaları Dergisi*, (37), 1173-1181. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1405830.

Abstract

The landscape of teacher education has recently experienced a significant transformation, shifting away from conventional constructivist methodologies towards more socio-culturally grounded and critical pedagogical approaches. This shift underscores the growing importance of exploring language teacher identity and underscores the imperative for in-depth research into its construction within teacher education programs. This evolution is vital not only to enable language educators to gain deeper insights into their students' ideologies but also to facilitate their understanding and cultivation of their own professional identities. Within the framework of critical pedagogy, pivotal concepts such as power, identity, and agency empower language instructors with the tools necessary to actively shape their own identities and effectively challenge the language ideologies held by their students. Consequently, it is essential to investigate how socio-cultural and political contexts influence the identities of language educators and how these educators can proactively mold their identities to meet the diverse needs of their students. Throughout this study, critical pedagogy serves as a lens for evaluating teacher education programs, highlighting how their incorporation can enhance the educational landscape. In light of the dynamic nature of education, particularly in evolving contexts, a critical language pedagogy perspective necessitates further research into the identity of language teachers within the field. This aligns with the assertion made by Kubota (2017), emphasizing the imperative of additional research concerning the identity of language teachers within the realm of critical language pedagogy.

Keywords: Language teacher identity, critical pedagogy, teacher education, critical approaches

¹ Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduđu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiđi beyan olunur.

Çıkar Çatışması: Çıkar çatışması beyan edilmemiştir.

Finansman: Bu arařtırmayı desteklemek için dış fon kullanılmamıştır.

Telif Hakkı & Lisans: Yazarlar dergide yayımlanan çalışmalarının telif hakkına sahiptirler ve çalışmalarını CC BY-NC 4.0 lisansı altında yayımlanmaktadır.

Kaynak: Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduđu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiđi beyan olunur.

Benzerlik Raporu: Alındı – Turnitin, Oran: %3

Etik Şikayeti: editor@rumelide.com

Makale Türü: Derleme makalesi, **Makale Kayıt Tarihi:** 28.09.2023-**Kabul Tarihi:** 20.12.2023-**Yayın Tarihi:** 21.12.2023; **DOI:** 10.29000/rumelide.1405830

Hakem Deđerlendirmesi: İki Dış Hakem / Çift Taraflı Körleme

² Dr., Çađ Üniversitesi, Fen Edebiyat Fakóltesi / Dr., Çađ University, Faculty of Science and Letters (Mersin-Türkiye), fatmatokoz@cag.edu.tr, **ORCID ID:** 0000-0001-9242-8829, **ROR ID:** https://ror.org/oont6ka44, ISNI: 0000 0004 0642 5982, Crossreff Funder ID: Q6035202

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Eleştirel Pedagojiye Yönelik Dil Öğretmeni Kimliğinin Araştırılması³

Öz

Öğretmen eğitiminin son zamanlarda geleneksel yapılandırmacı metodolojilerden daha sosyo-kültürel temelli ve eleştirel pedagojik yaklaşımlara doğru kayarak önemli bir dönüşüm yaşamıştır. Bu değişim, dil öğretmeni kimliğini keşfetmenin giderek artan öneminin altını çiziyor ve öğretmen eğitimi programlarında bu kimliğin oluşturulmasına yönelik derinlemesine araştırma zorunluluğunun altını çiziyor. Bu evrim, yalnızca dil eğitimcilerinin öğrencilerinin ideolojileri hakkında daha derin bir anlayışa sahip olmalarını sağlamak için değil, aynı zamanda onların kendi profesyonel kimliklerini anlamalarını ve geliştirmelerini kolaylaştırmak için de hayati öneme sahiptir. Eleştirel pedagoji çerçevesinde güç, kimlik ve faillik gibi temel kavramlar, dil eğitimlerine kendi kimliklerini aktif olarak şekillendirmeleri ve öğrencilerinin sahip olduğu dil ideolojilerine etkili bir şekilde meydan okumaları için gerekli araçları sağlar. Sonuç olarak, sosyo-kültürel ve politik bağlamların dil eğitimcilerinin kimliklerini nasıl etkilediğini ve bu eğitimcilerin öğrencilerinin farklı ihtiyaçlarını karşılamak için kimliklerini proaktif olarak nasıl şekillendirebileceklerini araştırmak önemlidir. Bu çalışma boyunca eleştirel pedagoji, öğretmen eğitimi programlarının değerlendirilmesi için bir mercek görevi görmekte ve bunların birleştirilmesinin eğitim ortamını nasıl geliştirebileceğini vurgulamaktadır. Eğitimin dinamik doğasının ışığında, özellikle de gelişen bağlamlarda, eleştirel bir dil pedagojisi perspektifi, alandaki dil öğretmenlerinin kimliğine ilişkin daha fazla araştırma yapılmasını gerektirmektedir. Bu, Kubota'nın (2017) eleştirel dil pedagojisi alanında dil öğretmenlerinin kimliğine ilişkin ek araştırmaların gerekliliğini vurgulayan iddiasıyla uyumludur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dil öğretmeni kimliği, eleştirel pedagoji, öğretmen eğitimi, eleştirel yaklaşımlar

Introduction

English language learners in classrooms across the United States lag far behind their English-speaking counterparts, graduating at significantly lower rates (Baecher et al., 2019). Therefore, teachers must be empowered to build and understand their identities as language teachers to improve classroom structures and lessons that benefit their most vulnerable students. Hawkins and Norton (2009) noted that “because language, culture, and identity are integrally related, language teachers are in a key position to address educational inequality” due to the particular population of students with whom they engage with and the subject that they teach (p. 32). As global migration creates more diverse classrooms including marginalised students from communities lacking equal access to resources that support their language acquisition and full participation in their classrooms and communities, language education classrooms provide a space for critical pedagogy (CP) to be introduced (Hawkins & Norton, 2009). Language learning is evolving through an awareness of the “pervasive social, cultural, and ideological

³ It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were followed during the preparation process of this study and all the studies utilised are indicated in the bibliography.

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest is declared.

Funding: No external funding was used to support this research.

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Source: It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were followed during the preparation of this study and all the studies used are stated in the bibliography.

Similarity Report: Received - Turnitin, Rate: 3

Ethics Complaint: editor@rumelide.com

Article Type: Research article, Article Registration Date: 28.09.2023-Acceptance Date: 20.12.2023-Publication Date: 21.12.2023; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1405830

Peer Review: Two External Referees / Double Blind

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nature of language use that can empower some but marginalize others” (Kubanyiova, 2018, p. 2). The importance of the English language learning classroom and the teachers who lead them, considering the power these teachers hold to positively influence communities from the classroom, become even more apparent.

How language teacher identity developed and impacted English language classrooms has become a particular focus of education research over the past 20 years (Banegas & Gerlach, 2021; Barkhuizen, 2017; Tokoz Goktepe, 2020; Tokoz Goktepe & Kunt, 2021a; Yazan, 2018). The identities of teachers are shaped by the relationships between power and knowledge, which have an impact on their perceptions and actions as well (Morgan, 2017). As teachers develop their identities as language educators, the expectation that they will consume existing theories and implement them in the classroom can be replaced with the expectation that they will develop their own theories and practices that impact classrooms and communities in novel and unforeseen positive ways (Sardabi et al., 2018). The emphasis on developing teacher identity as a goal is a significant departure from the neoliberal education programme goals most commonly seen in recent decades; it represents a shift away from producing teachers taught to focus on producing capable workers (Gray, 2019) to producing teachers who can think critically about how the classroom can be used to create positive changes with teachers and students who are agents in the education process. Critical pedagogy is based on the idea that teachers bring a set of ideals and beliefs with them into the profession and are active participants in education, capable of developing and applying their own theories rather than consuming knowledge about established theories that inform their classroom practices (Afshar & Movassagh, 2021).

Utilising CP in teacher education, schools can potentially become “potential sites of social transformation”, providing spaces where teachers can critically determine how to best structure their classes and lessons that can foster equality and challenge existing power structures (Gray, 2019). CP has been employed in the ELT profession for nearly two decades (Canagarajah, 2005), but its principles and practical implications have only recently received increased attention. Most discussions about CP have centred on its rationale, with little effort made to implement it in the classroom. By addressing the question of Language Teacher Identity (LTI) and Critical Teacher Education (CTE) in general, this study explores why LTI should be examined from a critical perspective.

Language Teacher Identity

Hoffman-Kipp (2008) defines teacher identity as “the intersection of personal, pedagogical, and political participation and reflection within a larger sociopolitical context”. This argument is echoed by Tokoz Goktepe and Kunt (2021a) who have employed a longitudinal narrative inquiry to examine the experiences of one Turkish EFL teacher in a public school. Their study unveils that language teachers' sense of teacher identity is constituted through the negotiation and power relations within their communities of practice. Abednia (2012) describes teacher professional identity as “how teachers define their professional roles” (p. 706) and as a “complex, dynamic process through which...[teachers] undertake their roles within the limits of their abilities and values” (Sardabi et al., 2018, p. 618). Afshar and Movassagh (2021) argue that language teacher identity can influence instruction, which is part of a dynamic process of constructing and re-constructing as teachers learn how to teach (Afshar & Movassagh, 2021).

A focus on language teacher identity emphasises the need to perceive teachers as “reflective practitioners” who are “equipped with prior experiences and personal beliefs which inform their teaching knowledge and practice” instead of as “empty vessels to be filled with knowledge and skills with teaching” (Abednia, 2012, p. 706). An understanding of the position occupied by the language educator

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and that of the English language learner, an understanding that can inform practice and be used to challenge power structures that so often oppress the communities from which these learners come (Tokoz Goktepe & Kunt, 2021a), signifies the development of language teacher identity and allows the educator to create space for positive transformation.

The development of teacher identity is not an automatic process accomplished by the rigorous and systematic teaching of education in college or during preservice, but instead “takes place in the midst of complex systems of different relationships”, and in “a process characterized by tension and struggle” beginning in the earliest days of pre-service teaching (Henry, 2019, p. 264). Language teacher identities are “under continual construction and reconstruction”, as “development takes place during interactions with others” and “is both an individual and social process” (Henry, 2019, p. 265). In a single case study, Henry (2019) describes the development of a professional identity in the teaching profession as characterised as “emerging from tensions between multiple and sometimes conflicting conceptions of what it means to be someone who teaches” (p. 263). On the basis of a similar study, Tokoz Goktepe and Kunt (2021b) found that the development of teacher identity is determined by several dynamics and that socio-political events also play an important role in developing teacher identity. Teacher identity is formed through practical work with language learners in which teachers learn and adapt practices that are best suited to their students. According to Abednia (2012), the identities of teachers shifted from instrumental orientation to perspective and from adherence to prevailing ideologies to critical autonomy.

These shifts are critical to identity formation and result in classrooms where language learning takes place in ways that benefit not only students but also the communities that schools serve. Numerous advantages accrue to language learners in the classroom when teachers are taught to think critically and develop a teacher identity. Learners in classrooms with language teachers who have worked to develop an identity as a language educator are given agency to create learning materials and make educational decisions, whilst teachers serve as participants in learning with the education and experience to “play the role of collaborators, facilitators, or consultants” rather than as authority figures (Afshar & Movassagh, 2021, p. 91). This establishes a new way of seeing the student-teacher relationship with a more equalised balance of power. It also empowers students as learners by allowing them to be active participants and agents in their own education.

Critical Language Teacher Education

As migration expands and relocates students, particularly those from marginalised communities, the racial and ethnic composition of classrooms is changing. Researchers have identified a need in today's ever-changing demographics within classrooms to educate teachers on how to “recognize, build, and/or develop man language and literacy practices in twenty-first-century classrooms and communities”, as well as how to use their understanding of those practices to improve their teaching and student learning (Garcia, 2017, p. 264). The requirement for CP in an English language classroom could not be more timely. The word “critical” denotes a focus on “how dominant ideologies in society drive the construction of understandings and meanings in ways that privilege certain groups of people, whilst marginalizing others” (Hawkins & Norton, 2009, p. 31). Hawkins and Norton (2009) also describe the critical theory as challenging “constructs such as naturalism, rationality, and neutrality, referencing instead the subjective, the social, and the partisan nature of reality, and the ways in which our understandings of the world are constructed by contextual factors that are ideologically informed” (p. 31). In this regard, critical pedagogy which is based on the work of Paolo Freire in the 1970s aims to address oppression and to “empower people to challenge oppression in their lives” (Hawkins & Norton, 2009, p. 31). Educating teachers within a critical agenda means tapping into “the political, ethical, and emancipatory

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dimensions of teaching...to prepare teachers who are empowered to transform the unjust status quo; teachers who can play an active social role by creating the context for positive action and by drawing the attention of their students to the less privileged” (Sardabi et al., 2018, p. 619). The practices of informed teachers in language classrooms to critically structure the environments that language learners encounter can transform their lives and those in their communities.

In the modern era of mass migration, the production of critical thinkers in education programs, specifically teachers whose practice is informed by CP, is of immediate concern. Sardabi et al. (2018) define the role of teacher education programmes as “to influence teacher cognition”, which includes their “knowledge base, beliefs, and thinking processes as well as their professional identities” with an aim towards “a change to teachers’ practices” (p. 618). Akbari describes CP as “a way of “doing” learning and teaching” in ways that transform society towards social justice and positive social change through education rather than as a theory of teaching and education (Akban, 2008, p. 276).

Researchers have discussed language teacher education as a place where “critical awareness of power structures, social inequality, discriminatory practices, and potentials for transformation” can be increased to positive effects (Banegas & Gerlach, 2021, p. 1). Practitioners of CP are aware of the social biases that are reflected in educational systems, where those in power make decisions based on established value systems, whereas those with less power are left voiceless, making education “a political activity in which the rights of certain classes are systematically denied” (Akban, 2008, pp. 276-277). In addition to teaching languages, critical pedagogues strive to transform society through education. In classrooms where language teachers are educated, language is recognized as an ideology with its own varying cultural implications rather than as a system, and practices inside the classroom which are designed with the intention of making positive changes beyond the classroom (Akban, 2008, p. 277). In addition, the language classroom is recognised as a space where prior knowledge and instilled values brought by the teacher must be continually challenged and reviewed and empowering teachers with these skills is a goal towards which education programmes must strive for if classrooms are to become the transformative spaces that language learners so desperately require. Since language is a highly dynamic entity, which continues to evolve and continue to progress in response to the demands of any given time period, language teachers must also have the ability to constantly reflect on how they teach and ensure that they continue to grow as competent language educators.

Need for Critical Language Teacher Education Practices

A critical pedagogical approach focuses on issues of social justice and social change through education. According to critical pedagogues, educational systems are reflective of the social systems within which they operate and given that discrimination and marginalisation are prevalent across all social systems. Discussions and debates within language education scholarship have uncovered a need for language teachers to be educated as “transformative intellectuals” who are “willing and able to assume a critical advocacy perspective that can uncover as well as challenge the socio-political landscape in which language education is located” to serve a population so critically underserved in our societies (Kubanyiova, 2018, p. 3). Hiver et al. (2022) suggested a transdisciplinary approach that is “less paradigmatic and more problem-oriented in nature” to linguistic research in order to best understand how this shift can be accomplished (p. 1). Sharma and Phyak (2017) argue that “it is necessary to engage teachers in conflict-filled situations to empower them to build alternative, and sometimes multiple, ideologies, without imposing on them experts’ ideas from the top down” (p. 23). The harms caused by the neoliberal aims of education policy seen in recent decades have been demonstrated in teacher preparation programmes that are “emblematic of the kind of deskilling and discrediting of teachers” in ways that discourage educators from engaging in critical thinking practices that can revolutionise

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language teaching for the benefit of students and communities (Gray, 2019, p. 1). Instead, teachers must be empowered to think critically to create classrooms that best support and benefit their students, becoming aware of the barriers faced by the communities their students represent. Garcia (2017) noted the need for teachers in the modern era to develop two types of awareness: “(1) an awareness of plurilingualism and appreciations of linguistic tolerance and its merits for democratic citizenship and (2) an awareness of the histories of colonial and imperialistic oppression that has produced the plurilingualism in society” (p. 268). Thus, language education classrooms can be structured in ways that are historically informed and transformative for the future, but only if teachers lead with the critical thinking required to recognise how to overcome historical prejudices and barriers.

Global migration has posed new challenges for language teachers and larger populations of students with unmet and often misunderstood needs. Refugees, as students, who have been displaced by violence, persecution, or war, are one student group in which a critically informed language educator is especially crucial (Baecher et al., 2019). Refugee students may exhibit specific barriers to language acquisition, such as trauma-related symptoms and a history of interrupted or limited access to education, amongst others. Refugee students tend to fall far behind their counterparts, even amongst English language learners, statistically. Given that several factors contribute to low rates of graduation for students who are English language learners, “quality teaching and the consistency of having qualified teachers in the classrooms who have been prepared for and are supported in their work with students of refugee backgrounds” is essential for successful classroom learning (Baecher et al., 2019, p. 166).

The benefits and abilities of such teachers to create change are well documented. In a study conducted by Afshar and Movassagh (2021), teachers completed a ten-session course on CTE in which they were instructed on transformative education and CP whilst reflecting on their own classroom practices in journals. The course resulted in teachers becoming “more aware of the social, cultural, economic, and political factors that might affect the whole process” of education (Afshar & Movassagh, 2021, p. 89). In another study, Yazan (2018) found that critical autoethnographic narrative exercises encouraged teachers to share their ongoing narrative insights with others, including through contributions to scholarly publications. Fundamentally, the need to educate teachers with the ability to think critically and examine their identities as language educators analytically to benefit students, and one another is evident and can only prove beneficial to marginalised communities. As education programmes for teachers evolve over time, a focus on identity development and critical thinking about classroom practices, teacher–student relationships, and power structures and how they reflect the societal norms outside the classroom, is essential to transformative change.

Insights and Implications for Further Language Teacher Identity Towards Critical Pedagogy

For language teachers, teacher identity and CP are intrinsically linked as supporting the needs of students is a task that requires deep reflection and a heightened sense of empathy (Kubanyiova, 2018). Teacher education begins with the goal of preparing teachers to form identities as language teachers and to think critically about how they can affect the change even in the development of teacher identity which begins at the earliest stages of practice; thus, the practicum stage can be the most influential in terms of identity development for an educator because the educator's identity must realign relationships from that of a student in a community of other learners to that of an educator in a community of professionals (Henry, 2019). In their study of novice teachers, Sardabi et al. (2018) found that teacher education programmes developed using the principles of CP influenced teachers' professional identity construction, moving them from “an attitude of compliance” and “a narrow view of EFL teaching” to developing their own voices and adopting “a humanistic conception of teaching” (p. 617). Banegas and

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Gerlach (2021) uncovered that after reflective sessions in which practising teachers met to discuss critical views on education using narrative inquiry and oral dialogue, teachers reported that their understanding of social justice and their increased feelings of responsibility towards it played a significant role in influencing their sense of agency and identity as critical English language teachers and that their classroom practices were positively impacted. Thus, the education of critically engaged teachers begins early and must continue throughout the professional development of a language educator's career.

The importance of teacher identity development for increasing the sense of agency the language teacher feels in the classroom has also emerged through research. Sharma and Phyak (2017) unveiled that teachers who developed critical awareness skills in professional workshops had an increased sense of agency and drive to work towards positive social transformation. Critical pedagogy, which allows space for the formation of new theories and practices, supports teacher agency. In her study, Tsui (2007) argues that agency and structure are opposing facets in the formation of identity, emphasising that teachers form identity by making choices, which they must have the opportunity to do. To ensure that language learners are engaging with teachers who can think critically and offer spaces that empower students and teachers, the need for CP and identity formation as a focus for language educators is apparent. As communities continue to shift and demographics evolve, language educators play a key role in improving conditions for the most marginalized, educating learners with the same abilities to think critically about their own and others' conditions and positions within a community, and reform societies into more inclusive and beneficial spaces for their students.

Conclusion

As global migration continues to shift, the production of language teachers, who are empowered to form their own identities as educators through critical thinking about the positions and conditions occupied by their students who could not be more vital to the future of our society. Language educators must understand the issues that arise as a result of racial, ethnic, and gender disparities in education and in society because of the population they serve and the potential for that population to grow significantly over time. As these populations change, the best and most fundamental place to address the barriers they face to full participation in the classroom and in their communities is the language learning classroom. To transform the status quo, teachers must be aware of issues, such as the sociocultural context of teaching, agency, dominance, and power relationships, the native/non-native binary, and culturally, socially, and politically loaded pedagogy. Teaching should not be viewed as a neutral act, and social, cultural, political and economic factors should also be considered seriously.

Further study into the education of language teachers fosters positive teacher identity development and encourages critical pedagogy: a task that scholars warn will never be accomplished through any concrete set of "prescribed practices that should constitute its knowledge base", (Kubanyiova, 2018, p. 5) is warranted. Further research into the best practices in education classrooms to encourage critical thinking and identity formation should remain a focus of educational academic scholarship, with the aim of making the classroom a transformative space that challenges existing power structures and supports the needs of the most marginalised students. Finally, research into teacher development and education that instils new ways of thinking into existing classrooms is imminently essential to improve conditions for students in language learning classrooms.

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e-posta: editor@rumelide.com | **e-mail:** editor@rumelide.com,
tel: +90 505 7958124 | **phone:** +90 505 7958124