"STUDENTS MUST BE HATING ME" IDENTITY FORMATION OF A NOVICE UNIVERSITY LECTURER IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE FACE OF THE PANDEMIC

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INTRODUCTION

To several teachers who enter a teaching career, the confrontation with the complexities and responsibilities of a classroom appear to provoke a form of "praxis shock" also referred to as "reality shock" or "transition shock" (Gold, 1996; Veenman, 1984). The transition from a student teacher to an actual classroom teacher puts their beliefs and ideas about teaching to test. This 'reality shock' takes a different colour with the revolution that has taken place in the field of education in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, with no exception to the field of English language teaching.

This study focuses on the context of a state university in Sri Lanka, which has adopted the distance mode of education during the pandemic. It intends to explore how the change in education platform, from physical to virtual, has influenced the identity formation of a novice English lecturer. As Barkhuizen (2017) states, language teacher identities (LTIs) are "cognitive, social, emotional, ideological and historical." According to him,

> LTIs are being and doing, feeling and imagining, and storying. They are struggle and harmony: they are contested and resisted, by self and others, and they are also accepted, acknowledged and valued, by self and others. They are core and peripheral, personal and professional, they are dynamic, multiple, and hybrid, and they are foregrounded and backgrounded. (p.4)

In this light, more attention is paid to understand how the novice English lecturer's imagined identity, the identity constructed in the imagination about relationships between oneself and other people and about things in the same time and space with which the individual nevertheless has virtually no direct interaction (Norton, 2001) is negotiated or transformed in response to the novice English lecturer's novel role as an online teacher.

METHODOLOGY

The study focused on one novice lecturer in English language, attached to a Department of English Language Teaching at a state university in Sri Lanka, identified by the pseudonym, Hiruni. She is a novice lecturer in English with about 9 months of experience at a state university. She has embarked on her career, on a temporary basis, after the outbreak of the pandemic and has been engaged in online teaching from the beginning itself.

This is a qualitative study intended to collect highly subjective data leading to an in-depth analysis (Merriam 2009) to explore the identity of a novice English lecturer. It adopted a narrative inquiry approach and the data collection was carried out using 'interviews as conversations' where the participant was encouraged to share rich experiences with the researcher. Narrative inquiry, which involves understanding and making meaning of individuals' experiences over time and in context (Clandinin & Caine, 2008) facilitated answering the research questions: how has the participant perceived herself as a lecturer in English and how her perceptions have been negotiated by her professional practices during the pandemic. The participant was encouraged to use the language of her choice or switch between her mother tongue (Sinhala) and English during the interview. The interview data were transcribed and analysed thematically employing the two-cycle coding method (Miles et al, 2014) Accordingly, during the first cycle, codes or labels that assign meaning to the

descriptive or inferential information were identified, and the emergent themes were identified during the second cycle.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis of this study develops along a few perceptual strands of the novice English lecturer, the emerging themes of Hiruni's narrative. Moreover, it is clear that these themes lead to a juxtaposition of the imagined and practiced English lecturer identity in the context of the global pandemic.

Facilitator vs. 'traditional teacher'

Hiruni has imagined herself as a teacher who 'interacts a lot with students' and 'creates an environment for student centred learning'. She has visualized herself as a facilitator who ensures that maximum student engagement takes place in the classroom. Interestingly, she has wanted to clearly distinguish herself from the 'traditional teacher' who, as she perceives, 'comes to the class, teaches whatever that is in the syllabus or textbook... to be done with what is on the book or syllabus'. However, the one-way communication associated with the role of the traditional teacher which she has previously rejected has now become a reality within her own role due to the nature of online teaching. Students who are generally less responsive even in the physical language classroom have turned to be completely mute during their online classes. Hiruni says, 'it takes the first ten minutes for me to make sure my students can hear me'

Student-teacher rapport

Hiruni has visualized herself as an extremely approachable teacher. She says, 'I wanted my students to feel free to reach out to me whenever they have problems with regard to what they learn'. However, the use of an online platform for teaching has resulted in a very 'distant' relationship with the students. Students' response to her requests to turn on their cameras has been appalling. She says, 'they send me text messages saying their camera isn't working'. According to her, 'it feels like dealing with an unknown community' and her students are 'strangers' to her. The passive existence of her student community which she has wanted to be actively engaged in classroom activities has resulted in a sense of uncertainty in her with regard to her performance as a teacher. In a physical classroom, the teacher would notice 'if your face is blank and she might repeat herself and that helps you understand even if you don't tell her that you don't understand'. It is clear that the physical presence of students greatly helps the teacher to see herself and her performance through the student response, and the online platform greatly limits it. Identities are accepted, acknowledged and valued, by self and others (Barkhuizen, 2017). However, the novice English lecturer remains uncertain of how she is perceived by others (students).

Impression created in the students

As a novice teacher embarking on her career, Hiruni seeks to develop her own unique professional identity. She has been immensely influenced by her favourite teachers, and she says, 'I'd really like if my students get the kind of image/impression I got about them, the teachers I used to look up to'. However, as she sees, the absence of the interaction and intimacy she has had with her teachers has narrowed her space to create a positive impression in the minds of her students. Hiruni thinks that her students only know her as someone who sends the zoom link to the online lectures in advance and delivers the lecture. She assumesthat the fact that the students find the online lectures monotonous and difficult have made them hate her: 'These students must be hating me when they receive the link. I really don't think they like me'.

Her personality, preferences and even the appearance remain vague to the students. She says, 'you can still create an impression while being yourself. If it is your thing to wear crumpled shirts, you can wear them and go to the class and be yourself. But, I can't say what I would have done because I really did not get the chance to do what I would have wanted to do.' Her struggle to develop a more complete identity and the restrictions posed by the virtual mode of teaching is brought to light here.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Hiruni's virtually supported English teaching environment has made her negotiate her imagined identity significantly. Similarly, her dilemma in relation to her present self along with the urge to negotiate her identity further, either to develop a professional identity or fit into the imagined version of herself as a 'perfect teacher' is brought to light. Moreover, Hiruni's narrative emphasizes that more student engagement and more feedback could have quite a positive impact on her identity and identity formation. In brief, Hiruni's lack of experience as an online student, her extremely 'distant' relationship with her student community, the absence or limited presence of multimodal resources such as dress, gestures and physical bearing for the purpose of self- presentation (Block, 2017) appear to impact the process of identity formation negatively. Hence, the study emphasizes the need to build a support system for the novice English lecturers entering online teaching and enable them to see themselves in a more positive light.

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