

Giving emotions the centrality in teachers' lives: reframing thinking, doing and feeling in Language Teacher Education through the lens of sociocultural theory

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Abstract

This article, grounded in a Vygotskian sociocultural perspective, calls for a re-framing of language teacher cognition by placing greater, and central, emphasis on emotion and thus how teachers *feel* about what they think, know, believe and do. Consequently, it argues that language teacher cognition integrates the interaction of both language teacher learner and teacher educator emotion and cognition, both influenced and shaped by complex factors, such as institutional and sociocultural contexts, and both therefore key in the learning-to-teach and learning-to-educate experiences. The article engages with some of the theoretical issues through observations collected via a small-scale research study conducted amongst teacher learners and contemplates on some of their experiences related to the issues in question.

1. Introduction

The reflections shared with the reader in this article stem from my general orientation towards theories that engage in sociohistorical, cultural and social perspectives on language,

be that communication in general or, as is the case here, language teaching and learning. The second reason centers around my professional practice as a teacher educator in the context of Higher Education postgraduate provision on TESOL and TESOL-related courses, for both pre-service and in-service teachers. More specifically, some of the considerations shared in the article are related to a cohort of students on a course in Language Teacher Education, which focuses on cognition, emotion and teacher identity. Through on-going research, my practice, and instruction in some aspects of Sociocultural, and Activity theories, it has become apparent that emotion (should) hold(s) a central place and should be addressed on the same level as other aspects discussed within teacher identity and cognition. In the on-going process of self-reflection, a particularly pertinent questions arouse, namely surrounding the nature of emotional responses in the ever-shifting context of globalization, and how those might affect teacher identity and professional practice, of both teacher learner and educator. Secondly, I wondered whether, and to what extent, social and institutional contexts shaped how I understood the link between emotional experiences as a teacher and other elements of my professional practice. Relatedly, the impact of my understanding of those experiences on teacher learners I have been engaging with seemed to be missing from self-enquiry. In discussions of the theoretical perspectives on emotion in class, the next question centers on how emotion shapes and influences the development of teacher identity of my students, as well as mine. Self-reflection and *ability* to self-reflect arouse frequently in seminars. Lastly, considering the nature of the cohorts I have been teaching, a question of potential differences of emotional demands of native and non-native English-speaking teachers also attracted attention in group discussions.

Whilst this paper cannot deal with all of the above questions, we hope to have given a flavor of the kinds of issues pertinent to the role of emotion in the professional lives of both teacher learners and teacher educations. Therefore, in section 2 this article engages with some of the

leading literature on the topic and illustrates gaps in the investigation of emotion on a par with other affective factors, whilst in 2.1 we provide a brief summary of the work that has advanced the research on emotion. Section 3 sets a scene for our theoretical orientation by examining key tenets of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. We then discuss teacher learner responses to some of the questions explored in a small-scale study (section 4), and offer some concluding remarks in section 5.

2. Language teacher cognition, identity and emotion: summary of key research advances

In the research on language teacher cognition, since its rapid growth from the 1970s, the term *teacher cognition*, also present in education research more generally, has been used to recognise that teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who play a central role in shaping classroom activities, and thus refers to what teachers *know*, *believe* and *think* (cf. Borg 2003; Borg 2006; Song 2016). Within this broad framework, coupled with insights from the field of psychology, it has been recognised that knowledge and beliefs exert a strong influence on human action, thus understanding teacher cognition is also central to understanding the process of teaching and the nature of teachers' instructional practices. The mainstream educational research, and thus research on language teaching, has tended to focus on the following three themes: (1) cognition and prior learning experience, (2) cognition and teacher education, and (3) cognition and classroom practice (Borg 2003: 81). In his extensive summary on the research in the field, Borg (2003) gives a clear sense of diversity in the approaches taken, which all consider different topics and contexts within which their work is situated. The studies address topics such as grammar and literacy instruction, whereas context includes experiences from a range of cultural perspectives and engages with both EFL and

ESL contexts. Importantly, it is possible to draw some generic conclusions from this variety of research, namely that teachers have cognitions about all aspects of their work. Further, as indicated above, there is ample evidence to suggest that the three themes noted above all inform teachers' various psychological constructs. For example, teachers' experience as learners can continue to exert an influence throughout their career; teachers' practices and cognitions are interconnected and, together with a range of other contextual factors, play an important role in "determining the extent to which teachers are able to implement instruction congruent with their cognitions" (Borg 2003: 81; see also Beach 1994). Additionally, research has shown that teacher training courses which do not pay particular attention to teachers' prior beliefs as integral in their professional training and practice, are less effective at influencing these beliefs (e.g. Kettle and Sellars 1996).

In the passages that follow, we wish to continue to briefly illustrate and recognise that important work in this field has been advanced, but that it has not yet been able to join up some of the perspectives, contexts and teacher cognitions in a manner that provides insights into teachers' and teacher educators' mental lives, and the centrality of those 'real' conditions in the processes of language teacher education. These elements appear to be predominantly investigated in isolation, although in the next section we engage in more depth with advances in this respect (cf. Golombek and Doran 2014; Golombek 2015).

The mainstream educational research stemming, as we said, mainly from the 1970s through to the new millennium has arguably mainly dealt with the concept of *knowledge* in order to examine a wide variety of 'cognitions'. In the late 1980s the focus appeared to be related to the role of the subject-matter knowledge in teaching, namely "practical knowledge", which attempted to illustrate that teacher knowledge originated in practice and was used to make

sense of and deal with practical problems (cf. Elbaz 1981). Whilst this presented an advance over behaviourist theories which dominated previous decade's research, a number of issues with this approach were identified, namely that it did not capture the process of teaching and teacher cognition holistically (Mitchell and Marland 1989; Borg 2006). Further, the role of teachers' beliefs was missing from the research on the complex nature of teaching and the need to understand the subjective cognitive dimension of teachers' professional lives.

Further advancement in the research reflected on the links between teacher knowledge and teachers' thought processes, noting the importance of the *context* in which teaching takes place: classrooms were increasingly seen as the "locus of social, psychological, physical, political, and metaphysical action[s], embedded in the word affected by it" (Clark 1986: 12). The research turned more towards examining the importance of referring to the socio-psychological contexts in which teaching occurred. Teacher *thinking* was refocused on teacher *knowledge* which necessarily recognised the importance of cognition and teacher's beliefs, including a recognition that the nature of teacher *knowledge* was not solely about sources, acquisition, transformation and usage in the classroom, but equally about teachers' beliefs and cognition that is often tacit and personally-held; it is a practical system of mental constructs which are dynamic and held by teachers based on a range of complex contextual factors, such as educational and professional experiences, classroom practice (and reflection on that practice) throughout teachers' lives (Borg 2003).

The developments in the field since the 2000s have shown that separating knowledge, belief and other related concepts is not a helpful approach to understanding teacher education and thus improving pedagogical practices through professional training, since research has shown that teachers see these constructs as necessarily interconnected. One of the important

contributions to the issues in question has been a distinction between individual teacher cognitions and those that are shared, the former being far more extensively researched. Others like Shulman and Shulman (2004: 269) stress the importance of examining teacher learning and development within a broader context of “community, institution, polity and profession.” Meijer et al. (2002) and Zanting et al. (2003) have contributed to questions on how research on teacher *knowledge* could aid in the training of prospective teachers. Inevitably, specific areas of research into the role of teacher cognition remain underdeveloped, and in some cases little or no progress has been made. However, over the last thirty or so years this broad field of enquiry has experienced enormous growth, and we hope to offer a contribution to some of the complexities raised above by advocating for a sociocultural perspective in better understanding some aspects of language teacher education.

2.1 Emotion

In the previous section we have sketched out some of the key themes in the development of research associated with (language) teacher education and have alluded in places to the importance of contextual factors that surround teachers and teacher educators, all of which are intrinsically linked and often circle us back towards more subjective elements of professional practice, i.e. cognition and beliefs. Emotion, we will argue in this section, is an intrinsic element in recognising these complexities of the professional practice and pedagogy. We illustrate this on some of the existing research on the matter.

As with other advances in the research outlined above, the past thirty years has also seen an emergent body of literature that has challenged “the rationalist intellectual tradition” of restricting emotional expression in professional contexts due to its (alleged) primitive, irrational and feminine nature (Golombek and Doran 2014: 102) and has instead given

emotion in teachers' lives the centrality it deserves (Shutz and Zembylas 2009; van Veen and Lasky 2005, to name but a few). Studies have approached this work in different ways: many have focused on *the emotional labour* of teachers in managing others' emotional states, such as parents and students (cf. Zembylas 2005). Relatedly, Zembylas (2005) suggests that because emotions are constructed in social and historical contexts, they also exist within certain cultural and power structures. Thus, institutional contexts tend to drive a particular viewpoint of various emotional states: those that should be encouraged and others which should be suppressed, creating in the process "emotional norms [and rules]" (Song 2016: 633) as what a teacher "should feel" (Zembylas 2002: 196) as opposed to what they *actually feel*. *Emotional labour* is further evident in the emotional work and effort needed in regulating teacher emotions, roles and identity, particularly that it is not explicitly recognised in institutional settings but rather appears in the form of "ethical codes, professional techniques, and specialised pedagogical knowledge" (Zembylas 2002: 201; see also Song 2016). Staying with institutional pressures and constraints, research has also brought to the surface ways in which administrative reforms lead to teacher "burn-out" as teachers negotiate their own emotional states in stressful situations (Maslach 1982, cited in Golombek and Duran 2014: 103). Emotions can be positive, too. Day's (2002) work discusses positive affective factors with students as a source of psychic rewards for teachers and as a contributing factor to job satisfaction.

Another essential element in understanding the centrality of emotions in language teacher cognition is the interaction of both language teacher learner and teacher educator emotion, how these are activated and shaped, and thus how the latter impact in the learning-to-teach experience of language teacher learners. Perhaps the most effective way in achieving some of these goals is through teacher educators' self-enquiry and consequently a development of

teacher educators' continuous understanding and reflection of their practice of teaching teachers. Golombek's (2015) work, as well as Golombek and Doran (2014), Johnson and Golombek (2013), Mann and Walsh (2013), have called for greater emphasis on and visibility of teacher educators' instructional practices on the teachers they work with. Golombek (2015: 470) goes further in pointing out the importance of the need to "redraw the boundaries of language teacher cognition to incorporate the interaction of both teacher learner and teacher educator emotion and cognition in their activity of teaching and learning." By drawing on a longitudinal qualitative study undertaken with a group of pre-service teachers and their experiences of teacher educator instruction, through reflection journals, Golombek (2015) leads us towards a conclusion that both learners and those that educate have experiences that are framed and understood through an interaction of cognition and emotion. Understanding and learning about students' emotional associations, a teacher can learn how to support, or "mediate" (Vygotsky 1978), students' emotion and cognition, based on individual learning practices, the level of development learners bring and potential level of development facilitated through expert others. Equally, teacher educators' experience as learners, as well as teachers, plays an essential role in the *quality* of the mediation as cognitive functions mature in teacher learners. The relationship between the two is "dialectical", a key concept in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theoretical perspective, to which we dedicate the next section.

3. Theoretical Framework - Sociocultural theory

Through Borg's synthesis of research perspectives on *teacher cognition*, we noted in section 2 a commonly accepted perspective on what it entails, or that it is defined as "what language teachers think, know, believe and do" (2003: 81). Following Golombek and Doran (2014),

Johnson and Golombek (2003), Golombek (2015) and others, we suggest that a key element is absent from this definition, namely what language teachers *feel* about what they think, know, believe and do. Relatedly, in underlying the importance of a Vygotskian sociocultural approach and the role of *lived or emotional experience*, we argue that emotion is on a par, on the same level, as the dialectics between thinking and doing of teaching. Let us unpack these proposals by focusing on some aspects of Vygotskian framework.

Explicitly acknowledging dialectical materialism as the source of his elaborations, Vygotsky emphasised a *dialectical* relationship between the commonly identified psychological variables, mind vs. body and individual vs. society, and thus challenged the dualistic approaches to cognition and emotion that existed in psychology at the time, primarily that the relationship between these variables was *discrete*. In doing so, he argued that consciousness is fundamentally *mediated* mental activity (cf. Lantolf and Appel 1994). This means that the psychological variables exist in a dynamic interrelationship with each other, as syntheses or opposing forces, which mutually influence and shape each other. Vygotsky began with a premise that humans affect reality and in doing so change it and establish new conditions, which also impact and change themselves. Thus, psychological processes have to be explained as a part of active participation in our every-day lives (Lantolf and Appel 1994). The psychological tools humans use (the most important being language) are adapted and appropriated in the context of “specific goal-oriented sociocultural activities” (Golombek and Doran 2014: 104). Key to this position is the generative capacity of emotion in the development of cognition. Vygotsky (1994) suggested that during child development, and similarly in the context of teacher learners, a perception of new experiences and environments is consequent upon cognitive and emotional reciprocal processing of old and new experiences. This dialectic of lived or emotional experience thus means that how one

perceives past experience influences current experience, which in turn has a bearing on how subsequently one perceives, or interprets that previous experience. This kind of reciprocal processing is regenerated with each new experience (Golombek and Doran 2014). Another key dialectical relation Vygotsky (1987) addresses is between *meaning* and *sense*. Sense has a social character because it is shaped by culture and developed through social interaction in the context of changing historical, contextual, political dimensions, as well as shaped by emotion. Meaning represents a “fixed” denotation of word (Vygotsky 1987: 276) and refers to its conventional understanding. The two are in a dialectical relationship because through sense a learner interprets their lived experiences, which are personal and dynamic, which then reshape and alter how a learner conceives of the external/conventional ‘world’. Since this kind of *mediation* of mind is central to Vygotsky’s framework, for a teacher learner an experience of any teaching practice and instruction depends on the *quality* of mediation between what they already know (the level of development already obtained) and the level of development made possible through mediation by more expert others. For a teacher educator thus, an awareness of the quality of that mediation to a novice teacher is essential in how instruction is perceived, and what the impact might be on the teacher learner development. Teacher educators necessarily need to consider teacher learners’ cognitive abilities in learning and teaching settings, and whether and how these might impact (positively or negatively) on their cognition and emotion, thus frequently re-examining the mediation between cognition and emotion.

The second pertinent element in the relationship between a novice teacher and a teacher educator is the consideration and recognition of emotion of the latter. Systematic examination of the connection between teacher educator emotions and cognition in relation to our activity towards novice teachers in our view plays a central role in the *quality* of mediation discussed

above. Further, a recognition of equal influence of social, contextual, historical, political, and emotional dimensions on teacher educators' thinking and doing, enables for engagement in self-inquiry and examination of mediation responses, which opens up opportunities to address how our social perspectives impact and influence learners' social space and their professional development. As teacher educators we all experience emotions with our teacher learners, often, as discussed in section 2, influenced by institutional (rational) challenges, as well as personal, dynamic, elements of our emotion. This complex dialectic in our view is appropriately explained and understood by Vygotsky's theoretical underpinnings and helps towards a better understanding of our teaching, and learning, practices.

4. Methodology

In the introductory remarks I alluded to a number of questions that were generated through my own practice, predominantly as a teacher educator, and how these led to a generation of this exploratory, small-case, study to (a) test some of the theoretical premises in Vygotsky's work and (b) reflect on my own practice and that of others. Within this context, I was particularly interested, and concerned, with the emotion of the students I have been teaching, and the impact this might have on their learning experience, cultural and social differences, and how it influenced their teaching practice. In the paragraphs that follow, I give a brief outline of the study, questions asked of teacher learners and some outcomes, which inevitably call for a more thorough and rigorous methodological approach in future, in the investigation of emotion in language teaching and learning.

4.1 A small-scale case study

Issues were explored with students who had at least some teaching experience (a condition for registering for the course on teacher identity and cognition), specifically with 2018/19 and 2019/20 postgraduate cohorts. The former included eleven students, the latter five students, all of mixed teaching experiences, mixed nationalities and a range of educational experiences related to teaching practice. Consequently, social, historical and cultural perspectives were mixed.

A method of data collection was in a form of focus groups of the two respective cohorts, both of which I attended and took responsibility for channelling the discussions related to a range of themes I was initially particularly interested in.¹ Based on some of the key elements identified in the summaries of scholarly work illustrated in previous sections, and for space reasons, we report here on three themes from the overall conduct of focus groups: relationship between institutional context (in the ever-shifting process of globalisation) and teacher learner emotional states (e.g. Song 2016; Zembylas 2002), whether teacher training courses teacher learners attended prior to postgraduate study at Brighton included engagement with reflecting on their prior beliefs and emotion, and the impact of those on their professional practice to date (e.g. Kettle and Sellars 1996); existence of other possible forums for considering and reflecting on emotional effects in the own teaching *practice* through training, for example in feedback sessions with their teacher educators/mentors (e.g. Golombek 2015).

¹ It should be noted that for reasons of space, it has not been possible to offer a detailed summary of ethical and methodological considerations and implications associated with focus groups, and the role of teacher (and assessor) in the objectivity of views put forth by teacher learners. The reader should also note that all due diligence was followed in relation to ethical conduct (e.g. anonymity, consent, right to withdraw, safeguarding of participants and researcher) and ethical considerations, as outlined in the University of Brighton's Code of Ethics, which can be found here: <https://staff.brighton.ac.uk/ease/ro/CREC%20Published%20Documents/Guidance%20on%20issues%20in%20research%20ethics%20v5%20May%202018.pdf>

4.3 Selected findings

The 2018/19 cohort of eleven students, as well as the 2019/20 cohort of five students reported diverse contextual, cultural and institutional contexts in which they worked as language teachers during their relatively short professional lives. Nine students in the first cohort and four students in the second cohort reported common institutional pressures they were faced with, despite reporting on experiences of working in different countries, UK included. The common themes that emerged were: importance of fitting in and getting on with the job, lack of time to consider emotional pressures surrounding them, particularly related to lack of time to prepare for their classes and lack of teaching experience, both of which contributed to relatively high levels of anxiety and stress. Another repeated theme that emerged was lack of support from those institutions for novice teachers and “not knowing” whether they were doing a good job. Relatedly, students from the 2018/19 cohort, who generally had more teaching experience compared to the second cohort, observed similar levels of stress and anxiety in their more experienced colleagues and managers they worked with, also faced with a range of institutional pressures. The novice teachers in question further observed their reluctance to therefore seek support and help in those professional settings; rather they sought emotional support from family members. Teachers who had experience in teaching internationally and in the UK (four from the first and one from the second cohort) reported difficulties in readjusting to changing sociocultural and professional contexts, leaving them feeling “vulnerable” and “exposed”. From the overall number of sixteen teacher learners, nine had teaching jobs before embarking on any professional training in language teaching. The students in question reported an existence of various opportunities to reflect on that teaching during their training; however, *all* reported that self-reflection instigated by their teacher educators focused on teaching *practice*, excluding any elements of teacher identity, belief or emotion.

By the time the sixteen students attended their MA courses at Brighton, all had had some form of training in teaching English as a foreign or second language. In order to preserve confidentiality of the institutions students attended to obtain teaching qualifications, we only note that eleven students had internationally recognised teaching qualifications and five had equivalent qualifications in level (and to a large extent content), undertaken at various centres in a range of countries that offered EFL/ESOL training, recognised in those respective countries. It is in this context, with varied levels of experience in teaching, that students responded to the second theme discussed in the focus groups. The response was unanimous: none of the courses students attended actively engaged in theoretical or practical forms of instruction on the role of emotion in shaping teacher identity, the way emotion affects teaching practice, knowledge and activity; the formal instruction addressed issues of knowledge in ways we have got to understand these concepts through a plethora of research, as summarised in Borg (2003).

Having established that all students needed to undertake some form of assessment of their teaching practices in classroom settings as part of their training to become teachers, which necessarily included feedback and reflection sessions with teacher educators, I investigated whether a discussion and reflection on emotions experienced during assessed teaching sessions, and their impact, took place. In conversations on the processes of giving feedback by teacher educators, none of the teacher learners in the two focus groups reported an explicit engagement by teacher educators with emotions experienced. A large majority observed however that teacher educators' feedback was considered, sensitive to the context in question and included positive feedback and praise, and where applicable, areas for improvement were

discussed constructively and sensitively. It could thus be observed from the shared views that teacher educators' focus predominantly concentrated on teacher learner *activity* and *practice*.

Perhaps noteworthy, however outside of the remit of this article, are two further observations from the focus groups. Firstly, considering a mixed cohort of teacher learners, issues raised around sociocultural and historical themes were tightly linked to a continuously existing stigma surrounding non-native speaker teachers and daily challenges faced by those teachers in negotiating their professional credentials. Secondly, in discussions around the curriculum offered at Brighton, the teacher learners overwhelmingly reported gratitude towards opportunities in the curriculum to engage with alternative theoretical methods, such as sociocultural and activity theory, and examine the complex, dialectical interrelationship of affective and other factors that equally contribute to and shape our experience as teachers, as learners, and further, specifically related to the two cohorts, an expression of gratitude for an in-depth engagement with the teacher educator on exploring the relationship between activity, emotion and cognition as a guide towards viewing professional practice in different light.

5. Reflections and Conclusion

Perhaps an obvious, although a tentative, conclusion could be drawn from the modest study conducted, which is a visible discrepancy between published research on emotion and practical applications of even aspects of sociocultural theory. The latter, in our view, offers significant insights into the elements that constitute teacher experience, which only if considered holistically, offer productive ways to understand and work towards change. One way towards such change is providing a more consistent and a fuller conceptualisation of the

role of emotion and its development within a cultural historical approach in ‘formal’ instruction of language teacher education courses. Another way might be to engage teacher educators in more formal forms of reflection on personal, professional and theoretical findings that could get generated through more structured forms of self-enquiry, leading to better understanding of the dialectical relationship between learners and expert others.

Whilst the undertaking of the small-scale research has left me with many unanswered questions (including the need to examine answers to additional questions posed to students during its execution), it has been an important first step on a journey to better promote teacher learner professional development; not only by ensuring consistency between teacher educators theory and practice and embracing the idea that all teaching and learning are emotional practices, but also by recognising complex sociocultural elements that continuously (re)shape how we as teacher educators respond to varied affective factors of teacher learners.

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