Becoming an English language teacher: Linguistic knowledge, anxieties and the shifting sense of identity

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Abstract

English Language is a fast growing and popular subject at A level but the majority of qualified secondary teachers in the UK have subject expertise and backgrounds in literature. This paper reports on interviews with seven secondary English teachers who discuss the strategies they used when taking on the responsibility of A level English Language teaching for the first time. It highlights the shifting sense of identity that these teachers felt they went through, and as such, explores some emerging issues related to identity from a narrative/personal history perspective. The study reveals that despite feelings of anxiety and low self-confidence, teachers felt that the experience had been a positive one in terms of their own developing identity as an English teacher and had impacted on other aspects of their teaching. The paper raises questions about the value of language-based work for English teachers and has implications for UK initial and continuing teacher education in English.

Keywords: linguistics; A level English Language; subject knowledge; teacher identity; teacher education

Introduction

This paper focuses on how English teachers with personal histories, professional training and subject expertise in literature teaching reflect on their experiences of teaching linguistics and language. It specifically reports on interviews with seven teachers of A level English Language, an optional Post-16 subject in the UK. None of

the participants in this study had subject knowledge backgrounds in English language/linguistics at undergraduate or postgraduate level, yet all had recently been involved in teaching English Language at A level for the first time. This paper aims to explore the concerns of these teachers in the light of their shifting identities from 'literature' to 'language' teachers, and discusses the strategies they used to cope with this change and to evaluate how the experience affected their personal and professional identities. It raises important questions about the nature of linguistic subject and pedagogical content knowledge amongst English teachers in the context of rising numbers of Post-16 students studying A level English Language. The paper also outlines how initial anxieties around teaching an unfamiliar subject are displaced by the value of becoming part of a community of 'language' teachers within the broader frame of secondary English practitioners.

Teacher identities

In their discussion of identity, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) argue that the concept has proved difficult to define since it sits within a complex series of relationships with other phenomena such as *self*, *emotion*, *discourse*, *narrative* and *agency*. Day et al. (2007, 62) stress that the notion of identity is best understood within the interpretative frame of the *self*. The authors trace the development of philosophical and critical thinking about self, explaining the movement away from a simple notion of the *stable self* from early models of psychology to a more complex model that highlights the number of *selves* that an individual might hold. These selves form part of a process of complex and dynamic construction and reconstruction of identity in the context of

external forces and change acting on an individual's personal and professional life experiences.

Turner (1968) provides a useful analytical framework for discussing how selves form the larger phenomenon that is a person's identity. He distinguishes between *self-image*, the sense of self that is conceptualised in the immediate experience of specific moments or events, and *self-conception*, a more stable sense of self that is enduring and persisting but still essentially dynamic in that it has the capacity to naturally grow and adapt to specific contexts. Self-images build into self-conception in ways that alter it; in turn self-conception may be seen to act as a *testing base* against which self-images are compared and evaluated, integrated or rejected through the process of *editing* (Turner 1968, 97). Self-conception is thus dynamic and interactive (Turner 1968, 100). Identity formation is always situated within a defined social context motivated by external pressures and forces (MacLure 1993) and is always defined as a type of 'ongoing reinvention' (Clarke 2008, 83).

The research literature on identity also highlights the interrelatedness of *personal* and *professional* identities (Goodson 1991). Teaching has been long recognised as a profession that places significant demands on individuals and asks them to invest a great deal of themselves (Day et al. 2007). Consequently, how teachers feel about themselves influences how they perceive their effectiveness as educators and practitioners (Lipka and Brinthaupt 1999). This relationship is to a large extent governed by the interplay between personal belief systems, feelings and emotions and the specific contexts in which teachers find themselves working (Rodgers and Scott 2008). Indeed studies have shown how a myriad of factors related to school

environments, school culture and leadership, and relationships with students and colleagues affect or shape a sense of self-conception both in the course of initial teacher education (Flores and Day 2006; Beauchamp and Thomas 2009) generally, and more specifically among trainee English teachers (Goodwyn 1997).

Identity also develops through an individual's increasingly active and influential membership of a community. Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that the evolution of identity is itself understood as part of a process of increasing participation in a community of practice where individuals move from peripheral to more central membership through their developing expertise, mastery of collective practices and acceptance by other community members. Similarly, Hodkinson, Biesta, and James (2008) present learning metaphorically as a type of physical movement to stress the participatory nature of identity-formation. In their model, which draws on Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* and *field*, learners 'become' through an ongoing process of participation that reconstructs both the learner and what is learnt. The process of participating in membership of a group equally involves learning as part of *becoming* and initiates further learning that is to take place. Learning itself is viewed as the accretion of skills and knowledge that is partly shared as a result of group membership, and partly idiosyncratic as a result of an individual ethos that emerges from full participation (2008, 41).

The subject identity of secondary English teachers

Both Beijaard (1995) and Helms (1998) argue that teachers' professional identities are inextricably tied to a commitment to and passion for their subject, and that

consequently it is important to explore the personal dimension and subject-specific world-views that inform the wider sense of what being a subject teacher entails. Writing about science teachers in her study of how teachers' conceptions of themselves as scientists affected their professional identity in the classroom, Helms observes that

[teachers] felt a sense of personal identification with science; that is, their sense of what makes science *special* is rooted in their own sense of themselves as science teachers and individuals in the world.

Helms (1998, 812, added emphasis)

Studies suggest that what makes English 'special' to English teachers is usually related to reading, and specifically to reading literary texts. Goodwyn (2002) examines both the response of PGCE candidates to a question asking them for their reasons for wanting to join the profession, and several hundred reflective reading histories written for a PGCE assignment. He suggests that the dominant formative force in English teachers is their belief in the transformational power of reading literature. English teachers, both during initial teacher education (Goodwyn 1997) and later on in their careers (Goodwyn 2010) have been shown to align themselves very closely to a 'personal growth model' (DES/WO 1989) of English, advocating the role of literature in developing children's imaginative, linguistic and social skills.

In a survey of beginning teachers' motivations for wanting to teach their subject, Ellis (2003) suggests that English teachers have an altogether unique perspective on the profession that manifests itself in the reasons they give for wanting to work in

schools. Ellis found that English teachers had a more emphatic allegiance to wanting to share their subject with young people rather than simply wanting to work with them per se. And, their passion for the subject was much more of motivating factor than the anticipation that teaching would yield great job satisfaction, or that they would make some significant contribution to society through being a teacher. In the vast majority of cases, this passion was a passion for literature rather than topics from the fields of language studies and linguistics (Ellis 2003, 10).

This emerging practitioner self-conception as a *literature teacher* is an example of what Goodwyn (2010, 71) terms a 'personal subject construct', an embryonic manifesto of the teacher-self that emerges during a beginning teacher's formative experiences, both as a student at school and university, and during their initial teacher education. It is very likely that being asked to teach language topics would present a challenge to this developing construct and could cause a significant editing of a teacher's self-conception.

English teachers and English language/linguistics

The percentage of trainee teachers coming onto courses with single honours qualifications in English language or linguistics is low, and PGCE tutors are likely to give greater weight to candidates with literature degrees (Blake and Shortis 2010). On university-based initial teacher education programmes where time is at a premium, it can often be the case that time dedicated to language work is minimal (Bluett et al. 2004). The arrival of *School Direct*, a school-centred teacher-training model as an alternative to PGCE, has meant that schools now take responsibility for the majority

of a beginning teacher's subject input. In departments where existing staff's expertise is in the teaching of literature, this could well result in beginning teachers having fewer opportunities to receive specialist input in language pedagogy (Giovanelli 2014).

Both beginning and experienced teachers' anxieties about their subject knowledge in areas of grammar (in its technical sense of syntax and morphology) and more general *language awareness* (Hawkins 1984) are well-documented (Williamson and Hardman 1995; Myhill 2000; Cajkler and Hislam 2002; Ellis 2007). Where anxieties are less pronounced, teachers have been shown to either overestimate their linguistic content knowledge (Sangster, Anderson, and O'Hara 2013) or view language work in negative terms, even to the extent they hold a strong dislike and distrust of grammar and language work, and a sense that it's somehow not really 'English' compared to teaching reading and writing around literary texts (Watson 2012).

The reasons for these views are considerable and complex, and clearly there is not the space to go into them in any detail in this paper. However, the relative paucity of research in educationally-oriented linguistics before 1960, debates about the relative value of English undergraduate degree content, and the rise of English literature to the centre of school and university English study – and the subsequent marginalisation of language and linguistics from the English curriculum – all contributed to a relatively impoverished existence for language based work. Expertise in language and linguistics among secondary English teachers is generally limited, and debates on the binaries of prescription/ description, correctness/creativity, and on whether the explicit teaching of grammar has any measurable impact on students' writing, and

therefore value have tended to dominate educational discourse (see Hudson and Walmsley [2005]). Despite numerous government initiatives over the last twenty-five years, there still appears to be a lack of knowledge among secondary English teachers about how best to teach grammar (Bell 2015), or even which model of language is best applied to classroom pedagogy (Macken-Horarik 2009; Clark 2010; Giovanelli 2014). Indeed, as Watson (2013, 11) argues, reflecting on the impact of policies, resources and attempts to develop expertise in language work, 'it is remarkable how little [in that time] has changed'.

Advanced level English Language

In the UK, A level English Language is a subject that is optional at Post 16 (Years 12 and 13), and is part of a suite of English subjects that also includes English Literature and the integrated English Language and Literature course (see Clark, Giovanelli, and Macrae [2015] for an overview of Post-16 English provision in the UK). A level English Language has grown from forty-two students taking an experimental optional paper in 'Varieties of English' offered by the University of London in 1981 to its current numbers: in 2014 over 23000 students took the full A level (see Hawkins [1984]; Scott [1989]). Drawing primarily from diverse academic fields such as linguistics, sociology, and psychology, the subject has a much broader range of academic influences than English Literature. Indeed its focus on varieties and diatypes, and students' own writing skills meant that it has not only challenged the 'English as literature paradigm' but opened up the opportunity for discussion about the nature of the subject itself since literature is viewed simply as a register among many others (Hardman and Leat 1998).

The popularity of the subject at Post-16 arose from an interest amongst linguists working in higher education towards a more sociologically-oriented linguistics, the drive of a group of English teachers at grass-roots level to promote language work with their classes, and the influence of key government policy and publications that highlighted the importance and value of students' knowledge about language (Giovanelli 2014). Over time, the subject's popularity has strengthened its place in the Post-16 curriculum where sixth form students have been keen to explore English in a variety of forms beyond that of literary texts. Academics working in English language and linguistics departments have seen the value in developing and establishing links with sixth forms, evident in a number of partnerships, open days and collaborations between higher education, examination boards and schools (Bleiman and Webster 2006). However, despite large growth, there are relatively few teachers both qualified and confident to teach the subject. Indeed, many of the anxieties expressed by teachers towards grammar teaching are amplified in the face of being asked to teach it at Post-16.

The present study

The present study focuses on seven participants, six women and one man, all of whom were English teachers in different schools in the east midlands region of the UK. Their teaching experience ranged from two to twelve years. All were classroom teachers with the exception of Fiona who was a head of department. They had all begun to teach A level language within the last three years, and all had come from non-language/linguistics backgrounds. Two had done some very limited work on

language at either A level (as part of a combined language-literature course) or had completed an undergraduate module with some very limited language focus. Five of the seven teachers interviewed had undergraduate degrees in English Literature (the others' undergraduate studies were in Classical Civilisation, and History and Politics).

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect responses from participants. The interviews consisted of questions relating to their academic backgrounds, reasons for wanting to become an English teacher and for joining the profession, initial attitudes towards language work, their involvement in A level English Language, support and professional development offered by the school and by colleagues, and reflections on their changing personal and professional identities as a result of their experiences. The looser structure of the semi-structured interviews allowed participants to actively construct knowledge around the questions they were asked (Fontana and Frey 2000). This approach allowed the building of a biographical narrative for each teacher (MacLure 1993), and encouraged individual reflection, identification of important issues and episodes, and an evaluation of perceived shifting identities (Connelly and Clandinin 2009). At the same time the methodology recognises the interpretative role of the interviewer as a co-constructor of the participants' narratives (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

The interviews were transcribed professionally, and then reviewed by the researcher and checked against audio recordings to ensure accuracy. The data were then coded using NVivo. Inductive coding was used to ensure that findings followed from the

data themselves. In addition, a *bricolage* approach (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009) was taken, moving between thematic analysis to discussion of the participants' use of metaphor as a structural and exploratory tool, and the shaping of responses into a narrative.

Findings and Discussion

Teachers' backgrounds and teaching Post-16

Participants' reflections on their own backgrounds tended to highlight their lack of linguistic study, and their general awareness of, and confidence in, language topics. They explained their own experiences as students of English in ways which foregrounded these as largely students of *English literature*. In turn, the conceptualisation of the subject that they said that they had taken into the classroom as teachers was almost exclusively based on literature.

When you were at school, in the late '80s, early '90s, I do not know for definite because I just might have had terrible teachers, but I do not think they taught it as explicitly as we are encouraged to do now. I think it implicitly came out of the marking, but I do not remember having that sort of language focus, or a literacy lesson, or something like that. (Charlotte [1])

I find it hard because I was of the generation where we weren't explicitly taught language and we weren't taught grammar. So it's constantly teaching it to myself because we never had that. (Belinda)

Well I didn't know enough about it, because I was of the age, at school, where we didn't do any language at all, really. I was at a school where we were taught basically adjectives, verbs, the very

basics, and that was it. I didn't really know anything on English language, as a subject. When I was at school everything was very literature focused. (Fiona)

The importance of schoolteachers' own experiences as students and the effect these may have on both their practice and identity is well-documented (Smith 2005), and it is clear that participants' biographies had influenced their sense of what *being* an English teacher involved, and had informed their own self-conception at an early stage in their career. As Knowles argues:

unlike future physicians or lawyers who come to their formal professional preparation relatively ignorant and unskilled about their future professional duties and places of work, future teachers do not come to teacher education and beginning teaching ignorant and unskilled as to the mechanics, processes and rules of their place of work – they already know classrooms'.

(Knowles 1992, 101-2)

In these instances, this knowledge was largely structured around English as *literature teaching*.

Equally, participants' reasons for wanting to become an English teacher were very much related to wanting to be a teacher of literature. Katherine spoke with passion about what she saw as her critical relationship with books and reading, and about her desire to share this with students in her classes.

That's what I love about it. When I'm teaching it, for example we're doing Macbeth and I've done Macbeth now for two years in a row, and every time I read it, you can think about it, this and this word

actually makes me feel this way, just from one word and how much it reveals. It always got me excited and because I felt excited I thought, "If I was to teach it, I'll get excited about it". So that's why I wanted to become an English teacher.

Similarly, experiences on PGCE courses, although varying to some degree, highlighted the lack of any formal language and/or grammar work.

I think we may have had a day devoted to it, but it did not run through the core of all the kind of activities that we did. It was very much English literature led, I thought. (Charlotte)

We had one session that was introducing English language, and then we had other sessions that were interlinked into that. I remember a session on grammar and one on something else. It was that first session that really made me think, "I might have to teach this". (Harriet)

Participants' own reasons for taking on A level English Language are evidence of the draw of Post-16 teaching for teachers. Despite being literature specialists, their desire to be included in the delivery of the sixth form curriculum overcame any uncertainties they might have had about teaching A level English Language. However, some participants spoke of a perceived hierarchy within the English suite of Post-16 subjects with A level English Literature being seen as more prestigious and usually the preserve of more senior and/or 'better staff'. Often, A level English Language was seen as a way of serving an apprenticeship in Post-16 teaching by taking up an opportunity that others may have not wanted. For example, Belinda explained that:

I volunteered yes, I wanted to do A Level, and at the time the head of department was quite elitist, when I first started. Only a certain core of people were allowed to teach A Level, so I wasn't chosen. Then the new head of Key Stage Five, who took over as she left - the head of department, she was very similar and she kind of saw Language as very much the poor relation, and didn't really get involved

with Language. So when [head of department] took over and introduced- Language was only introduced here the year before, so 2011, it was only introduced here then. So I saw that as an in road to get into A Level.

Emotions

Day et al. (2007) argue that:

a significant and ongoing part of being a teacher, then, is the experiencing and management of strong emotions'.

(Day et al. 2007, 612)

Thematic analysis of interviews in this study show that are two significant themes that teachers reported when reflecting on their experience and initial responses to being told that they were teaching A level English Language.

First, the participants reported a dominant sense of negativity expressed openly in terms of an overpowering emotion of fear. Although fear itself was expressed in a range of phrases ranging in semantic intensity, it was interesting that nearly all of the teachers foregrounded this particular emotion in their narratives.

Feelings wise, I was petrified, I was really scared. I didn't want to half do it. I regretted saying, "Yes". (Katherine)

Nervous, because I thought I have learnt this and I am pretty confident I am right but if I am put on the spot I don't know if I am going to be able to give them the exact answer that they are looking for. I

might panic so much that I fluff it and give them the wrong answer, I think that was my anxiety.

(Anna)

[I felt] Panic…abject terror. (Anna)

I think it's because it's something I didn't know much about, so that was terrifying in itself. (Belinda)

Apprehensive. (John)

How can you get excited about teaching something that you do not understand? You are just

frightened, aren't you? (Charlotte)

I was quite scared by it, really. (Fiona)

Second, teachers highlighted anxieties over their own academic abilities, emphasising

their relatively limited knowledge of topics, theories and general understanding of

language and linguistics. Some objectified knowledge as a set of content, skills and

practices that they believed they lacked, and consequently saw themselves as deficient

and professionally inadequate. They felt that this realisation had a direct impact on

their on-going identity as a teacher.

I had used it without having any knowledge of what I was using, just monkey see, monkey do really,

probably not what you want to hear. (Anna)

I had to go back and revise my own knowledge I think was the biggest thing. (Anna)

[I felt] inadequate. (Belinda)

Yes, because they're looking at you as that you know everything, and you don't know everything. Actually the class are lovely, but sometimes I'd try and field it and say, "Who else in here knows?" I'm thinking, "I hope one of them does because I don't." (Belinda)

Belinda's responses demonstrate that her own experience of becoming an A level English Language teacher undermined her confidence in her own intellectual ability. These feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy and inauthenticity are typical traits of *imposter syndrome* (Clance 1985) where individuals have a strongly perceived sense of being inferior in some marked way to others, and of being seen by their colleagues and peers as both fraudulent and deficient in some respect. Research suggests that there is a clear relationship between the beliefs that teachers hold about themselves and their practice (McGrath 2006), and that those with strong feelings of self-doubt are often those whom students believe to be weaker teachers (Brems et al. 1994).

Fiona's comments below highlight how strongly she felt about her own sense of identity and how, in the context of being asked to teach A level English Language, she felt that a marked editing of her self-conception had come about. Her second remark exemplifies the importance of specific, critical episodes in the shaping of the self and consequent editing of self-conception. In this instance, her belief that as a teacher she 'should know the answer' calls into question her own sense of validity as a practitioner:

it's almost like getting a job and them saying to you, "You're teaching geography," because at that stage I didn't really… I felt like a bit of a fraud;

I think sometimes students lose a little bit of confidence in you, because they expect you, as a teacher, to know the answer to everything, and if – I can't even remember what the question was, but it was

something that I didn't have the knowledge to answer, and I can remember feeling quite… A bit of a fraud, because I was thinking, "I should know the answer to that question," and I didn't.

For Belinda, the fear of not being an authority in the classroom had potentially more worrying consequences in respect of her relationships with students, and the value they would attach to her both as an English specialist and more generally as a professional. She expressed an awareness of moving from *unconscious* to *conscious* incompetence (Howell 1982), and of having her identity undermined in a radical way. In this case, she felt that such a threat to identity raised questions about her moral and ethical identity (Taylor 1995), and would have dramatic and over-reaching implications far beyond that of the A level classroom:

I was worried that it's trust as well, because obviously I want them to trust me and to trust that I know what I'm doing and that I'm taking them down the right path. You worry that maybe that trust will be damaged if you don't have all the answers.

Another participant made it clear that his fear of being uncovered as a fraud meant that he felt unable to ask either colleagues or his head of department for support. In this instance, his anxieties around others' possible judgements on both his subject and pedagogical content knowledge overpowered his own self-awareness abut the kind of support he might need:

'however, I never ask for any support, partly I suppose because of the connotations of somebody putting their hand up and saying, "Actually, can you help me teach sixth form?" I suppose I wanted to be seen as a confident enough teacher to do it without'. (John)

Teachers' use of metaphor

Metaphor has been shown to be an important ubiquitous phenomenon by which we organise and understand the world, often through the framing of complex abstract concepts in terms of more physical ones (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999). The epistemological and ideological perspectives that metaphor reveals (Miller and Fredericks 1988; Gillis and Johnson 2002) and its structural affordances in making the implicit explicit and available to others (Hunt 2006) have allowed researchers to explore teachers' use of metaphor within the context of forming and reflecting on identity (Munby 1986), and the changing nature of attitudes towards the personal and professional self (Alsop 2005; Leavey, McSorley, and Boté 2006; Thomas and Beauchamp 2011).

In the following discussion, I briefly draw on three explicit metaphors used by three of the participants.

I did not grasp it properly myself;

[my role to] pass on knowledge. (Charlotte)

Charlotte conceptualised both her content and pedagogical knowledge as an object that she currently lacked possession of but needed to obtain. This appeared to reflect her own anxieties about her ability to be viewed as a genuine teacher by her students and the desire to be seen as an authority. Equally – and interestingly – her comment on passing knowledge from herself to her students was solely concerned with language; she perceived literature teaching, with its perceived less factual body of knowledge, in much more constructivist terms.

Anna objectified herself, using metaphors that emphasised her fragility and lack of agency. Her metaphor of the 'smashed glass' was used to describe her early experiences with A level English Language, and the impact it had on her confidence and perception of her ability as a teacher. In her second, she exemplifies a common feeling of absorbing information involuntarily as a way of surviving the initial stages of her teaching.

[I felt like] a smashed glass;

[I was] a sponge.

Finally, a number of participants drew on a conventional metaphor of their life and career as a journey, and viewed the experience of teaching A level Language as part of a process of learning and self-development. Katherine viewed the experience as part of the shifting landscape through which her career would take her:

For me, it's the *exploration*, I think, of emotions and universal ideas that really drove me into English;

It is that *process* of teaching it;

I saw it as a *challenge* to further my own subject knowledge. (added emphasis)

Since metaphors are embodied and arise out of experience (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), the participants responses can be viewed as ways of making sense of their own process of becoming and the editing of self-conception. Their metaphors both arise

out of their experience and provide a reflective shape to a way of explaining that experience.

Coping strategies

The ways in which participants said they had coped with the demands on taking on A level English Language varied. Some identified reading around the topics prescribed on awarding bodies' specifications as a way of developing their expertise. Invariably this reading tended to be very well known reference works (for example Crystal [2004], [2010]) or examination-board endorsed textbooks. Some participants commented on the power of shared learning in the form of being able to turn to a subject mentor or someone in the department who was a recognised expert. For example, Charlotte commented on the importance of having dedicated expertise in the department, and on the need for schools to be able to provide this (see also Butcher [2002]).

I just think that staff could do with more time to train each other. Because we have got people like Dan here, who is just a wealth of knowledge, and he desperately wants to help people with their teaching of English language. (Charlotte)

In such instances, participants noticed and accepted their movement from peripheral to substantive membership of a discrete community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). This sense of becoming a member of a community of language teachers both within their department, and in a wider sense through attendance at awarding body training and standardisation sessions, was matched by their acknowledgement of the

importance of adequate mentorship and support from more experienced colleagues on Post-16 teaching.

Professional transformation: becoming through participation

All of the participants believed that their experience had involved some degree of professional transformation, and that teaching A level English Language had positively impacted on other areas of their classroom practice. Their experience can be viewed as providing a series of important self-images that edited their self-conception and provided an embellished sense of self both personally and professionally. It also seemed to enrich their own perspective of the subject so that they reflected that their teaching had caused them to view 'English' as something more than just 'literature', evident in Harriet's following comment:

I think that it has given me an awareness of another side of English that I had never come across before.

In contrast to the findings of Hardman and Leat (1998), the participants did feel that there was something different in the way they taught language. Indeed, Harriet remarked that becoming a 'language' teacher had had an influence on other aspects of her professional identity and practice, including her approach to thinking about and teaching literary texts and other parts of the English curriculum:

We had one lesson, I can't remember- it must have been last year with the year nine class as well, and we had one lesson where we- you've probably heard this before. Where we got a load of receipts and we picked them apart and we talked about the language on the receipts, and then they wrote a story

inspired by the receipt. That just came from something that I'd done in A Level that I thought, "Actually that would work really well with Year nine".

The participants were also more critical in their understanding of literature as a variety of English, and had a firmer grasp of the representational aspect of various semiotic systems. For example, Anna reflected on how the experience of teaching A level English Language had given her greater insight into how she conceptualised English as a subject and her experience of being a subject practitioner. She clearly understood that becoming a language teacher meant becoming a different kind of person (Lave and Wenger 1991; Greene 1995). Commenting on this process of self-realisation, she was explicit about how long it had taken for her to acknowledge her shifting identity, and about the impact of her experience on her professional and personal belief systems:

I think it has only emerged in the past six months to be honest and it is because I am coming to the end of my fourth year. I taught child language acquisition for the fourth time and this time I knew exactly what I was doing. I knew exactly what they wanted me to say, I knew what they were asking. I felt really comfortable with it and I thought this is so unlike what I expected English to be.

Conclusions

The results of this study show that teachers taking on A level English Language teaching for the first time find it a difficult process that places considerable demands on them. It also involves significant movement and change in terms of their own identity as English teachers; becoming a 'language' teacher meant developing an alternative set of skills and pedagogies that participants were not prepared for.

However, as anxiety and self-doubt decrease, participants felt that the experience clearly marked a critical phase (Measor 1985) in the development of their identities as practitioners as they made sense of their experiences and re-evaluated their own self-conception. The movement of this group of practitioners from novices to confident teachers is clearly part of a complex process of identity reformation that in many respects is similar to the journey made by trainee teachers of English within the subject generally (Goodwyn 2011).

This study clearly raises several important questions regarding the subject and pedagogical content knowledge of secondary and Post-16 English teachers. There is clearly further space for debate regarding how pre-service and in-service teachers' knowledge about language and associated effective pedagogies can best be developed, and whether this should take place during initial teacher education programmes – and if so which type of initial teacher education – or as part of in-service provision (Sangster, Anderson, and O'Hara 2013). It also raises questions about levels of support for those teachers taking Post-16 classes for the first time, and about the ways in which effective practices around language teaching are disseminated among the English teaching community (Bell 2015). Furthermore, the fact that participants report that language work had a positive impact on their English teaching per se means that there is a strong motivation for considering the value of a more fully identifiably integrated 'English' that incorporates different kinds of descriptive and analytical work with a range of discourse and text types (Clark, Giovanelli, and Macrae 2014, 2015) both during initial teacher education programmes, and more widely within the curriculum.

Note

[1] The names of all participants have been changed.

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