Critical Perspectives on Worldview, Spirituality, Identity, and Pedagogy

In order to write a comprehensive dialogue on faith, spirituality, and identity in English teaching, a broad spectrum of beliefs is essential. Because we are spiritual beings, it is nearly impossible to separate our spiritual selves from our teaching. Therefore, it is important to explore our spiritual nature and faith through the lens of English language teaching and pedagogy to better serve our students.

The students I come across may already know about God and my culture. It is not up to me to be the all-knowing cultural benefactor, but the learner, the questioner and the listener. By taking on these roles, others will be more receptive to learning from me as well. The Bible also teaches me to be a servant leader (Matthew 20) and to not be afraid to hear God through others, even non Christian's. One example shared by David Smith (2009) was when Abraham traveled to a new town with Sarah. Abraham lies, saying Sarah is his sister, and Abimelek takes Sarah as his wife (p. 18). God speaks through Abimelek, a foreign, unsaved leader, to right Abraham's wrongs. Being open to listening to God and others can build more biblical relationships and new cultural connections. The Bible stresses that, in order to be humble and be a servant, I must also have love. In fact, God commands us to love others as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:39) and to treat each other as we want to be treated. Therefore, I need to see my students, not as a culture or an ethnicity, but as a spiritual human being. Likewise, I want to be treated that way myself. Each person that I meet is one of God's children, regardless of culture or faith, and I continue to develop the open mind and heart necessary in order to learn from and teach them.

Informing our Pedagogy

Identity and culture are interrelated and impact and inform a teacher’s pedagogy. While all aspects of our identity are factors in our pedagogy, our spiritual identity acts as a blanket
covering them all. It is difficult, if not impossible, to completely separate ourselves from our identity when we teach, so the question is really how do we use our identity in such a way to encourage our students in their own identity and not impose our personal identities upon them?

One possible answer shared by Dr. Mary Wong is “when Christian teachers diligently prepare for class, listen attentively to students, are genuinely concerned for their students’ well-being, cooperate with colleagues… and make an effort to continually learn and grow professionally, they are a witness” (Wong, 2009, p. 99). Teachers can exhibit these traits described, no matter what religion, ethnicity, race, or gender they are and no matter what language they speak. Good teaching is influenced by our identity - and transcends it at the same time.

Our spiritual identity, or even a lack thereof, becomes an overall influence in our pedagogical views. Our spiritual identity is not stagnant; it has a fluidity that moves with us as we navigate through life. Wintergerst and McVeigh, in their article “Tips for Teaching Culture” (2011), describe both primary and secondary identities, stating that “primary identities have an impact on our lives on an ongoing basis, whereas secondary or situational identities are changeable from situation to situation” (Wintergerst and McVeigh, 2011, p. 79). Our identities are flexible and, if we are continuing to grow spiritually and relationally, wherever we live, our identity is constantly changing; we are constantly building on it and reshaping it daily.

Wintergerst and McVeigh go on to share that “Personal identity exists in each human being...[and] many of us go through life never taking the time to look closely at this aspect of our lives and the impact it has on us and others” (Wintergerst and McVeigh, 2011, p. 79). Therefore, it is evident that to be effective in our impact on others, we must first look reflectively at ourselves and who we are. The intrinsic flexibility, fluidity, and level of self-awareness needed is
what makes the idea of identity so complex, yet important to learn, if our goal is to become an effective language teacher.

My goal is for my students to see their multilingualism as an asset, and by doing so I can empower them not only with intercultural competence, but intercultural confidence. Through my studies, I now have a new awareness and conviction of how I look at the world and how I approach every new person and culture. I learned that the purpose of learning about other cultures and examining my own cultural views is to “increase [my] chances of being a blessing rather than a curse to those [I] encounter” (Smith, 2009, p. 106). I learned that “intercultural engagement is an ongoing spiral in which one encounter becomes part of what one knows before the next” (Smith, 2009, p. 106); it does not end with one person or one mission trip and it does not end with one book or chapter. Intercultural learning is a lifelong process because culture is not stagnant; it is constantly changing, and I am changing along with it. I learned that I must constantly reflect on myself - who I am, what I believe, and how I am perceived versus how I want to be perceived. Naturally, through my own Christian upbringing, my cultural lens is skewed and with each new intercultural experience I need to act, not out of myself or my knowledge, but out of maturity and God's love. I need to realize that “people do not interact in the same ways in different communities” (Smith, 2009, p. 109), and that by taking time to learn about a person or a culture shows a unique type of love, acceptance, and respect that can lead toward more interpersonal and intercultural relationships. Additionally, I learned that “language learning, like love, always has to happen in concrete ways” (Smith, 2009, p. 109). It is a choice we make every day in how we choose to interact and love others and is the foundation for all cultural interaction. Identity and culture are interrelated, and these variables and levels of self-awareness are what makes the idea of identity so complex and an interesting study.
Stevick (2009) reflects on the study of identity and extends it through a thoughtful poem:

“The impatient gate, that swings both in and out,
Whose work is lost when no one passes through;
The faithful fence, that marks off false from true—
No time for hanging back, no room for doubt—
Exist, not in the world, but in the mind.
Yet God forgive if what is there for me
I either hide, or try to press on thee,
To shout thee deaf, or leave thee lost and blind.
This dreadful choice sets brother against brother,
Either to injure, or to fail each other” (p. 296).

Stevick’s (2009) thoughts that our experiences, the horizontal, should connect with our appreciation of self and our “spiritual sensibilities,” the vertical, (p. 296) was a new concept for me. In retrospect, it seems that this mentality and belief would be a beneficial one to hold as it is important to be aware of the impact our experiences can have on our spirituality and sense of self. In fact, the two are in a unique balance. For example, one should have a strong sense of self so that experiences do not “make or break” the self. However, the right experiences can provide a broader sense of self and spirituality. The two, horizontal and vertical, are most effective when they work together toward a common goal.

Stevick’s poem had a haunting tone but had impact as I reflected on my beliefs in regards to teaching faith in the language classroom. On further analysis, it can be said that the impatient gate guards the fence that divides what is true from what is false. The gate’s swinging in and out could be a metaphor for my decision to share my beliefs with my students and which side of the fence I choose to share. The word “impatient” also reminded me of a quote from Augustine of Hippo where he preaches that “we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search of truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it” (from Relevant Magazine). Our impatience to discuss topics without self-reflection or
regard to the needs of our students can be damaging to their identities and to the respectful climate of our classroom, shutting down any future discussions on truth and spirituality. The swinging gate is an invitation for my students to walk in and enter into this discussion. If the gate remains locked, the students are never given the choice to determine or discuss what is true or false or to explore their own belief systems.

In addition, whatever it is I have to teach and share with my students, there are two extremes the poem brings to light: that of pushing ideals and beliefs onto our students or ignoring these belief discussions completely. Both methods can be harmful to the learner, for even by avoiding or ignoring controversial topics we skew our curriculum and teaching to filter for our own comfort level. The quandary is still which side of the fence is truth and which is false. Not everyone agrees, but there is some significance in recognizing that sitting on the fence does little to pursue the truth and there is value in opening that gate, allowing it to swing to both sides, giving students the opportunity to choose whether to pass through.

Salient Religious Identity

Through the analysis of Stevick’s poem, the teachings of the Bible, Smith, and my studies, I have examined my identity, as it affects my pedagogy, on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level. The aspect of my identity that is most salient is my religious identity. I realize there are some areas of my identity that, generally speaking, cannot be changed, such as my gender, race, physical appearance, and ethnicity. Those areas of my life I consider “I am what I am” and there is not much I can do about it. It has caused me to embrace these areas with love and acceptance. Have I been judged by these areas? Yes. Have I been treated differently because of my gender or physical appearance? Absolutely. For example, visually I often get mistaken for the Persian or Mediterranean ethnicities. Because of my appearance, I often get asked where I
am from and if I speak English, however, I am Scottish and Mexican-Indian, born and raised in Southern California. My students, being non-native speakers, often suffer harsher judgements and fall into wider ranges of stereotypes simply due to aspects of their own physical identities they cannot deny. Therefore, teaching with empathy, understanding, and empowerment, will help to break down these unnecessary stereotypes. I understand the benefits of being a native speaker of English, but try not to take advantage of the cultural power and imperialistic nature it implies. Instead, I try to represent humility and encouragement and use any linguistic power I may have within my identity to empower my students. These qualities would be difficult to uphold without the morals and values of my faith.

**Pedagogical and Professional Influence**

To see a world so often split apart by these various identities is disheartening and so I see my religious identity as a part of me that I learned, chose, and can use as a vessel to bring all aspects of my identity, and those of my students, from fragmented pieces into a whole. I take my role as an educator seriously, and as someone who has the potential to shape future generations, Therefore, the morals and values of my faith are important aspects of my identity I hold on to as I develop professionally.

Choosing to attend Azusa Pacific University for my Master’s degree was the first step toward developing my Christian world view. Going forward with my education, I plan to seek out doctoral programs at Christian universities that will continue to refine these views, while still challenging me to continually seek new ideas and learn from others. I will also seek out collaboration with other leaders in the TESOL field to sharpen my identity and learn from educators from various cultures outside of my own. By attending conferences and submitting articles to educational websites, magazines, and ESL related publications, I can further support
positive intercultural communications and extend my influence as a Christian English teacher. My hope and prayer is that my students will see this modeling of life-long learning and intercultural acceptance in my professional life, and be inspired to life-long learners and vessels of cultural acceptance in their language circles as well. As a language teacher, I am also a cultural bridge, and my identity influences and shapes the identity of every student that crosses my path. I take that role seriously, and when people, including students and colleagues, meet me and get to know me, I hope they see that my character and joy comes from the Lord and that, by showing humility, fair treatment, and equally empowering my students, I can be a positive witness to others of my faith and Christianity.
References


