A Filipino EFL Teacher's Positioning in a Thai Secondary School: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the positioning of "Laura", a Filipino teacher who teaches English as a foreign language (EFL) in a secondary school in the district of Sai Yok in Kanchanaburi province, Thailand. The concept of positioning helps to understand how individuals take up particular positions as a result of their obligations, acceptance, resistance, or negotiation with regard to other people or groups. Drawing upon a semi-structured interview transcript, the findings suggest that Laura's positioning is complex, shifting, and multiple as it interplays with a number of factors such as ethnicity, linguistic barriers, and sociocultural differences. As a result, she positions Thai students as disrespectful, whereas she positions herself as a stranger in the school. The findings reveal Laura's negative attitudes towards Thai students' classroom behaviour. The pedagogical implications of this study are the recognition of Thai students' cultures of learning, concerning classroom behaviour, attitudes, expectations, values and beliefs in a good learning and teaching methodology, which can promote positive positioning for both Laura and her students. It is advisable to examine "non-Thai" EFL teachers from a wider linguistic, ethnic, and cultural background by exploring their attitudes towards school and classroom experiences because they create linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity in Thai schools.

Keywords: a Filipino EFL teacher (ครูสอนภาษาอังกฤษชาวฟิลิปปินส์); a Thai secondary school (โรงเรียน มัธยมศึกษาไทย); positioning theory (ทฤษฎีเกี่ยวกับการสร้างอัตลักษณ์); and theory of "cultures of learning" (ทฤษฎีเกี่ยวกับวัฒนธรรมการเรียนรู้)

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้มีจุดประสงค์ที่จะศึกษาการสร้างอัตลักษณ์ของครูสอนภาษาอังกฤษชาว
ฟิลิปปินส์ที่ชื่อ "ลอร่า" ในโรงเรียนระดับมัธยมศึกษาในอำเภอไทรโยค จังหวัดกาญจนบุรี
แนวคิดเกี่ยวกับการสร้างอัตลักษณ์เป็นผลมาจากการที่บุคคลมีภาระ หน้าที่ การยอมรับ การต่อต้าน
หรือการต่อรองกับบุคคล หรือกลุ่มอื่นๆ ผลวิจัยจากบทสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้าง แสดงให้
เห็นว่าการสร้างอัตลักษณ์ของลอร่าเป็นสิ่งที่ซับซ้อน เปลี่ยนแปลง และ หลากหลาย โดยขึ้นกับ
ปัจจัยต่างๆ เช่น ความแตกต่างทางด้านเชื้อชาติ ภาษา วัฒนธรรม และสังคม ดังนั้น เธอจึงมอง
อัตลักษณ์ของนักเรียนไทยว่าไม่มีความเคารพต่อครู ในขณะที่ตัวเธอเองก็มองตัวเองว่าเป็น
คนแปลกหน้าในโรงเรียน เธอเองก็ยังมีทัศนคติที่เป็นลบต่อพฤติกรรมในชั้นเรียนของนักเรียนไทย
แนวทางการแก้ไขเพื่อช่วยส่งเสริมการเรียนการสอนคือ การสร้างความตระหนักถึงวัฒนธรรม
การเรียนรู้ของนักเรียนไทย ซึ่งเกี่ยวกับ พฤติกรรมในชั้นเรียน ทัศนคติ ความคาดหวัง ค่านิยม และ
ความเชื่อในวิธีการเรียนการสอนที่ดี ซึ่งจะช่วยส่งเสริมการสร้างอัตลักษณ์ที่เป็นบวกให้กับทั้งลอร่า
และนักเรียนเอง การศึกษาครูสอนภาษาอังกฤษที่ไม่ใช่คนไทยที่มีพื้นเพที่แตกต่างทางด้านภาษา
เชื้อชาติ และวัฒนธรรม รวมถึงทัศนคติของพวกเขาที่มีต่อประสบการณ์ที่หลากหลายทั้งใน
ห้องเรียนและนอกห้องเรียนเป็นสิ่งสำคัญ เพราะพวกเขาได้สร้างสรรค์ความหลากหลายทางด้าน
ภาษา เชื้อชาติ และวัฒนธรรมในโรงเรียนไทย

Introduction

The concept of "positioning" derives from questions regarding how
and the extent to which individuals take up particular positions as a result of
their obligations, acceptance, resistance, or negotiation with regard to other
people or groups. This study aims to investigate the positioning of a
Filipino female teacher called "Laura" who teaches English as a foreign
language (EFL) in a Thai secondary school in a remote area in the district of
Sai Yok in Kanchanaburi province. Davies & Harré (1990) state that the
concept of "positioning" is created to address the dynamic aspect of human
interactions and to replace static, formal and ritualistic aspects of "role"
because individuals emerge from the processes of social interactions (p.46).
Ritchie's study (2002), for example, suggests that students are likely to
contest the positioning of their peers and vice versa, because none of them
want to be under the control of their peers, and thus students who position
themselves as "boss" are contested and have to reposition themselves
in order to fit into the group (p.50). Barnes (2004) claims that explicit
classroom "norms" can prevent students from being positioned as "outsiders"

by focusing on every student's contribution and allowing individuals to be given a hearing by the group, and thus teachers play a significant role in solving conflicts among students in classroom settings, which are relatively homogeneous in terms of the linguistic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds of both students and teachers. There has, however, been very little research examining "non-Thai" EFL teachers from ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse backgrounds in mainstream education in Thailand. To my knowledge, this is the first time the issue of a Filipino EFL teacher in a Thai secondary school has been explored, and that can vitally contribute to furthering critical perspectives in applied linguistics and TESOL research. This study, therefore, can be a starting point for scholars who are interested in the lives and experiences of "non-Thai" EFL teachers in Thai schools.

Literature review

"Positioning theory" is employed in this study to reveal different variables that contribute to a wide range of positions constructed by Laura, a Filipino EFL teacher in a Thai secondary school, which might otherwise have remained invisible, overlooked, and under-examined. According to Davies & Harré (1990), the notion of 'positioning' can be viewed as the construction of speakers and hearers in particular ways as they engage in conversations that are simultaneously resources through which both parties can negotiate new positions created in talk and through talk. Positioning can be divided into two aspects: "interactive" and "reflexive"; the former assumes that an individual positions others, whereas the latter is the process of positioning oneself. In other words, in various communicative situations, speakers may attempt to position their interlocutors in a particular way (interactive positioning). Yet, those positioned interactively might not want to be positioned in such a way and might not only reject that position, but also try to position him/herself in a more desirable way (reflective positioning). When speakers position themselves and others in interactions, they are also influenced by political and moral commitments, their identities, and attitudes towards their interlocutors, and cumulative experiences, which are all implicated in their utterances.

Although Davies & Harré (1990) provide a useful introduction to positioning theory regarding 'interactive' and 'reflexive' positionings, this

study further draws upon van Langenhove & Harré's (1999) framework, which suggests three basic features of interactions that enable speakers to understand and explain much of what is going on and how sociological and psychological phenomena are constructed in interactions: firstly, the moral positions of the participants and the rights and duties they have to say certain things; secondly, the conversational history and the sequence of things that have been said; and thirdly, the actual utterances that shape particular aspects of the social world. To analyze the act of positioning to uncover Laura's social life episodes, this study employs the triad of the position, social force of, and storyline, which is illustrated below.
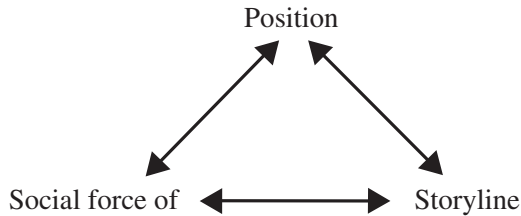
Position

Social force of   Storyline

Figure 1: Mutually Determining Triad
(van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 18)

van Langenhove & Harré's (1999) tri-polar structure of conversations consisting of "positions", "storylines", and "social force of" illustrates that the act of 'positioning' in conversations is the assignment of fluid 'positions' to speakers in the discursive construction of their stories. This triad can reveal episodes of their social lives and enable their actions to become intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts, which are mutually determined by one another. For instance, if a person positions himself/herself as dependent, his/her cry of pain can be interpreted as a plea for help; whereas, if the person positions himself/herself as dominant, a similar cry can be viewed as a protest or a reprimand.

"Positioning theory" is employed in Brock et al.'s (2006) study, which investigates six in-service American teachers sent to Costa Rica to study "Literacy Across Languages and Cultures" and learn how to teach students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds by examining the impact

of social contexts on their construction of teachers' social identities as teachers and by reflecting on their own cultural identities while living in Costa Rica. The results obtained from teachers' written reflections and group interviews suggest that effective literacy teaching factors to students from diverse backgrounds include firstly, a knowledge of instructional frameworks, strategies, methods, and materials; secondly, a knowledge of students' lives and experiences; and thirdly, a knowledge of one's own perspectives and beliefs. The study also points out that teachers' positioning is not fixed but fluid, dynamic, and multiple because they are influenced by the contexts in which they live, act, and interact, and thus they can develop appropriate pedagogies which can help support students' learning experiences in linguistically and culturally diverse classroom contexts.

The notions of "position" and "positioning" are applicable to this study in terms of understanding how Laura as a linguistic, ethnic, and cultural minority teacher positions herself by taking up particular positions in relation to others in a Thai secondary school. "Positioning" can enable Laura to employ various practices to construct particular positions.

Different practices in this study can include Laura's interactions with her colleagues and students, her teaching styles and methods, gestures, students' personalities and classroom behaviours, Thai students' rapport with their tutors, and these may all impact upon the different ways Laura wants to position herself and others. In sum, "positioning theory" offers an important framework that recognises how and the extent to which Laura takes up particular positions as a result of her obligations, acceptance, resistance, or negotiation with regard to other people or groups within a Thai secondary school.

Research methodology

Case study as a research approach

"Case study" has been variously defined. Yin (1993) views case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Drever (1995) suggests that case study should be able to identify the participant involved in the study and should aim at a quite

detailed understanding of factors at work in that particular case, without assuming that any other case would be the same. McDonough & McDonough (1997) also comment that the case study is particularly appropriate for small-scale research. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2000) point out that a case study is an object of interest, such as, a person, a classroom, or a programme, or a school, which is assumed to be a complex system that cannot be easily understood. Denscombe (2003) defines case study as the focus of a single or a few instances of a particular phenomenon, which examines an in-depth understanding of events, relationships, experiences, or processes happening in that specific situation.

A case study approach is employed in this study because it aims for depth of understanding regarding what it means for Laura to be in a particular school, what her life is like and what matters to her. By exploring her experiences, this study strives for concrete and complex illustrations of this individual case. It is important to take various educational factors into account and understand the links that affect Laura's experiences in this particular school setting. It should, however, be noted that generalizations may not be applicable to and are not a particular aim of this case study. Although case study is very often not representative, and hence the findings may apply only to the example studied, it can be a useful starting point for research.

Research participant and site

This case study took place at a secondary school located in a remote area in the district of Sai Yok in Kanchanaburi province. There are about 700 students in this school, including lower and upper levels. The interesting fact about this school is that it is located near many tourist attractions which include a historical rail line from World War II, an elephant camp site, a river, a cave, hotels and holiday resorts. As a result, there are a number of foreign tourists who come to visit and go sightseeing in this area daily. Students in this school always have a chance to see and communicate with these tourists.

The research participant is called "Laura", who is twenty-eight years old and from Cebu City, the second biggest city in the Philippines. She

obtained her BA in Industrial Psychology from the University of Cebu. After working in a recruitment company for 4 months, she became an ESL teacher for a year and six months to Korean students. She decided to come to Thailand because she wanted to explore something new and escape the poverty in the Philippines. She was advised by her friends who live in Bangkok that she could earn a better salary in Bangkok than in the Philippines. Although she does not think that there is a significant difference in terms of salary, she would like to realize her potential by working and living in Thailand.

Data collection and analysis

According to Drever (1995), the semi-structured interview allows researchers to adapt questions to suit the interviewee's complementary roles in order to explore his/her different perspectives in depth. It also allows the researcher to have a specific agenda to follow and select relevant topics and themes to pursue in advance. Since a semi-structured interview is less structured than a structured interview, it allows the researcher and the participant to pursue topics of interest which may not have been foreseen when the questions were originally drawn up. Keats (2000) points out that additional information can be obtained by probing the initial responses which gives richness to the data in order to reveal the interviewee's opinions and reasoning. Follow-up questions can explore meanings and areas of interest that emerge.

A semi-structured interview was appropriate to this study in order to understand Laura's positions with regard to others by examining her interactive situations because the position, social force of, and storyline triad are related to situated contexts and mutually determine one another. van Langenhove & Harré (1999) argue that all conversations, such as interviewing, involve some sort of positioning, which can be understood in terms of the triad "position, social acts, and storyline". The semi-structured interview can be a useful research tool, which enabled this study to gain deeper insights into understanding Laura's positions with regard to her experiences with her colleagues and her students, and which can potentially reveal the dynamic and shifting nature of "positions" and "positioning" that take place in different storylines. The interview was conducted in her office for about two hours. The interview questions concerned 1) Laura's

personal and educational background, 2) her reasons for coming to work in Thailand, 3) the difficulties and challenges she has encountered, 4) the ways she deals with such difficulties and challenges, and 5) her expectations about her life and career in the future. The interview was tape-recorded, transcribed, and shown to her for verification. The content of Laura's transcript was then analyzed, and the results are presented in the following sections.

Findings

This section discusses the findings regarding how and the extent to which Laura positions herself with respect to different contextual factors such as ethnicity, linguistic barriers, and sociocultural differences. These findings suggest the multiplicity of Laura's positioning in this school setting.

Laura is confident about living and working in the school, although she had not thought of being an English teacher initially, as she says explicitly.

Extract 1

I have an ego. I don't want to go back to the Philippines for nothing. I want to prove something to myself and my family. I quit my job. I told my parents that I can find a job in Thailand.

Due to financial difficulties in the Philippines, she strongly believed that Thailand was the best alternative for her to find a better-paid job that could prove to her parents that she was able to live and work abroad. This incident suggests that she reflectively positions herself as "confident" and "egoistic". However, she finds her current teaching career rather difficult due to Thai students' classroom behaviour.

Extract 2

Laura:	*Right now, I feel like giving up. I've been here for 5-6 months. I've been struggling every day because Thai students are different.*
Interviewer:	*In terms of what?*

Laura:	*The ones I told you. They don't like (English). They have their own worlds.*
Interviewer:	*What do you mean by worlds?*
Laura:	*They don't care about you. If you go to the lowest section, you will see students running and fooling around. They will not care about you. They will not respect you. Really different.*

Laura believes that her students do not like learning English, and thus they do not pay much attention in her class. As a result, she feels that students do not respect her. This extract illustrates that she positions herself as a teacher, who expects students to be respectful without considering whether they may need time to adjust themselves to learning English with a "non-Thai" teacher. She compared and contrasted the students in her class with Filipino students whom she previously taught in the Philippines.

Extract 3

Interviewer:	*How do you see yourself being a Filipino person teaching English in Thailand?*
Laura:	*It's too difficult. It seems like I'm struggling every day.*
Interviewer:	*Do Thai students behave differently from Filipino students?*
Laura:	*Differently.*
Interviewer:	*How?*
Laura:	*Filipino students are scared of teachers.We respect our teachers.*

Laura's comparison between Thai and Filipino students illustrates "interactive positioning" in a way that Thai students are "disrespectful", whereas the Filipino counterparts are "respectful" of their teachers. She points out that it could be due to language barriers.

Extract 4

I need to learn to speak Thai as well. That's one way I can do. They told me "teacher pa-sa-thai". It's also because Thai students can't understand me. That's the problem. In the Philippines,

Filipino students can understand me. Here, even if I'm angry, no one will care because "mai-khao-jai". If I'm very angry with my students, I don't have to talk or shout. It's useless. I just sit quietly and they will know that I'm angry and they will be quiet. Language barriers.

This incident clearly illustrates the ways she overcomes language barriers by learning some Thai words in order to communicate with her students. She, however, employs non-linguistic cues when she is upset with her students by being silent, and thus students recognize her mood and become quiet as well. Besides language barriers, there is also a problem of students' classroom behaviour that makes her apprehensive.

Extract 5

Every day is a learning process for me. There's one time in Mattayom 6, I nearly cried after teaching. A group of female students were talking about me. I felt really bad. I was thinking whether they were gossiping about me.

This extract illustrates the "mutually determining triad" in which students were creating a storyline among themselves whether or not they were discussing about Laura. Laura, however, thought she was being criticized, and thus the students' storyline affected her social acts as she became upset and positioned herself as "an apprehensive teacher". She feels that she needs to understand Thai students' behaviour in order to interpret it in a positive light. In addition to students, Laura feels distant and isolated from her colleagues because of the language barrier.

Extract 6

Interviewer:	*What do you think of being a non-Thai teacher in the school?*
Laura:	*I'm a stranger in this school.*
Interviewer:	*But you don't look like a stranger.*
Laura:	*Of course, typically. Sometimes I feel very aloof because Thai teachers want to talk to me but they can't. They stay with their own groups. During the flag*

ceremony in the morning, that's the time I feel I'm different. I keep asking myself why I'm here, why I am torturing myself.

Laura explicitly and reflectively positions herself as "a stranger" in the school, especially during the national anthem ceremony in the morning because she is not Thai, and she does not belong to any group of Thai colleagues. Being a Filipino, she further argues that she is not a "native" speaker of English as she claims.

Extract 7

Interviewer:	*What do you think about yourself as a speaker of English?*
Laura:	*Okay, actually, I am not a native speaker.*
Interviewer:	*Why do you think that?*
Laura:	*I'm not. Native speakers, their accents are different. Right?*
Interviewer:	*But Filipino.*
Laura:	*I'm proud because of my educational background. I'm able to speak English. It helps me a lot. I'm not saying I'm not good but I'm trying to be good but not the best. I'm doing good. I believe in myself. I need to.*

Although English is now viewed as an international language whose users can be considered as native speakers in their own right (Davies, 2003) Laura positions herself as a "non-native" speaker of English because she does not possess a "native" English accent. She, however, positions herself as "a good teacher" who has a good academic background and always wants to improve herself. Her self-esteem enables her to position and view herself optimistically while living and teaching in Thailand.

Discussion

The findings suggest that Laura is willing to teach in Thailand although she still finds it difficult to understand Thai students' classroom behaviour due to language barriers, and thus she rather positions herself pessimistically.

In order to enable Laura to position herself in a more positive light, it is advisable for her to take her Thai students' "cultures of learning" into account when teaching and encountering particular kinds of classroom behaviour and attitudes. According to Cortazzi & Jin (1996), the term "cultures of learning" is defined as the framework of classroom behaviour, attitudes, expectations, values and beliefs of good learning and teaching methodology, but language teachers and learners are likely to be unaware of the impact of "cultures of learning" on the process of teaching and learning, and thus the "cultures of learning" is part of the hidden curriculum (p.169). With reference to the stereotypes of learners, Asian students are likely to be perceived as passive and non-participative due to their collectivist culture and reproductive approach to learning, which is often contrasted to Western learning approaches (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Holliday (2005) argues that the essentialist perspective has a negative impact on Asian students because their approach to study is represented as negative, problematic, and inappropriate in Western academic settings. It is important that, according to Dogancay-Aktuna (2005), teachers need to consider appropriate teaching methodologies that correspond to the set of assumptions and expectations learners bring to class. In sum, this study suggests that although Laura is from South East Asia, she cannot claim that Thai students should share similar personalities or classroom behaviour with Filipino students. Recognizing Thai students' cultures of learning can encourage Laura to position herself reflectively and to position her students interactively and positively.

Conclusions and recommendations

This paper aims to examine the positioning of Laura, a Filipino EFL teacher in a secondary school in the district of Sai Yok in Kanchanaburi province. The concept of "positioning" reveals how individuals view themselves and others by taking up various "positions" depending upon different storylines and social acts. Drawing upon a semi-structured interview, the findings clearly suggest that Laura's positioning in this educational setting is complex, multiple, and shifting as it is associated with a number of factors such as ethnicity, linguistic barriers, and sociocultural differences. The main issue Laura encounters is to understand Thai students' classroom behaviour because she finds Thai students different from Filipino students based on her previous educational and cultural background. The

pedagogical implication of this study is the importance of understanding Thai students' "cultures of learning", which include classroom behaviour, attitudes, expectations, values and beliefs in good learning and teaching methodology. It is advisable to investigate "non-Thai" EFL teachers from a wider linguistic and ethnic background, and to explore their attitudes towards their school and classroom experiences. This can potentially enrich our understanding regarding the extent to which speakers of different languages position themselves and are positioned by others, which contribute to linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity in schools. This recommendation highlights a limitation of this study: it focuses only on a Filipino EFL teacher.

  Although the findings of this study may not allow us to draw parallels between Laura and other "non-Thai" EFL teachers from other different linguistic, ethnic and cultural minority groups, the study can potentially offer some important indications for research scholars as to what issues may be particularly worthy of consideration. Therefore, this study offers a starting point for other researchers and scholars who are interested in learning about the school and the classroom experiences of EFL teachers from a linguistic minority in the mainstream of the Thai educational system.

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