

Identities of English language lecturers in universities of mainland China: A multiple case study

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Abstract

China is the largest country involved with teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) and English language lecturers are the largest group of teachers in university. In China, a lecturer is an academic rank below associate professor. While recent education reform across the globe has increasingly focused on the professional practices of lecturers, the identity development of English language lecturers—who play a pivotal part in the development of teaching, research, and English teacher education—becomes an emerging topic in higher education. The present study, drawing upon communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), aims to bridge these gaps, with a focus on using identity as an analytical lens to examine the identity construction experiences of one group of English language lecturers in the contested and ever-shifting contexts of teacher education and higher education in mainland China. Data were triangulated through narrative frames, interviews, documents, and observation, and were analyzed through the “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches. The findings revealed a wide array of identity options that the participants chose to identify themselves with. Identities included “guide”, “innovator”, “bottom-line worker”, “teaching machine”, “factory-line worker”, “fisherman”, and “paper machine”. The present study adds new knowledge to the complex and contested nature of lecturer identity.

Keywords

Lecturers, identity, communities of practice

1. Introduction

China is in a phase of industrial, scientific and commercial expansion and the world’s largest EFL market. Over the past few decades, along with an increase in the volume of students and courses offered in higher education institutions in China, a continual wave of reform and change has been introduced in EFL teaching in higher education. The focus of this line of research has been on English language lecturers’

professionalism, work and life, as well as various mediating factors related to the historical, social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions of their work settings. Although previous research has touched upon the experiences of identity construction among teachers (Teng, 2017ab), more research on the work of lecturers is needed, particularly in relation to how they enhance competency in teaching and respond to the challenges of conducting research and publishing.

1.1 Identity

Identity, a notion in exploring “who I am”, can be interpreted from individuals’ social roles in various social settings. Some components of identities are subjective and are organized hierarchically. Identities high on the hierarchy are more salient while identities low on the hierarchy are less salient (Teng, 2018; Teng & Bui, 2018).

1.2 Research questions

Research questions that guide the study included: How do the lecturers (re) construct their identities?

What personal, institutional, and social factors influence their identity development?

2. Method

2.1 A multiple case study

The present study employed a qualitative multiple case study methodology, which allows a researcher to closely examine a phenomenon within a specific context.

2.2 Selection of participants

The participants were three English language lecturers who had been working in the department of English from different universities in China. Purposeful sampling was employed.

2.3 Data collection and analysis process

Data were triangulated through in-depth individual interviews, narrative frame, and observation. Data analysis were iterative with data collection. The “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches, commonly used in qualitative studies, were adopted to analyze the data.

3. Findings

In Becky's case, she entered language teacher education because of her parents' insistence on benefits of being a teacher. After being a lecturer, she took part in various of communities. In terms of the teaching community, Becky established her teacher agendas and took the initiative in purposefully responding to students' needs. Becky demonstrated various identities, e.g., a "fruitful gardener", a "counselor", an "advisor", and a "facilitator", during her personal teaching experiences. While being engaged in the research community, Becky also demonstrated different identity options, including a "struggler", a "cow", an "old lecturer", and a "blind follower". Becky's participation in her personal life also led her to exhibit different identity options, including a "mother of a son with autism", a "wife", and a "woman". However, in spite of challenges in life, Becky enjoyed the feeling of teaching, and consistently placed the priority on teaching. Becky entered this profession domain "by accident" and then spent almost 20 years in this teaching community. She cared less about her positions in the research community. Students' recognition in her teaching reinforced her identity as a teaching practice-oriented lecturer.

In Sabrina's case, influenced by her previous educational experiences, she entered language education with strong interest, motivation, and determination. In her early teaching career, she took part in various communities, including teaching, research, and administrative service. She demonstrated positive identities, e.g., an "innovative lecturer", a "pedagogical lecturer", a "guide", and a "friend" to students. However, after teaching for two years, challenges and paradox encountered in her institution forced her to give up her self-claimed identity. Sabrina began to perceive herself as a "peripheral member" of her teaching community. Negative identities, including an "underpaid labor", a "low-end worker", a "teaching machine", a "coward rabbit", emerged during her teaching experiences.

In the case of Sam, he aimed for being a language teacher and researcher based on his personal and professional experiences. At the first beginning, he accidentally became a student in mathematic major and later a mathematics teacher in a primary school. His strong interest and motivation about bilingual learning inspired him to apply for a master's degree in Hong Kong. His perseverance and confidence in doing research fostered him to continue a Ph.D. degree. Through continuous efforts, he built up

confidence in overcoming obstacles and fashioned his identity as a "researcher". These experiences strengthened his confidence of working in a research-based university and helped him develop a strong identity as a "lecturer-researcher". However, Sam faced pressures in balancing time for doing research, teaching, administrative work, and providing service. The new university environment has some match and mismatch with his imagination. He demonstrated multiple identities, including a "coordinator", a "service provider", a "mentor", a "knowledgeable lecturer", a "paper machine", a "warrior", and a "lonely fighter".

4. Discussion and conclusion

In summary, this study portrayed three English language lecturers' trajectories of identity development. The three cases demonstrated individual differences in participating various communities. The various degree of efforts exerted in juggling between various demands at the personal and institutional levels for English language teaching and research were related to their awareness of identities. Despite the negative factors within and beyond the institution, the lecturers also attempted to maneuver within the community constraints and engage in professional development for a need to live up to their beliefs about English language education. The reflective stance and agency (Teng, 2018) is important for the lecturers to construct and defend their identities, thus making commitment to English language teaching and research.

5. References

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