Navigating EFL teacher identities in curriculum reforms: Alignment, engagement and imagination

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Data availability statement

There is no available data associated with this paper.

Abstract

The worldwide expansion of the EFL curriculum to younger learners means significant challenges and transformations for teachers and particularly those who were (re)trained to teach English. Situated in the Chinese context, this paper investigates three such teachers' identities and how these may impact on their professional development through an exploratory case study approach. The findings suggest that teachers exert different levels of alignment, engagement and imagination, highlighting that identity is not a fixed, stable and unitary phenomenon but is multiple, shifting and transformative. To challenge an assigned rule-based identity, one needs to creatively engage in local practice and explore the ideal and creative self in the imagined community. This study urges us to reflect on the changing ownership status of English in globalization and what this means for language teacher education, and also indicates that legitimate and effective participation in professional development communities is a prerequisite for teacher learning.

Keywords

China, curriculum reform, EFL teacher, identity, language teacher development, teaching English in primary schools

Word count

7813

1. Introduction

At the turn of the 21st century, an increasing number of countries around the world introduced programs to expand the English curriculum to younger learners. For example, Japan introduced English language teaching as "foreign language activities" in primary schools, while, starting in 2001, China made it mandatory to implement English education in primary schools from grade three (age 9). However, a major obstacle hindering the success of these reforms is the shortage of teachers with a high language proficiency level and the pedagogical knowledge necessary to teach young learners (Baldauf, Kaplan, Kamwangamalu & Bryant, 2011; Butler, 2015; Spolsky & Moon, 2012). Two approaches have emerged to address this shortage of qualified teachers. One approach involves the direct hiring of native-speakers as English teachers, as seen in Japan, Korea and Taiwan (Butler, 2015). A number of developing countries such as China followed a second approach: the (re)training of local school teachers of other subjects to teach English. These teachers are known as *zhuangang jiaoshi* (转岗教师) or transfer-post teachers.

According to Wang (2011), the number of transfer-post teachers in China may be as high as 200,000. This is a significant cohort of teachers, whose performance is crucial to the success of primary English curriculum reform as well as to the more fundamental issue of educational equity (Tan, 2011). To date, while various training programs have been initiated at different levels for these teachers, little progress has been made, as the training tends to follow a top-down model, focusing on program design and implementation rather than the trainees' conditions and needs. In particular, the ways in which these transfer-post teachers formulate their identities and the process in which they engage in professional development are often overlooked. As Olsen argued, teacher identity is "a pedagogical tool that can be used by teacher educators and professional development specialists to make visible various holistic, situated framings of teacher development in practice" (2008, p. 5). Teacher identity issues are critical in the case of those transfer-post teachers who come from rural schools with fewer teaching resources and professional development opportunities and who therefore face the challenge of legitimating peripheral participation in optimal teacher learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Drawing upon theoretical perspectives on (language) teacher identity and teacher learning and development (Johnson & Golombek, 2016; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Olsen, 2008; Reagan, Hambacher, Schram, McCurdy, Lord, Higginbotham, & Fornauf, 2019; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005), the current study intends to explore the identity construction experiences of three transfer-post teachers and how this may impact on their professional development. Specifically, the study addresses the

following research questions: what kind of teacher identities have been constructed by these three teachers and to what extent, if any, have their identity construction experiences contributed to their professional development?

2. Professional development of transfer-post teachers

In 2001, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE, 2001) issued the *Guidelines on the active promotion of English language curriculum in elementary schools.* This policy required primary schools nationwide to offer English classes to third graders and above at least four sessions a week. To address the massive shortage of qualified English teachers, it required schools to train more in-service teachers to transfer to teach English on a full-time or part-time basis. This is when the locally practised coping strategy of transferring post was officially recognized. In 2011, it was estimated that the total number of transfer-post teachers accounted for approximately 50% of all EFL teachers at the elementary level nationwide (Wang, 2011) and the percentage was as high as 80% in some under-developed regions (Tan, 2010).

So far, a survey of the research literature on the qualifications of transfer-post teachers is characterized by largely discouraging impressions (e.g. Wu, 2012). According to Tan's (2011) study in Guangdong Province, transfer-post teachers accounted for roughly 50% of all primary school English teachers in the province, which was largely due to overstaffing, the large numbers of students, and the lack of an effective qualification system. In addition, according to Tan, surprisingly, new transfer-post teachers have emerged in recent years. In Li's (2012) survey of 182 English transfer-post teachers in a medium-sized city in Shandong Province, 57% of the participants reported that their transition to teaching English was voluntary, which, according to the author, was due to the growing enthusiasm for English education nationwide. However, Li failed to offer insights into why 43% of the participants' transfer was not voluntary. You (2016) found that transfer-post teachers are typically isolated and have little access to the local community of English teachers, and she recommended setting up inter-school communities and panels from which the transfer-post teachers could benefit.

Although more and more English majors with diplomas from colleges or universities have become primary school English teachers in China, in socio-economically advanced regions, in particular, many less-developed rural areas are still lagging behind. This is partly due to the fact that in these rural areas the majority of primary school teachers, aged from 35 to 40, are graduates from secondary normal schools. These schools were the main mechanism of educating primary school teachers

in China until the turn of the new century when the MOE upgraded the diploma requirements for primary school teachers to the post-secondary level. Secondary normal schools, with a history of over one hundred years, were the de-facto elite schools in the 1980s and 1990s because only a selection of high-achieving graduates from junior middle schools were admitted. The programs on offer were designed to prepare students for teaching a wide range of school subjects, and English was not a major subject in the curriculum.

3. Teacher identity in the Chinese EFL context

EFL teacher identity issues are especially significant in China where there are over 400 million English learners (Bolton & Graddol, 2012) and sustained reforming efforts and resources have been invested in English language education. However, there is limited research regarding Chinese EFL teacher identity construction, with only two studies situated in K-12 contexts. One of the key issues has been teacher identity construction and transformation in contexts of curriculum reforms. For example, at the tertiary level, Liu and Xu (2011) illuminate the complexity of teacher identity in the reform context where a Chinese EFL teacher's stories were "included in and "excluded from" the community in her department, introducing the notions of "designated identity" (institutional construction of identities) and "actual identity" (personal construction of identities). Tsui (2007) looked into a college EFL teacher's professional trajectory as a dual process of identification and negotiation of meanings, commenting that identity is "relational as well as experiential, reificative as well as participative, and individual as well as social" (2007, p. 678). Y. Xu (2013) probed into university EFL teachers' identity as researchers and found that identity involves research interests, publications, peer and institutional support, as well as professional life cycles. Elsewhere, while H. Xu's (2013) study of K-12 novice EFL teachers concluded that, despite negative institutional pressures, the teacher's perseverance and agency may ultimately lead to positive identities, Gao and Xu's (2014) study of secondary EFL teachers from underdeveloped rural areas found that participants have ambivalent attitudes towards their professional experiences, highlighting the complex and conflictual nature of teacher identity in a very different socio-political culture.

A survey of the relevant literature shows that researchers have become increasingly aware of the complexities and multifaceted nature of teacher identity as well as various contextual and sociocultural factors shaping identities. Furthermore, most studies have been centred on tertiary and secondary education, while relatively few have been conducted at the primary level, especially in rural areas. The significance of researching

this group of teachers lies in two areas: first, it will enhance our understanding of the complexity of teacher identity at primary level, and its relations to pedagogical practice and context, ultimately undergirding or undermining foreign language teaching (Varghese et al., 2016); second, it will enable teacher educators to gain insights into the needs of transfer-post teachers, in particular in the area of professional knowledge and learning, access to power and ownership of language (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Varghese et al., 2016) thus contributing to the further professional development of EFL teachers (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Author 2, 2020).

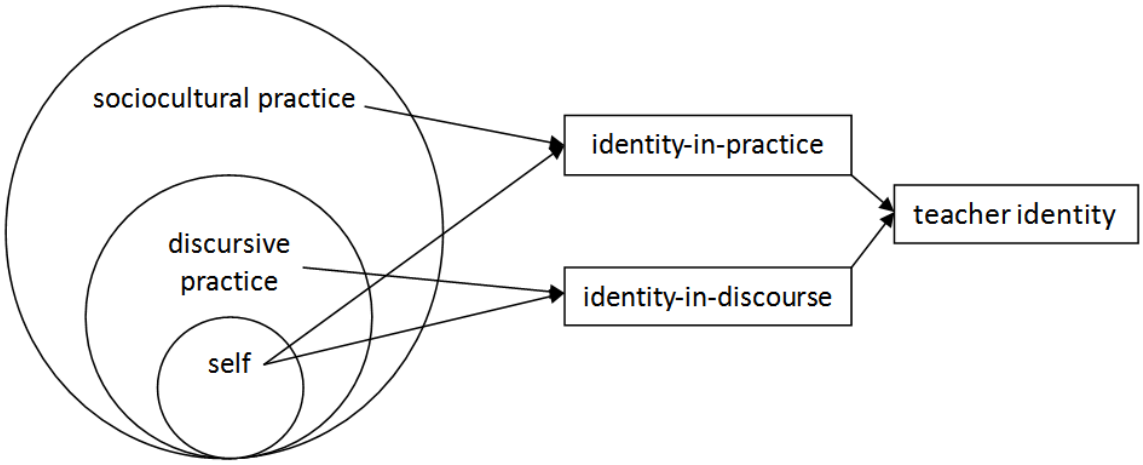
4. Conceptual framework

Drawing upon theoretical perspectives such as "learning involves the construction of identities" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53), teacher education as placed learning (Reagan et al., 2019), identity as pedagogy (Olsen, 2008), identity-in-activity (Johnson & Golombek, 2016), identity-in-practice and identity-in-discourse (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005), we propose an integrated conceptual framework to understand teacher identity as a form of discursively constructed knowledge about one's social roles and relations. This is echoed by Singh and Richards' (2006) argument that language teacher learning involves not only discovering the skills and knowledge of language teaching but also what it means to be a language teacher. Hence, identity as a key concept serves as an analytic frame to highlight the holistic, dynamic and situated nature of teacher development (Cheung, Said & Park, 2015; Olsen, 2008). Underlying all these ideas about teacher identity has been the intricate relationship between teacher identity construction and teacher learning.

In understanding the research context, this study uses the "placed-learning" perspective (Reagan et al., 2019) to underscore the importance of sociocultural context, particularly the rural context where our participants are based. Varghese et al (2005) rightly pointed out that "the broader context in which the teacher was situated was vital" (p. 22). What is particular about this take on rural teacher learning is the awareness that the place of teacher learning should not be taken for granted, which is often the case, because general education researchers are more familiar with the situation of urban environments. This makes it important to foreground the particular place, community or context in which the participants work and live while bearing in mind the general significance of educational research. Second, we are also aware of the dialectic relationship between teachers and their place and believe that the place is knowingly or unknowingly worked by the teachers. This means place or rurality is a negotiable, cultural construct, which highlights the teacher's transformative power or agency to

exert a possible influence on the immediate and broader social environment.

Figure 1



Reviewing the literature, we conclude that the most recent line of research is heavily influenced by poststructural approaches (see Pavlenko, 2002; Morgan, 2007; Huang & Varghese, 2015), which emphasised the plurality and composite nature of teacher identities in professional discourse and ideologies. In this study, we have outlined the main components of the conceptual framework (see Figure 1). The three circles stand for the relations of the self, discursive practice and sociocultural practice. The self is situated in discursive practices which are, in turn, part of sociocultural practices. Identity falls into two categories, namely identity-in-practice and identity-in-discourse, which are interfaces between the self and the discursive practice as well as the sociocultural practice (Varghese et al., 2005; Trent, Gao & Gu, 2014). Identity-in-practice concerns teachers' narration of their identity in their work, while identity-in-discourse examines what teachers say about themselves as transfer-post teachers (Lee, 2013). In particular, we consider how teachers construct their identities in professional practice, with a particular focus on engagement in the community of practice, alignment of their practice with the dominant policies and discourse, and imagination of the self beyond the practice (Wenger, 1998). We equally consider how these teachers display their identities in discourse by doing social acts and taking stances (Ochs, 1993; Fairclough, 2003). The details of the elements of identity-in-practice and identity-in-discourse are outlined below (see Table 1) but it should be noted that the relationship of teacher identity to sociocultural and discursive practices is not always straightforward and transparent.

Identity-in-practice (Wenger, 1998)	Identity-in-discourse (Ochs, 1993; Fairclough, 2003)
• alignment: level of conformity to dominant policies and discourses • engagement: level of participation in professional development communities of practice • imagination: imagined and desired identities beyond here and now	• social act: socially recognized, goal-directed behaviour with semantic and pragmatic meaning, such as making a claim or a disclaim (speech acts). Social acts can be realized by using a lexical or grammatical construction with the potential to achieve a result. • stance: semantic and pragmatic items of commitment to the truth or necessity of what is said (modality), or attitude about what is desirable or undesirable, good or bad (evaluation). Stances are linguistic resources which can be realized by using a lexical or grammatical structure with a potential to construct an attitude or a value judgment.

Table 1 Identity-in-practice and identity-in-discourse

5. Methodological considerations

This is an exploratory case study, which aims to understand the concept of "constructing identities for transfer-post teachers" in a rural area in China. A case study approach was adopted as the purpose of this study was to understand a cultural practice in a local context: specifically, how these transfer-post teachers constructed their identities and what impact these identities might have on their professional development.

5.1 Context and participants

The study investigates three transfer-post teachers from a county-level city with a

population of 700,000, H, in Guangdong Province, which is one of the most economically developed coastal provinces in China. H is well known for being the hometown of many overseas Cantonese, which means a considerably high level of international exchange. In 2016 there were a total of 51,000 elementary school students and 400 English teachers in the city.

In mid-1990s, the educational authorities of H launched English education in primary schools. Notwithstanding, English education in H has not been well developed compared with neighbouring cities. As one of a series of measures to promote English education, in 2013 an English teaching research group affiliated to the educational bureau was established to boost English language education to enable the city to better fit its international profile. Moreover, two "Expert Teacher's Studios" have also been set up to promote pedagogical innovations and ideas in English language teaching across different schools in the city. Our observations of several open classrooms and videos suggest that, although the routine characteristics of primary school English teaching such as teacher-controlled and large-sized classes with audio-lingual drills were present, the teachers were trying to incorporate a number of innovative teaching techniques to engage the students. The commonly used techniques include English songs, group competitions, and theme-based and topic-based instructions supported by the mainstream language teaching styles typically characterized by presentation, practice and production (PPP) procedures.

In July, October and December 2016, the faculty with which the first author of this paper is affiliated hosted three rounds of in-service teacher training for more than 300 EFL teachers at elementary schools under the administration of the educational bureau of H. The training, with each round lasting for three days, was initiated and funded by the local educational bureau as part of a larger project to train in-service English teachers in primary and secondary schools in H. To have a better understanding of their professional development status and needs, a survey among the 182 trainee teachers revealed that 30% of the participants were transfer-post teachers (Author1, 2017), which accords with You's (2016) result (32.5%) in a different city in the same province. The majority of these transfer-post teachers had previously taught Chinese (61.4%) and an overwhelming majority of them were female teachers (93.4%) (Author1, 2017). The survey results also suggest that these teachers have a low level of satisfaction with their English proficiency as well as their professional qualifications and identification.

With the help of the local educational bureau, we selected three teachers who willingly took part in the study. They were from three schools at different levels, that is, city level, township level and village level, and for this reason, they can be seen as relatively representative of the different levels of elementary schools in the city (see

Table 2 for their profiles).

	Chen	Qiu	Lao
Sex	female	female	female
Age	42	38	34
Education	secondary normal school	secondary normal school	secondary normal school
Year of transfer	1996	2010	2013
Years of teaching experience	22	19	15
Level of school	city	township	village
Subjects taught prior to transfer	Chinese and Math	Chinese	Chinese and Math

Table 2 Profiles of the participants

5.2 Data and method

The main data source for the present study is the semi-structured interview which was supplemented with focus-group interviews. We carried out two rounds of semi-structured interviews with the three teachers. During the first round of interview, each participant was interviewed for about forty minutes, focusing on their biographical information, perceptions about professional roles, self-evaluation of classroom teaching skills, English language proficiency levels, and professional development and training needs. During the second round of interview, which was conducted via e-mail, we followed up on the first round to clarify information or probe into significant emerging issues. To have an initial understanding of the background information of these teachers' professional qualifications and needs, we went on a field trip to H and organised a focus-group interview.

As a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007), findings in this study are emergent rather than prefigured, and are based on the interpretation of the researchers and understood holistically. The identity-in-practice is analyzed by looking at what participants have experienced through readings of transcripts, and the identity-in-discourse is analyzed by understanding what and how participants make identity-invoking social acts and

stances by language during the interviews. The analysis aims to find emerging themes and codes and the process is ongoing and recursive between data and research framework. We had multiple and thorough readings of the interview transcripts while bearing in mind our research framework and research questions until important and relevant research themes crop up. We were not only interested in what the participants report they did as clues to identity-in-practice but also paid close attention to how they discursively organized their experiences of coming to terms with a new identity. The comments and commitments the participants made were assessed in terms of social acts and stances outlined in the research framework part. In the next section, the findings are presented to address the research questions, illuminating the identity construction and its impact on professional development.

6. Findings

In this section, we consider both identity-in-practice and identity-in-discourse; however, for the convenience of organisation, we structure this section using three levels of identity-in-practice, whereas "social acts" and "stances" within identity-in-discourse are intertwined in the analysis.

6.1 Alignment: Assigned identity

The notion of "alignment" concerns how one orients oneself to institutional, cultural and political power relations. By agreeing or disagreeing to align oneself with the dominant discourse, one is choosing "who I am," which has implications for identification with professional roles. The dominant discourse here mainly refers to the policy discourse regarding the implementation of the English curriculum to younger learners in primary schools, which is recontextualized at the school level as the decision to mobilize in-service teachers of other subjects to teach English. An analysis of the three teachers' alignment indicates that personnel policies are imposed on them in a top-down manner without much input from grassroots teachers. In Gee's (2000, p.102) words, these transfer-post EFL teachers' identity falls into the category of "institutional identity." This is not so surprising when we take into account the educational, social and cultural contexts in China, in which teachers in public schools have the status of civil servants. The following comments made by Chen can vividly illustrate this institutional nature of their identity:

> But there really was a shortage of English teachers. The principal said, "you are young and learn

> fast, just give it a shot!" Considering the difficulty faced by the school, the only thing I could do was accept this assignment." (Excerpt 1)

It will be evident that the three teachers discursively constructed their identity as being supportive of the dominant discourse. What they share in common is their social act or speech act of making claims about their alignment with the school leadership. All of them argued for the importance of accommodating the mandates of serving collective needs, even in a self-effacing way. They understand that they are not in a position to negotiate with the schools and when they cannot reconcile individual and collective thinking at the same time, they have to choose the latter. The fact that their identity is above all an assigned one corresponds with the notion of "assigned identity", which is imposed on the teacher due to overwhelming institutional, social and cultural constraints (Varghese et al., 2005).

6.2 Engagement: Participation in varying degrees

The notion of engagement is another point of reference by which we can observe how teachers identify themselves with their role of transfer-post EFL teachers. The teachers become who they are because of their access or lack of access to the communities of professional development with peers. The analysis of the three teachers shows that their professional experiences as transfer-post teachers are characterized by varying degrees of engagement.

6.2.1 Chen: High degree of engagement

Chen's identity construction experience shows a considerably high degree of engagement and agency, which leads to identification with her new role as a teacher of English. Chen started to teach Chinese and Maths in a village elementary school in a nearby county-level city which is relatively more advanced in educational development in the region. A year later, she became a transfer-post English teacher and participated in a training program where she encountered a very dedicated teacher educator whose words remain an inspiration to her to today, as she remarked:

> Back in the 1990s primary schools in rural areas just began to offer English courses, and there was a great demand for English teachers. Ms Xiao often came to conduct training courses and I was deeply moved by Ms Xiao's devotion and commitment to work and "it is she that inspired us to

> transfer to be an English teacher". (Excerpt 2)

It is clear that Chen's professional identity formation as an English teacher is influenced by a very devoted teacher trainer. This can be understood as an exemplar-based identity (H. Xu, 2013), in which she looked up to a successful role model in her pursuit of professional growth. The positive influence of the role-model encourages her to fully engage in the community of practice as she sees herself as someone to be able to adopt the practice in her daily teaching by changing and innovating. She reflected:

> When I got back from a training session, I would probably feel like having a change in some aspect of my teaching and would infiltrate this in my lessons bit by bit based on my simple and shallow understanding. But I was not quite clear about how to exactly apply the professor's ideas about teaching, and I just taught according to my understanding. (Excerpt 3)

Of course, to Chen, being part of the community and engaging in the practice were not straightforward moves, as she suffered from a lack of pedagogical knowledge, referred to by her as a "simple and shallow understanding". The negative comments show the uncertainty of her understanding of the pedagogy but it is also clear that she takes a stance of 'engagement' to try out the ideas according to her understanding. The exploration suggests a deep and real engagement of practice. On another occasion, Chen commented that in this ever-changing world, the only way to keep up-to-date with the trend is to 'seize every opportunity to learn', reflecting on how she had benefited from learning how to create micro-course videos in the "Expert Teacher's Studio" (ETS). There is, thus, a direct and strong link between her identity as a transfer-post teacher who engages in professional learning and the opportunities for her to be part of the community and develop.

Engagement, in Chen's case, also means sharing with the local community the practice or knowledge she has gained, especially when she became an expert teacher, leading the English teaching panel of her school, and also a member of an ETS. To her, learning is part of being and becoming; as she reflects on her experience, she commented on the way forward for the school to help other teachers to grow professionally:

> But after I came back [from training], the school leadership didn't ask me to pass what I learned on

> to the other teachers. I ended up being the only person who learned. But I think one should share with other teachers. If I ask you to observe my lesson, you might not be interested; but if the leadership demanded that my task was to pass on and share what I learn, then the effect will radiate to a broader range. (Excerpt 4)

We know that engaging in "deliberate practice" enables a teacher to be more reflective and critical about their understanding and practice, which further leads to the development of expertise (Author 2, 2017). In Chen's case, it is also a journey of becoming a member of the community.

Chen's active involvement in professional development activities can be borne out by the strong evaluative meanings in her discourse. As can be seen from the above, she was "deeply" impressed by Ms Xiao, a teacher educator who had "inspired" her to become an English teacher. Her experience evidences a transformation from "assigned identity" to "claimed identity" (Varghese et al., 2005), in which she re-orients herself as a reflective practitioner and active team leader hoping to transform teachers around her. This recalls H. Xu's (2013) study of novice K-12 EFL teachers' professional transition from "imagined identity" to "practised identity" with the conclusion that it is possible and desirable for teachers to overcome negative institutional constraints with strong perseverance and agency to maintain their ideal self. There is always space for individual teachers to exercise their agency and advance their career path, even in an unfavourable cultural context in which individual teachers are placed in a relatively disadvantaged power relationship.

6.2.2 Qiu and Lao: Limited engagement

Conversely, a low level of engagement and weak identification is often associated with less agency and motivation, as is suggested in the identity construction experiences of the other two participants, Qiu and Lao. Qiu became a transfer-post elementary EFL teacher in 2010 and, unsurprisingly, at that time she had not been trained and prepared for English language teaching. She had a number of opportunities to attend English teaching development activities such as watching open classes, which was an eye-opening experience for her. However, she was concerned about her English proficiency level and that she might not be able to keep up with the curriculum materials and requirements which are constantly being updated, as she commented:

> I had been teaching Chinese till transferring to teaching English. I felt rather strange with English so that I couldn't even get the pronunciation right of the simple words and expressions. I was like back into the status of "English-blind". My English level is so limited, and I am no longer young, so I find learning English difficult. Besides, the teaching materials are being constantly updated and getting increasingly difficult, I am afraid I might not be able to cope with it…If I can choose, I would rather stay on teaching Chinese." (Excerpt 5)

Qiu suffered from a lack of confidence due to her low level of language competence, as well as insufficient pedagogical knowledge about material evaluation and assessment. This lack of confidence is well situated within the broader educational context in China as it is a common practice for Chinese educational authorities to update curriculum policies regularly, which means teachers need to engage in ongoing professional development.

Qiu's limited level of engagement in the professional community of primary EFL teachers can be seen from her vague identification, or in Wenger's (1998, p.148) terms "peripheral participation," with her new role as an English teacher. This is suggested in her comments that she was not at all prepared for teaching English when she was assigned to be a transfer-post teacher. She used words like "remote and strange" and "English-blind" to describe a negative evaluation of her English language proficiency level. Although she had opportunities to participate in teaching development activities such as watching open classes, this did not meet her training needs concerning language development. Thus, the lack of training in both linguistic and pedagogic skills in the target language leads to her somewhat weak and ambiguous identification with her new role as an English teacher, and the result is that Qiu feels both frustrated and vulnerable, as evidenced in her claims of insufficient knowledge. The lack of confidence is closely related to teacher knowledge (Author 2, 2013; 2017), which could result in a lack of engagement, as shown in Qiu's case.

As concerns Lao, she has no access to a school-based teaching development community because she is the only English teacher in her school. The lack of engagement could result from a lack of motivation to become an English teacher, as she identified herself as a "primary school teacher". The lack of engagement might also be the result of a lack of understanding of 'future self' given that she was unclear about her professional trajectory, as suggested below:

> Lao: I don't think I belong to the category of "transfer-post" teacher. It means there is a need

for English teachers and I became one.

Interviewer: Have you been teaching English since the transfer?

Lao: Not necessarily. In my primary school, sometimes Chinese, sometimes Maths.

Interviewer: Depending on the circumstances?

Lao: Yes. (Excerpt 6)

It could be claimed that Qiu and Lao have had different degrees of access to training and development opportunities. In the case of Qiu, even though she has had some interest in honing her skills in English language and pedagogy, it becomes quite obvious that the training does not equip her with the right skills and knowledge to eventually qualify as a competent English teacher for young learners. As far as Lao is concerned, she has no access to an English teaching development community in her school, which makes it difficult for her to receive adequate training to become a qualified teacher of English for young learners. Besides, in the interview, it was made clear that the institutional practice was to choose young teachers who the management team considered capable of teaching English as the ones to be the transfer-post teachers. This is the 'designated identity' that Lao was given because she was chosen for and assigned to the post (Liu & Xu, 2011). When in the post, she will assume this identity until 'there are new English teachers to replenish the shortage'. In this case, the 'designated identity' suppresses the 'actual identity'. The feeling of 'being stuck' in this case perhaps demotivates Lao from becoming more active in searching for development opportunities. The limited engagement certainly has a negative impact here, in that Lao sees herself not only as someone incapable of teaching the subject but also as someone who does not have a community to engage with and develop.

6.3 Imagination: Gap between reality and ideal

Imagination is another means by which we can gain access to how our participants are oriented to their roles and images. By making imaginative and hypothetical comments, the participants highlighted a gap between their demonstrated "real" identity and "desired" identity. In Excerpt 4, Chen mentioned that there is a lack of engagement from the principal in their training. In her opinion, the out-of-school training programs should not only be attended by a few participating teachers; rather, these programs should be connected to school-based training to the extent that new teaching ideas can be made available to more teachers who need them most. This has constructed her as a

critically minded and reflective teacher who does not just blindly follow what her leaders say but takes responsibility for the professional growth of her colleagues. Her clear thinking and criticality are reflected in another example, in which she mentioned that on one occasion she had not been allowed to attend training because her principal thought she was too good for it.

Another instance of using imagined self as a resource to construct identity is evident in Excerpt 5, in which Qiu comments that she would rather teach subjects other than English because of her insufficient English language proficiency and the growing demands on English teachers. This shows that she does not have a strong sense of belonging to the ranks of English teachers due to her lack of necessary language proficiency in the target language.

Lao is in a similar situation. To our surprise, she did not view herself as a transfer-post teacher, as can be seen in Excerpt 6. Her disagreement with us on the meaning of transfer-post teachers suggests that she does not seem to think of herself as an English teacher, perhaps because she was also teaching other subjects at the same time, which is not uncommon among transfer-post teachers. The above examples of how our participants construct their imagined identities as opposed to their "real" identities suggest that there is a disparity between how they are presented and made sense of by others and how they would like to make sense of themselves in an ideal way. Qiu and Lao's identity construction experiences can also be seen as a form of non-participation or peripheral participation (Wenger, 1998,) in which they consciously distance themselves from the institutionally sanctioned identity.

7. Discussion

This study has contributed a number of insights to the scholarship of language teacher identity and teacher learning by exploring the transfer-post teachers' identities, which have hitherto been under-researched. In light of the tripartite conceptual framework on identity-in-practice including alignment, engagement and imagination, we have found that (1) the basic aspect of their identity has been the institutionally assigned identity, which is a rule-based identity (Xu, 2013) determined by the educational reform mandates and is by and large unnegotiable; (2) certain teachers have been more successful than others in effectively transforming their identities from a rule-based one to a schema-based one by varying degrees of engagement in professional development, highlighting the importance of teacher agency and transformative power in educational reforms. More specifically, while Chen's successful career growth is attributable to her active engagement in related development opportunities, the other two teachers' less

fruitful engagement has led to their weak identification with their assigned and rule-based identities. Finally, (3), through making sometimes imaginative and hypothetical remarks, they have constructed for themselves creative and ideal identities which are in stark contrast with their assigned or rule-based identities. The analytical perspective of identity-in-discourse has made it possible to provide some linguistic evidence of the nuances of their identities constructed on the interactive level. These discursive strategies included the participants' performing of social acts of claiming or disclaiming their identities, as well as highlighting the attitude or judgement by using words with strong evaluative meanings.

This qualitative study has offered rich theoretical and practical insights into the research of teacher identity. First, it underscores the view that identity is not a fixed, stable and unitary phenomenon but is multiple, shifting and transformative (Varghese et al., 2005). Our analyses have suggested that teacher identity is never a straightforward process in which teachers in the same situation would have the same experiences of identity construction. Rather, it is a being in continuous becoming (Johnson & Golombek, 2016) and a process of constant (re)discovering and (re)orienting oneself, responding to various local and national educational mandates by embracing, resisting or remaining ambivalence about one's shifting roles. Chen's identity transformation from a rule-based, assigned identity to a more creative and schema-based identity is a case in point. It can be seen that identity can bestow agency and transformative power for the teachers to act on the transformation and re-structuration of their professional and institutional communities.

Second, in response to Freeman's (2018) work-driven view on EFL teacher's knowledge base, findings from this study also urge us to reflect on the changing ownership status of English in globalization and what this means for language teacher education. It might be argued that whether a (transfer-post) EFL teacher is professionally qualified in terms of proficiency in the target language does not have to depend on the often decontextualized native-speaking tenets. What is important here is how well teachers can function with the English language in the work environment, make themselves understood by the students, and achieve the locally prescribed teaching objectives.

Third, echoing Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning, the study has indicated that legitimate and effective participation in professional development communities is a prerequisite for teacher learning, whereas non-participation or peripheral participation has negative implications for identity formation. It is imperative to develop a favourable inter-school community of teaching development. It might be a good idea for the schools to create more "affinity groups" (Gee, 2000, p. 106) to promote a kind of

"affinity identity" among the staff to generate more shared experiences, practices and values. For example, the ETS scheme, funded by the district educational bureau and based in schools and networked by teachers across schools, is such an affinity group. Such platforms should also be extended to bring more rural schools and urban schools together for more equitable and sustained teacher professional development and communication.

8. Conclusion

Overall, as a case study, this paper has offered significant insights into the broader issue of language teacher development from the perspective of identity construction, in particular with transfer-post teachers. The insights offered in this study might resonate with teachers in a similar context, particularly in developing countries where the number of EFL teachers is insufficient. Teacher educators in these contexts may need to design specific courses to tackle the challenges that these teachers face and encourage teachers to engage in positive practice when transferring to a new post. In the long run, the teacher shortage issue could be addressed in part by training more specialist primary school teachers who are capable of teaching multiple subjects. This has been mentioned as a key initiative in a recent educational reform policy guideline of the MOE (2014), in which the government pledges to educate more *zhuoyue jiaoshi* (卓越教师, expert teachers) who are capable of teaching multiple subjects. To this end, it is critical for policymakers and teacher education programs to draw from the experiences of secondary normal schools.

Acknowledging teacher identity construction is a process of finding a balance between personal experience and "professional/cultural expectations of what it means to be a teacher" (Alsup, 2006: 27), we need to particularly consider teacher education programs as a venue for teachers to recognise the importance of identity as cultural/pedagogical resources. Teachers should be encouraged to engage in "critical reflection (on) life experiences" to develop their awareness of teachers' identities as resources for pedagogy (Galindo & Olguin, 1996). Along the same line, peer support and community become crucial aids for these teachers to share their practice, reflect on their experience, and learn from each other. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that policy-makers need to be careful when rolling out similar schemes, as negative experience could form a barrier for teachers to engage in their work, and create a gap between the "designated identity" and "actual identity", which might further influence the efforts that teachers make to engage in the community.

Given that this is the first study to focus on transfer-post teachers, further studies

are required to explore how countries around the world deal with a similar teacher development challenge from an international comparative perspective. In addition, future research can also look at the development of teacher identities longitudinally, since teacher identity is often "subject to change across time and place" (Morgan, 2004, p. 172). Transfer-post teacher experiences, such as those described in this article, are clearly valuable for developing teacher identities. However, we cannot contend that it is vital to establish a framework for teachers to follow. Rather, it is critical to know that the understanding of teacher identity is an interpretive and subjective process for teachers to find their ways to theorising about their experiences and practice. In the long run, it will be more important for teachers to develop an awareness to recapture personal experiences as part of their daily practice.

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