

Exploring EFL Teacher Identities and Identity Conflicts¹

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Teacher identity is a research area which has emerged in the last two decades and has been considered an important element in teachers' professional development. However, as Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) point out in their review of the literature in this area, the concept has been understood in many different ways and emphasis has been placed on different aspects of professional identity. Some studies relate the concept of professional identity to teachers' images of self (Knowles, 1992; Nias, 1989) and some consider teachers' perceptions of their roles as characteristic of teachers' professional identity (e.g., Goodson & Cole, 1994; Volkman & Anderson, 1998). Some maintain that teachers' personal practical knowledge is the source of their professional identity while others observe that the professional landscape of which teachers are a part can be a powerful shaping force (Cooper & Olson, 1996; Reynolds, 1996; Duff & Uchida, 1997). This landscape, they argue, must be understood as part of the broader sociocultural and political landscape in which teachers' work is situated (see also He, 2002a, b, c).

One aspect of teachers' professional identity which has drawn researchers' attention is the nature of teacher identity. While it is generally agreed that professional identity is dynamic and multi-dimensional or multi-faceted (Mishler, 1999; Cortazzi & Jin, 2002), there are diverse views about the relationships between these dimensions or facets. For example, Mishler (1999) suggests that "sub-identities" can be compared to "a chorus of voices" (p. 8) and that they are broadly linked, some being more central than others.

Building on Mishler's metaphor of "chorus", Beijaard et al. (2004) point out that the more harmonized the sub-identities are, the better the chorus of voices sound. Though they acknowledge that conflicts are experienced by both novice and experienced teachers, they emphasize that "it is essential for a teacher that these sub-identities do not conflict, that is, that they are well-balanced" (p. 122). In a similar vein, Volkmann and Anderson (1999) maintain that "professional identity exists as a complex and dynamic *equilibrium* where personal self-image is *balanced* with a variety of social roles that teachers feel obliged to play." (p. 296, my emphasis) However, other researchers argue that managing conflict is germane to professional identity. For example, Lampert (1985) sees the teacher as a "dilemma manager, a broker of contradictory interests" (p.178). She maintains that when confronted with a dilemma, a teacher is "an active negotiator" (1985, p. 190) who embraces the conflict and manages the dilemma. Similarly, MacLure (1993) considers the construction of identity as a "continuing site of struggle" (p. 313). In today's world, the process of education is rapidly changing and teachers are increasingly confronted with conflicting values, behaviors and attitudes, which cannot always be resolved (Samuel & Stephens, 2000). Hence, in their view, being able to manage and live with conflicts is considered part of the work of teachers.

This paper focuses on the multi-dimensional nature of teacher identity, or rather teacher identities, and the relationship between these identities. Based on a study of Minfang, an EFL teacher in the People's Republic of China, it

explores the identities that were formed and the identity conflicts that were experienced as he was confronted with competing demands and conflicting beliefs and values in his six years of teaching. The study adopted a narrative inquiry approach by inviting Minfang to tell stories, orally as well as in writing, about how he became an EFL teacher, his perceptions of his roles and relations in his community of practice, how he played out those roles, the conflicts he experienced and the formation of identities in the course of managing those conflicts. As Connelly and Clandinin (1999) point out, stories provide a narrative thread that teachers draw on to make sense of their experience and themselves. These stories, as Beijaard et al. (2004) observe, are personal stories shaped by their own beliefs, experience, knowledge and values. They are also collective stories shaped by teachers' context of work which includes the school context as well as the broader social, cultural and historical context in which these stories are lived out.

EFL Learner Identities

Minfang joined *Nanda*, a well-known foreign language university in China, as an EFL teacher in the 1990s. At the time, China had already opened up to the rest of the world. The demand for more and better communicative skills in English had thrown into question the prevailing EFL pedagogies in schools and universities which had been criticized to have produced students who were unable to speak or understand English even after hundreds of hours

of instruction. The English competence that the students acquired were referred to as “deaf-and-dumb” English (*lungya yingyu*). These pedagogies were linguistically focused and placed a strong emphasis on text analysis and vocabulary learning. It was in this context that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was embraced by some universities as *the* solution for “deaf-and-dumb” English learners. *Nanda* was an advocate of CLT and devoted a great deal of energy in producing EFL teaching materials based on the principles of CLT. It established a strong national reputation in China for producing graduates with a high level of English proficiency who were much sought after by both the public and the private sectors. The leadership at *Nanda* attributed the success of their students to the CLT pedagogy and they were branded the “product of CLT”.

When Minfang was first admitted into *Nanda*, he was stigmatized as one of those “deaf-and-dumb” students who could hardly speak a word of English. He had problems understanding even simple English instructions from the teacher such as turning to the right page, although his writing and reading skills were very good. He was sent to the language lab after class to do remedial work. His classmates made fun of him and made him feel that he was a “country bumpkin” compared to his classmates who were “smart, eloquent and communicative”. By this he meant they could code-switch and code-mix between English and Cantonese and they could give a five-minute introduction about themselves in English with little difficulty. He worked extremely hard so that his English proficiency would be on a par with his classmates. He

developed his own strategies for learning English. For example, he bought two most widely used grammar books and studied them systematically. He explained that he studied both of them because their emphases and coverage were somewhat different and he wanted to have a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the English language system. He also studied the reading texts intensively, focusing on sentence structures and vocabulary. According to Minfang, this helped him to come to grips with how the language was organized. To improve his listening and speaking skills, he listened to the English news broadcast on the radio every evening more than once and he had English conversations with his partner for an hour every evening. For him, precious class time should be spent on learning *about* the language under the guidance of a teacher. Learning how to *use* the language for communication should be practiced outside of class with peers. Minfang's English improved dramatically within a year and he won the first prize in a pronunciation and intonation contest at the end of the first year. For the rest of his undergraduate studies at *Nanda*, Minfang remained a high achiever in English and he was treated like "an insider". His successful experience in learning English convinced him that the so-called "Traditional Method" which involved intensive study of linguistic structures, texts and vocabulary was "no worse than CLT". For him, learning about the language system was an indispensable part of learning English. In the process of investing his self in outperforming his peers and living out his role as an EFL learner in one of the top foreign language universities in the country, he developed an identity of a

successful EFL learner who was a product of the Traditional Method. However, at the same time, the identity of “a product of CLT” was, in Minfang’s own words, “thrust upon him” by his teachers. This identity was inseparable from his identity as a student of *Nanda* which he embraced and of which he was proud. These two conflicting identities co-existed in Minfang as an EFL learner. Minfang managed the conflict by allocating “regular time slots” when he could concentrate on his work, such as between eight and ten o’clock in the evening, to what he considered to be crucial to the learning of English. He used fragmented “peripheral” time slots, such as before meals and going to bed, to complete his CLT assignments. As we shall see, these EFL learner identities had a profound impact on his identities as an EFL teacher.

EFL Teacher Identities

The Marginal EFL Teacher

Minfang was offered a teaching position in the English Department upon graduation. The appointment was made after some heated debate in the department because normally only the top two or three students would be selected. Minfang ranked fifth in class. A major reason for the appointment was that he was considered “a genuine product of CLT” because throughout his four years of undergraduate education, he was taught English through the CLT approach. He was told by his former teachers that he should be grateful for this appointment and should behave like “a genuine CLT practitioner”.

Minfang was allocated the teaching of listening skills, the least valued component of the course and least paid job, on the ground that he was inexperienced and he had to improve on his English. He was assured that when he had proved himself, he would be promoted to teach other skills. Minfang worked extremely hard to legitimize his appointment. He monitored his own speech closely to make sure that there were no grammatical errors. He narrated, "I did not mind other people (meaning his students) talking about my appearance and other things about me, but I did care whether they thought my English was good or not." To live up to his former teachers' expectation, he embraced the identity of "a genuine CLT practitioner" and introduced plenty of activities that engaged students in oral interaction when teaching listening. His practice was at odds with his image of a teacher who should be serious, authoritative, and knowledgeable, and should not be wasting time on fun activities. It was also in conflict with his beliefs about EFL learning. Nevertheless, the concern to legitimize his membership of EFL teaching staff in *Nanda* was of paramount importance at the time. His students did not respond well to the activities and he received a critical report from his head of department advising him to improve on his teaching techniques. He was mortified and he put the blame on CLT. He felt that he was like a clown trying to entertain the students with fun activities, and yet the students remained "indifferent", "aloof", and "contemptuous". He was also resentful that listening lessons were allocated the worst slots of the day – in the afternoon when students were tired and drowsy. Partly because of the irresponsiveness of

his students and partly because of his belief that fun activities would not bring about real learning and therefore would adversely affect his students' examination results, he abandoned the CLT approach. Instead, he adopted the audio-lingual method which engaged students in structural drills and he gave them plenty of intensive listening exercises. He also asked them to transcribe audio stories and news recordings. Minfang wrote, "My behavior matched my beliefs for the first time since I began teaching." He worked them really hard to ensure that their examinations would not undermine his "hard-earned status" as an EFL teacher and his efforts paid off. The classes that he taught ranked first, second and fourth in the year-end listening examinations. This reinforced his beliefs about EFL learning which he described as the "hard learning approach" and he proudly told the students his motto, "no pain, no gain". Because of his outstanding teaching performance and his good rapport with his students, he became known as "the popular listening teacher". This identification, however, was in conflict with his image of a teacher. In Chinese culture, a popular teacher is often associated with someone who is light-weight and has to win over the hearts of the students by being friendly with them. He wrote, "...I hate to be perceived as a popular teacher who (just) knows how to establish relationship with students ... I thought it was a kind of humiliation which implied that I had nothing serious to win the heart of students but *guanxi* [relationship]."

Reflecting on his first two years of teaching, Minfang narrated that it was a personal struggle to construct his identity as an EFL teacher in a

prestigious university. Despite his achievements in the first two years of teaching, he never felt that he was a member of the teaching community at *Nanda*. He was afraid of going into the staff common room lest his former teachers might say, when introducing him to other teachers, something like this: “He was my student. His listening comprehension score was among the lowest, but he has greatly improved and now he teaches listening”. Remarks like this, in his view, would reinforce the identity of marginality which he desperately tried to shake off.

The CLT Teacher and the EFL Teacher

In his third year of teaching, Minfang was “promoted” to teach the CLT component of the EFL course. As CLT was considered the core component and taught only by the best teachers, this responsibility played a critical role in Minfang’s identity formation. For the first time, he felt that his status as a member of staff in *Nanda* was legitimate. The legitimization of this identity did not mean that Minfang changed his beliefs about CLT. When he was using the prescribed CLT textbook, he incorporated structural and vocabulary exercises and provided explicit grammar explanations. Such approach was welcomed by his students. However, a critical incident occurred which undermined the way he managed the conflicting beliefs and the confidence that he was gradually building up about his teaching.

As part of the internal quality assurance procedures, Minfang’s class was paid an unannounced visit by a senior professor from another department. Minfang

was ill-prepared and he was worried that he would not be able to get his students to participate actively in the communicative activities in the textbook. He said, "...if the class was not active, if nobody responded to you, how could you call it communicative language teaching?" He adopted an avoidance strategy and decided on the spot to teach reading comprehension which he could get by without asking the students to interact with each other. He had hoped that the inspector would have gone by the time he finished teaching skimming and scanning. When the inspector showed no sign of leaving, he was desperate. He started to go through the text, explaining the language structures and vocabulary in great detail. The inspector gave him very critical feedback. What alarmed Minfang most was the remark that was thrown at him when the inspector left the classroom and handed over his written comments, "Young man, CLT should not be taught like this ... Don't ruin the reputation of the CLT course." Apparently these comments were also conveyed to his head of department who made oblique references to his teaching in a staff meeting, reminding all staff members to teach CLT properly and to live up to the reputation of the department. This was a serious blow to Minfang. In order not to jeopardize his career, he decided to stick closely to the CLT textbook. Yet, he was not convinced that this was all the students needed; he felt that something was missing. He remembered how frustrated he was as a student when his teacher just conducted the activities in the CLT textbook without making explicit the linguistic objectives and exactly what went wrong when he made mistakes. He knew his students would feel exactly the same. His

identity as a CLT teacher, and the alignment with institutional goals entailed, was in conflict with his identity as a teacher who had the moral obligation to help students learn in the best possible way. To manage the conflict, Minfang made his teaching more communicatively focused when there was external pressure, such as inspection or monitoring by his superiors, and more linguistically focused when the pressure was alleviated. However, all the time, he was apprehensive about his colleagues asking him what he was doing in class and why he was teaching linguistic structures.

The “Model” CLT Teacher

In his fourth year of teaching, he was awarded the “Model Teacher of CLT” because of his high student evaluation scores. As part of the culture in schools and universities in China, teachers observe each other’s lessons regularly. Since he received the award, Minfang’s lessons were frequently observed by colleagues from his and other departments with or without advance notice. To live up to this award, he abandoned his somewhat eclectic approach and stuck to the orthodox CLT in his department.

In the same year, he took on the responsibility of inducting new staff members. As part of the induction, he introduced the tradition of the department, highlighting the centrality of CLT in its reputation. He also explained the underlying principles of CLT. In the following year, he was appointed the Deputy Director of *jiaoyanzhi* (Teaching Research Office) and the Director in the sixth year. *Jiaoyanzhi* is a core unit in the organizational

structure of schools and universities. It is an office which looks after teachers' professional development and where some of the most important activities are organized on a daily basis, such as Open Lessons, collective lesson preparation and so on (Guo, 2005). He was also appointed the course leader of CLT and the Director of the Office for Overseas Studies in the fifth year.

These appointments, which involved administrative and pedagogical leadership, were important sources of identification with the institution for Minfang. When he was put in charge of the *jiaoyanzhi*, he had to embrace CLT in order to provide leadership. He had to defend the principles of CLT when he organized activities, did group planning, and he had to force himself to be assertive about CLT as the official methodology despite his reservations. Given these official appointments, Minfang became very cautious about to whom he would disclose his views. He would be guarded when he talked to his former teachers or teachers who were older than him and more experienced. Similarly, his words would be measured if the conversation between them was less than informal, for example, a sit-down conversation in which his views were solicited. If the teacher was of his age or younger, had similar or less experience, was venting their frustrations, and he was sure that his words would not get back to the leadership, he would empathize and disclose that he was not in entire agreement with some of the pedagogical suggestions in the CLT textbook. Minfang explained that it was not so much that he was worried about espionage as being considered "an outlaw" by the authority. He felt that teachers who had been with *Nanda* for a long time would be socialized into

the discourse and would not be receptive to different views.

The Eclectic EFL Teacher

In the first three years of teaching, Minfang relied very much on his learning experience and his intimate knowledge of his students for pedagogical decision-making. In the fourth year of teaching, that is, the year when he was awarded “the Model Teacher of CLT”, Minfang enrolled on a two-year an EFL master’s program in his department. He was keen to learn more about EFL teaching and the theoretical underpinnings of various pedagogical approaches, particularly CLT.

Learning about the theories and models of English language teaching provided new insights for Minfang. He saw in a different light the conflicts that he experienced in his four years of teaching. On the one hand, he found that the misconceptions of CLT that were discussed in the literature resonated with some of the misgivings that he had about CLT. He was very happy to see that accuracy and fluency were not dichotomous, and that one was not supposed to be achieved at the expense of the other. Similarly, student-centredness was not to be understood as the absence of teacher guidance. He learnt about the differences between intensive and extensive reading and how to use reading texts appropriately. He realized that his modifications of the activities in the textbook were inappropriate and undermined their communicative purposes. On the other hand, he was gratified to see that some of his pedagogies that were based on his learning experience and students’

response were actually defensible and not diametrically opposed to principles of CLT. Teaching communicative skills did not preclude teaching about the language and the need to focus on form. He began to see intuitive classroom practices in a theoretically principled way.

The empowerment that was experienced by Minfang was a source of identification as a member of the teaching profession. He felt “more comfortable” about developing an eclectic approach to teaching which incorporated some of the principles of CLT. This deviated somewhat from the orthodox CLT approach adopted in the department. Given the hierarchical structure of the department and the respect for seniority and authority in the Chinese culture, Minfang did not feel that he could publicly challenge the authority and put forward his own views in front of all the professors and experienced teachers who had higher academic qualifications than he had.

At the end of his sixth year of teaching, he took leave from his institution to pursue a doctoral degree in the U.K. He described these six years as a “painful emotional journey” during which the conflicts were never resolved. It was only after he had left the institution and had started pursuing his doctoral studies that he began to feel “more solid” and he “knew what he was doing”. He began to question whether there was such a thing as the most suitable methodology, be it CLT or task-based learning. He felt that the teacher’s lived experience in the classroom was the best guide for pedagogical decision-making. He narrated, “I do believe teaching is an integrated skill developed through experience, inspiration and passion.”

Discussion

Identity Formation and Identity Conflicts: Reification and Participation

Wenger (1998) points out that reification is an important process of identity formation and membership is an important form of reification. It involves both reifying and being reified as members of socially organized categories or as taking on certain roles. However, identity formation is also participative: It is the lived experience of belonging that constitutes who we are. Minfang's stories show that the complex interplay between reification and participation contributes to the formation of multiple identities and generates identity conflicts which teachers had to manage and live with. Minfang's admittance to *Nanda* as a student was a reification of his membership of the learner community in *Nanda*. Similarly, his appointment as a teaching staff in *Nanda* was a reification of his membership of the teaching community in *Nanda*. However, in both cases, his lived experience was initially in conflict with the reifications: He felt that he was not fully accepted as a member of the respective communities. The identity of a "deaf-and-dumb student", which was both self-reificatory and other-reificatory, was at odds with the identity of students of *Nanda*, as highly competent learners of English. He tried to resolve the conflict by working hard on his English. When his English proficiency not only caught up with his peers but even surpassed them, he became "an insider". In other words, through participating in practice, Minfang developed

competence that was recognized as important by his community. As Wenger (1998) points out, recognition of competence is an important source of identity formation.

Similarly, when Minfang became a teacher in *Nanda*, the remarks made by his former teachers about the exceptions that they had taken to appoint him and the allocation of the teaching of listening skills, the least valued course component, contributed to his lived experience of marginality. His sense of exclusion from membership was symbolized by his reluctance to step into the staff common room. Again, it was when his competence as an EFL teacher was recognized by his peers and students that his membership was legitimated. The reification became congruent with his lived experience of being “promoted” from teaching the listening course to the core CLT course, being awarded the “Model Teacher of CLT” and being assigned important leadership positions.

Ownership of Meanings in Identity Formation and Identity Conflicts

While Minfang’s participation in his community of practice resolved the identity conflict generated by incongruities between the reification and the competence expected of the members of a community, it generated other identity conflicts. Wenger (1998) points out that participation in the negotiation of meanings that mattered in the community is another important process of identity formation. Whether one is able to contribute to the construction of meanings that mattered in the community and to claim

ownership of meanings shapes the identity constituted. Minfang's stories show that a major source of identity conflict was that the meanings of EFL that he constructed through his participation as an EFL learner and an EFL teacher were at odds with the meanings that were valued by the respective communities. However, in both cases, he was unable to negotiate meanings of EFL learning and EFL teaching with the powers that be. He was coerced to align with meanings constructed by the authority because of the asymmetrical power relationship in *Nanda*. As Wenger (1998) points out, alignment by coercion could lead to resistance and alienation. The resistance to the appropriation of the meanings that Minfang had constructed for EFL learning and EFL teaching was realized in his "othering" CLT as diametrically opposed to what he referred to as Traditional Method without really trying to understand the theoretical underpinnings of CLT. Even when he had a better understanding of CLT and was able to develop his own eclectic approach in a more principled way, his inability to participate in the negotiation of the meanings of EFL learning contributed to the lack of ownership of the meanings of what he was doing. For this reason, the identity conflicts that he experienced were painful and never adequately addressed.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have explored the multiple identities of an EFL teacher and the relationship between these identities through a narrative inquiry of

how he lived out his role as an EFL teacher in a prestigious university in the People's Republic of China. Drawing on Wenger's theory of identity formation, I have tried to make sense of the multiple identities formed and identity conflicts experienced. The stories of Minfang both as an EFL learner and as an EFL teacher show that while reification is an important source of identity, legitimacy of reification, recognition of competence as valued by the community, the ability to contribute to the meanings that matter in a community and a sense of ownership of meanings are equally important. The incongruities between the reifications that were externally imposed and the lived experience of belonging was a major source of identity conflict for Minfang. The incongruities between the meanings of EFL learning and teaching that he constructed for himself and the meanings that were valued by his communities of practice was another major source. Such incongruities are commonly found not only amongst novice teachers but also experienced teachers. In many cases, they provide the impetus for professional development as teachers try to address, manage or live with them. In Minfang's case, it was not so much the existence of such incongruities that created resistance and a sense of alienation as his inability to contribute to the construction and negotiation of meanings. The opportunity to pursue further study abroad allowed Minfang to reconcile these conflicts and to reclaim the meanings of EFL teaching. Otherwise, a sustained identity of alienation or marginality could eventually lead to disengagement from practice.

Endnote

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