



Identity constructions of ESP teachers in a Chinese university



Jian (Tracy) Tao^{a,b}, Xuesong (Andy) Gao^{b,*}

^a School of Foreign Studies, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, Shanghai, China

^b School of Education, The University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Keywords:

ESP teacher

Teacher identity

Professional development

ABSTRACT

This study draws on life-history interview data to examine the identity construction and negotiation of eight English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers at a Chinese university. Informed by an adapted model of TESOL teacher identity (Pennington, 2014), the data analysis reveals that for the study participants becoming an ESP teacher is a complex process of transforming professional practices and constructing professional identities. On the one hand, the participants felt a sense of intrinsic fulfillment through their teaching aimed at helping graduates acquire the ESP skills needed to support socioeconomic development in the region. On the other hand, their construction of professional identities is undermined by the marginalized status of ESP, as imposed by the institution. As English language teachers are increasingly expected to equip university graduates with ESP skills in diverse educational contexts, more attention and support are needed to facilitate ESP teachers' professional development and hence identity formation.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Language teachers' professional lives and practices in tertiary contexts have been profoundly impacted by recent educational changes worldwide. In language departments in the United States, for instance, structural changes have been implemented to embrace language for specific purposes (LSP) (Grosse & Voght, 2012); in Europe the Bologna reforms have focused on providing English for academic purposes (EAP) support (Fortanet-Gómez & Räisänen, 2008); and in Asia policies have focused on the internationalization of business and education (Cheng & Anthony, 2014). These shifts in education priorities have led to a growing body of literature that explores how English teachers respond to changing priorities in terms of their professional development (e.g. Campion, 2016). The converging evidence from empirical studies to date indicates that teacher identity is a central factor in adapting to changing educational environments, both for novice and experienced teachers (Kubanyiova & Crookes, 2016). When shifts in education priorities occur, teachers may need to acquire new knowledge, but even more important is the need for teachers to build or rebuild their identities (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Xu, 2014). Failure to address teacher development may result in identity struggles. For example, English for specific purposes (ESP) teachers may confront embarrassment when working with students who have more knowledge of the related subjects, and skepticism from specialist professors who question their qualifications (Tao & Gao, 2017; Tsou & Chen, 2014). Given the importance of these issues, this paper addresses teachers' professional identity struggles as mediated by ongoing educational changes in a mainland Chinese university.

* Corresponding author. F-20 Goodsell Building, School of Education, The University of New South Wales, High St, Kensington NSW 2052 Australia.
E-mail addresses: tao.jian@shufe.edu.cn (J.(Tracy) Tao), xuesong.gao@unsw.edu.au, andygohteacher@hotmail.com (X.(Andy) Gao).

To explore the complex issue of ESP teachers' professional identity struggles, here we focus on the context of China and begin by briefly explaining the changing landscape of English teaching at the university level. The ongoing curriculum reform of English language education in Chinese universities has taken into account the public expectation that college graduates should be able to use English to engage in a wide range of international communication activities and in different disciplinary areas (Cai, 2015; Wang, 2015). To meet these expectations, ESP teaching is considered as the key path (e.g. Cai, 2015), which has in turn given rise to the further expectation that English teachers should become increasingly involved in teaching a range of ESP subjects, even though this may require skills beyond their primary English language teaching (ELT) expertise. When thrust into a situation for which they may lack expertise, these teachers must deal with important challenges such as overcoming subject-matter knowledge gaps (Wu & Badger, 2009) and working with subject teachers who might have competing pedagogical beliefs (e.g. Lo, 2014). Given limited in-service professional development opportunities, a further challenge for English teachers compelled to teach ESP is that their qualifications to teach ESP in Chinese universities are often questioned, especially since they generally have less subject-matter knowledge compared with subject teachers (Wang, 2010). Yet another challenge is that English teachers in Chinese universities, like their colleagues in tertiary institutions in other contexts, also feel the pressure of finding ways to survive in a "publish or perish" academic culture (Lee, 2014). Research output carries much weight in the career advancement of language teachers, including ESP teachers at the tertiary level. Faced with competing obligations, these teachers can be described as "being caught in the middle" (Grosse & Voght, 2012, p. 190), as they need to fulfill the research requirements imposed by the traditional language/linguistics departments to which they belong, while at the same time deliver ESP courses that may be unrelated to those research activities. Further complicating their career development is that ESP teachers have a lower status in relation to their linguistics and literature colleagues in traditional language/linguistics faculties in Chinese universities (Wang, 2010). Taken together, the potential for identity struggles is quite real. These struggles, however, have received limited attention in previous ESP research. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore ESP teachers' identity struggle and shed some light on the complexity of becoming an ESP teacher in a tertiary setting (e.g. Tao & Gao, 2017; Tsou & Chen, 2014).

2. Teacher identity

The concept of teacher identity is often considered elusive, probably because of the much-debated nature of identity itself. We embark on the challenging work of defining teacher identity by revisiting Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004), which identified four features of teachers' professional identity. That is, professional identity is "*an ongoing process*" of interpreting experiences that connects "*person and context*," consists of "*sub-identities*" and needs the exercise of "*agency*" (p. 122, italics in original). These features are consolidated in Sachs's (2005) often-cited conceptualization of teacher identity, which is worth quoting again here:

It [teacher professional identity] provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience (p. 15).

This conceptualization of teacher identity not only relates the origin of teacher identity to the relevant experience, but also highlights its multifaceted and person-context features, which are examined and reemphasized as the central focus of teacher identity scholarship (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Language teachers were found to struggle with multiple identities when they experience an identity shift from learner to teacher (Tsui, 2007); when they have to adopt appropriate positioning in the face of different social agents (Whitsed & Volet, 2013); and when their gender, linguistic and sociocultural identities come into play (Simon-Maeda, 2004). The negotiation of multiple identities often results in tension and involves the interplay between the individual and the social (Bukor, 2015; Gu & Benson, 2015). For example, empirical studies have revealed that teacher identities are constructed with reference to the social discourse on teachers and the teaching profession (Gu & Benson, 2015; Simon-Maeda, 2004), the educational discourse on internationalization (Whitsed & Volet, 2013), and curricular changes, as well as the school culture in particular institutions (Assaf, 2008; Buchanan, 2015; Flores & Day, 2006). These different levels of context, in and outside the classroom, exert a consequential effect on teachers' classroom instruction and professional lives (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). For instance, it is not uncommon for language teachers to take into account the status of TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) or English language teaching (ELT) as a profession, which then shapes their identities (Pennington, 2014). In addition, teachers were found to construct and perform identities individually as mediated by their own schooling experiences and family influence (Bukor, 2015; Flores & Day, 2006; Gu & Benson, 2015). Although there is a general acknowledgment of the interaction between *person* and *context*, the majority of studies focus on teachers' instructional practices, which represent only one of the important facets of teacher identity (e.g. Assaf, 2008). By situating ESP teachers in different layers of the context, this study attempts to unveil a more contextualized version of ESP teachers' professional identity construction that may be manifest in multiple *sub-identities* or facets of teacher identity.

3. Analytic framework

To capture the multi-faceted nature of teacher identity in shifting contexts, this study draws on an adapted model of TESOL teacher identity (Pennington, 2014) to investigate the professional identities of ESP teachers as constructed in their

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6841034>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6841034>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)