



# Reflective learning and identity construction in practice, discourse and activity: Experiences of pre-service language teachers in Hong Kong

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Student teachers construct identities through reflective practice.
- Their language use through reflections can enhance teacher identities.
- Their identities and reflections are influenced by their embedded activity systems.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an investigation into two pre-service teachers' reflective learning through a series of integrated and interactive tasks (i.e., collaborative lesson planning, group consultation, microteaching and videoed reflections) in a teacher education course in Hong Kong. Relying on data gathered from interviews and reflection videos and informed by a tripartite model on teacher identity in practice, discourse and activity, the study revealed how the pre-service teachers engaged in reflective practice and identity construction in the course. The paper concludes with practical implications on how to design and implement effective reflective tasks in preparing and developing competent language teachers.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on teacher reflections has proliferated in the field of teacher education over the past decades. As a powerful impetus and desired outcomes of teacher learning (e.g., Farrell, 2015; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Ward & McCotter, 2004), reflection serves as “a core activity for all teachers – pre-service and in-service, in schools and universities” (Walkington, 2005, p. 59). Through their critical reflections, teachers can examine their past experiences and current practice in order to gain insights into their future teaching and continuing professional development (Farrell, 2015; Kleinknecht & Schneider, 2013).

Aligned with the great emphasis on teachers' reflective learning is an increasing awareness of the vitality of teacher identity which not only serves as an analytic lens for understanding teachers' professional lives (Gee, 2000), but also provides a frame of reference in helping teachers interpret, reflect on and improve their

professional practice and personal well-being (Yuan & Lee, 2015). Previous research has underscored the interrelationships between teachers' reflective practice and their identity construction. As Walkington (2005) states, “Reflections on actions assists in the development of the functional role of a teacher, and also provides strategies to nurture the ongoing development of a teacher identity that has been shaped, and will continue to be shaped over a long period of time” (p. 59). In other words, while teachers can construct and transform their identities through their reflective practice, their emerging identities as “reflective practitioners” and “adaptive experts” (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005) can further enrich and extend their reflective thinking and engagements.

While many scholars (e.g., Farrell, 2013; Lee, 2010) have argued for the importance of equipping teachers with strong reflective awareness and abilities in their professional learning and identity building, there is research evidence showing that teachers are likely to encounter challenges with regard to what, when and how to reflect, which may widen the theory-practice gap and impede their continuing professional growth (Harford, MacRuairc, & McCartan, 2010). Particularly for pre-service teachers with limited professional knowledge and teaching experience, the concept of

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reflections may turn out to be elusive and distant, hence posing difficulties for them to apply reflections in their learning to teach. Thus, it requires systematic and sustained guidance and support from teacher educators to help student teachers<sup>1</sup> learn how to conduct critical reflections and enact their identities as reflective professionals.

This paper reports on an investigation into two student teachers' reflective learning and identity construction through a series of integrated, collaborative reflective tasks (involving collaborative lesson planning, group consultation, micro-teaching and individual videoed reflection) in a pre-service language teacher education course in Hong Kong. The significance of this study lies in the following aspects. First of all, differing from previous studies which mainly focused on teachers' reflective practice through independent tasks, such as journal writing (Lee, 2008) and group discussion (Farrell, 2011), this research views reflections as a holistic and ongoing process which involves different interrelated tasks, both individually and collaboratively (Farrell, 2015; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Such a perspective on reflections aligns with a socio-cultural view which regards teacher learning and identity formation as a complex and dynamic process encompassing cognitive engagements, social interactions and emotional experiences in specific educational contexts (Kelly, 2006; Yuan & Lee, 2015). In this sense, this study can shed light on the continuous process of student teachers' reflective learning and identity (trans)formation in an interactive environment with practical implications for current pre-service teacher education programs.

In addition, this research adopts a multiple and integrated framework focusing on the interrelationship between language, practice and social activity in investigating teacher reflections and identities (Trent, 2012; Watson, 2006; Yuan, 2016). First, teachers' identity develops as they are involved in the practices of the community. As a form of social practice, reflections call for teachers' active interpretation and critical evaluation of their classroom teaching, independently or in a collective manner (e.g., group meetings). Such sociocultural reflection cannot only lead to their actions for improvement, but it may also help refine their self-understanding as teachers (Farrell, 2013). Second, teacher reflections as a particular form of professional discourse can activate and convey various aspects of teachers' cognitive, metacognitive, and emotional engagements, such as reasoning, intentionality, commitment, and self-confidence through specific language use, which can be interpreted as active displays of professional identity construction (Urzúa & Vásquez, 2008). Third, teacher reflections and identity construction do not take place in a vacuum; instead how teachers engage in reflection and enact their identities is mediated by their situated social activity systems where different stakeholders, institutional rules, and socio-cultural tools are at play. It is thus important to examine the interactions between teachers' reflective practice and identity work in specific social and cultural settings.

Informed by an integrated perspective focusing on identity-in-practice (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005; Wenger, 1998), identity-in-discourse (Fairclough, 2003; Trent, 2012), and identity-in-activity (Dang, 2013), this study examines how two student teachers learned to become literacy teachers through reflective practice in a teacher education course in Hong Kong. This research can shed light on how teacher identities are enacted and transformed through teacher reflections as a practical and linguistic act in complex, dynamic activity systems.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Teacher reflections and identity construction

Teacher reflections generally refer to an individual or interactive process in which teachers interrogate their pre-existing beliefs and examine their practice for further actions and improvement (Clarke, 1995; Farrell, 2015). As opposed to a technical view which depicts reflections as a series of steps or procedures used by teachers, there is a growing recognition that reflections represent “a holistic way of meeting and responding to problems, a way of being as a teacher” (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 9). Teacher reflections not only entail a logical and rational process of thinking, analyzing, evaluating, and predicting, but they also involve intuition and emotions, emerging from their active engagement with their surroundings in the work context (Farrell, 2015; Kleinknecht & Schneider, 2013; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Given the significance and complexities of teacher reflections, previous researchers have explored how to help pre-service teachers develop their reflective abilities in the process of learning to teach. Lee's (2008) study revealed that the critical dialogue and debate through interactive journal writing could deepen student teachers' awareness of important educational issues and develop their reflective competence. Similarly, Fernandez (2010) reported on how student teachers benefited from the post-lesson discussion with their school mentors in terms of their enhanced practical knowledge and contextualized understanding of the school reality.

In recent years, there is a steady growth of research on how technology (e.g., electronic portfolio and weblogs) can be utilized to promote pre-service teachers' reflective practice and learning to teach (Cherrington & Loveridge, 2014; Wopereis, Sloep, & Poortman, 2010). For instance, Kleinknecht and Schneider (2013) investigated teachers' reflective learning by individually analyzing videos of their own and others' teaching. Their findings indicate that the use of teaching videos not only facilitated the teachers' cognitive reasoning such as evaluating their teaching effectiveness based on prior knowledge and making predictions about alternative actions, but it also activated a range of emotional responses (e.g., enjoyment and disappointment) leading to increased awareness of their students and diverse classroom situations.

Recent research (e.g., Farrell, 2013; Lee, 2010) has also shown that reflective practices offer opportunities for teachers to engage in active and meaningful problem identification, evaluation and innovation, through which they can hone and develop their identities. Watson's (2006) study demonstrated how story telling which involves reflection on, selection of, and arrangement of events in an artful manner can serve as a powerful means for teachers to make sense of their professional experiences, imagine their future practice and build up their identities. Maclean and White (2007) examined how a group of teachers analyzed their teaching videos and engaged in reflections, which contributed to their identity formation. In particular, by articulating their teaching beliefs, analyzing problems, seeking information and offering suggestions, the teachers collectively constructed a social identity as effective members of the teaching profession with enhanced professional confidence and sense of commitment. To date, although the existing literature has emphasized the positive role of teachers' reflective engagements in their identity development (e.g., Farrell, 2013), there is a lack of attention on the nuanced, intertwined relationship between teacher reflections and identities in practice, discourse and activity. This study thus seeks to fill this void and contributes to our understanding of teachers' reflective learning and identity construction through social and linguistic practices in complex institutional and socio-cultural settings.

<sup>1</sup> The two terms “student teachers” and “pre-service teachers” are used interchangeably in the paper.

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