

RESEARCHING SOCIOCULTURAL SELVES: A NARRATIVE CASE STUDY OF A NON-LOCAL EFL TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

While sociocultural identities as a burgeoning strand of research on language teacher identity have been witnessed in the past decade, the interplay between teachers' sociocultural selves and pedagogical practices remains underexplored. In order to bridge this gap, the article reports on a narrative case study that examines a non-localized EFL teacher's identity construction. Drawing on life story interview and Burr's (2003) social constructionism, not only does this article explore the complex relationship between sociocultural selves and teaching practice, but also investigates possible processes that are involved in the development of sociocultural learning, the negotiation with multiple identities such as sexuality, and the contextual impact on professional repositioning of sociocultural identity. The findings indicated that the participant's sociocultural selves anchored in personal histories play a crucial part in shaping pedagogical practices. In the meantime, the participant faced challenges in negotiating identity and power relation. We argued that sociocultural underpinnings should be incorporated in the teaching curriculum, particularly in the transcultural setting where the participant is negotiating more than sociocultural selves.

1 Introduction

In the last two decades, research on teachers' professional identity has burgeoned in the field of language education. Most researchers perceive identity as a key construct to consider in light of conceptualizing teacher learning (Miller, 2009; Tsui, 2011; Wenger, 1998). Language teachers, no matter whether in a global or local context, represent a variety of social and cultural roles: such as male or female, heterosexual or homosexual, working or middle class, black or white, and native or non-native speakers. When all these identities intersect professional roles of being a language teacher, they might be foregrounded as individuals make an attempt to reflect on who they are, what they would like to become and what personal practical knowledge they possess (Tsui, 2011).

However, sociocultural identities, according to Kramsch (1993a), are not stable or determined concepts. Language teachers could notice some defining moments that their roles in class are affected by teaching practice, which is not consistent with the way they perceive. Rather, identities and ideologies are not only co-constructed through interaction with diverse subjects, personal history, but also negotiated and transformed in and influence practice and contexts (Martel & Wang). What causes these ongoing changes is none other than our human language (Hall, 1995; Kramsch, 1993a; Peirce, 1995). As Norton explains (2010), ‘the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships. Every time we speak, we are negotiating and renegotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganizing that relationship across time and space. Our gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, among other characteristics, are all implicated in this negotiation of identity’ (p. 350).

As far as EFL classrooms are concerned, we argue that issues of sociocultural identity and its embodiment are significant. On the one hand, language teachers often bring in social and cultural aspects to engage their lessons as part of learning a targeted language. Therefore, it is imperative to investigate how the teachers project themselves in the process of imparting knowledge about others’ cultural representations. On the other hand, challenges may occur when teachers’ identities and beliefs concerning gendered bodies, homosexuality, races, and linguistics are in conflict with sociocultural backgrounds of their colleagues and students. We wonder how these challenges can be overcome. Additionally, the English language teaching industry has been predominantly thriving in the countries from the expanding circle of English, which plays a unique and key part in constructing teachers’ professional roles in a culturally, politically and socially diverse climate (Duff & Uchida, 1997; Pennycook, 1994).

This article reports on a narrative case study that examines identity construction of a non-local EFL teacher through positioning of sociocultural selves. In order to capture details, obtain understandings and interpretations of our participant’s lived stories, we draw on life story interview and Burr’s (2003) social constructionism exploring the complex relationship between sociocultural selves and teaching practice. In the meantime, we also investigate the negotiation with multiple identities such as sexuality, and the contextual impact on professional repositioning of sociocultural selves.

1.1 Language Teacher Identity

English language teachers, against the backdrop of growing globalization, are allowed to relocate themselves teaching in a new cultural and linguistic environment (Richards, 2008). Meanwhile, the legitimate status of being a language teacher is faced with a great deal of challenges due to their linguistic, racial, sexual, and ethnic background (Pavlenko, 2003). These constitutive elements constantly influence the formation of language educators’ beliefs, values and attitudes (Ajayi, 2010; Morgan 2004; Richards 2008).

A major strand of research in this area is that the dichotomy of the native / non-native language teachers has the influential impact on language teacher identity research (Golombek & Jordan, 2005; Moussu & Llorca, 2008; Thomas, 1999). A great number of studies uncover that there exists a feeling of uncertainty and self-doubt in those non-native teachers, for they do not obtain the perceived status or power of native teachers (Miller, 2009), which is often associated with their pronunciation, intelligibility (Mawhinney & Xu, 1997). Therefore, for the non-native

teachers, their trajectories of shaping a professional identity inside or outside the circle of native speakerness are achieved by constant struggles to gain legitimacy (Brown & Miller, 2006; Miller, 2009; Reis, 2011).

Another line of research under language teacher identity indicates that social discrimination resulting from gendered, sexual or racial inequality is the true portrayal of the realities of teachers' lives (Amin, 1997; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Motha, 2006; Simon-Maeda, 2004). Language teachers, as cultural beings, unconsciously or consciously serve as the messengers of cultural teaching practices. Reversely, their cultural identities also affect how they perceive themselves as language teachers. For example, Motha (2006), through the critical feminist perspective, demonstrates how four K-12 school teachers (three white and one Korean American) wrestle with their own identities while negotiating the inherent racialization of their language teaching contexts. The research finding shows that "identities shaped within the construct of ESOL are inherently racialized" (2006, p. 514). Adopting the same perspective as Motha (2006), Simon-Maeda (2004) examined the life history of nine female Japanese EFL educators. The findings show that gender should be treated as a part of network of practice embedded in personal, social, and cultural circumstances; Teachers' professional identities are discursively engaged and constructed by unequal gendered and sociocultural circumstances. A common thread that goes through these studies is that gender, race and culture do matter because they structure opportunities for EFL teachers to redefine their labelled and marginalized identities. Therefore, Fives and Gill (2015) suggest that teacher identity can be understood as the dynamic process of negotiating teacher self between sociopolitical contexts and individual experience.

In reviewing these studies, we concluded that the interplay of identity, knowledge and context played a vital part in constructing teachers' identity. Teachers' thought, knowledge, belief, and action are enacted in various contexts, which, to some degree, cannot be extricable from teacher identity formation (Miller, 2009). Nevertheless, we noticed that most of the previous studies were centered on one particular aspect of identity issues, which failed to look at teacher identity construction through a holistic approach. In this study, we aim to investigate how a non-local EFL teacher navigates socio-cultural selves over time and how the sociocultural elements sway the participant's teacher identity construction.

2 Theoretical Framework

In this paper, we employ Burr (2003)'s social constructionism to look at the construction of our participant's professional identity. Social constructionism is treated as an umbrella theoretical paradigm sharing common grounds of Derrida's deconstruction, and Foucault's discourse analysis (Burr, 2003). According to Burr (2003), social constructionists anchor their interest in "social interaction of all kinds, and particularly language (p. 4)", which enables us to see participant's university workplace as the social practice where participant's knowledge about his sociocultural identity is constructed through interactions with others. A distinctive feature of social constructionism lies in its non-essentialism positioning. Essentialism refers to "things and phenomena have a real, true core or essence, a consistency and a determined ability which defines what the phenomenon is" (Buciek, 2003, p. 53; see also Tian & Lowe, 2014). An essentialist view of identity, thus, is that individuals are identified as having innate, stable and unitary attributes. However, by means of social constructionism, we are allowed to view identity as being fluid and open to change through engagement with a variety of discourses.

Identity construction or production does not stem from one's inside, but 'from the social realm, a realm where people swim in a sea of language and other sign, a sea that is invisible to us because it is the very medium of our existence as social beings' (Burr, 2003, p. 109). This is perhaps best reflected in our research participant who has gone through the transition from the familiar "West" to the unfamiliar "Southeast," who has been teaching in a different cultural setting and embracing the possible for a change in light of teacher identity.

3 Methodology

Narrative inquiry, generally speaking, is the study of narrative, which permits us to explore the ways humans experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The essential of this general notion, as Kramp (2004) pointed out, is to understand that narrative is a reification of knowing. It is narrative knowing that results in a narrative-form story which researchers employ to interpret experience and events told by storytellers. According to Turner and Bruner (1986, p. 15), stories are perceived as 'the most universal means of organizing and articulating experience'. However, narrative inquiry, as far as educational researchers are concerned, is more than just telling stories. Complex issues embedded in all phases of a narrative inquiry should be paid particular attention to (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). In the current study, the narrative methodology that we utilize to investigate the participant's identity construction as a language teacher is two folded. First, through the lens of narrative inquiry, his sociocultural identity is grounded in Connelly and Clandinin's 'stories to live by' (1999, p. 4). It suggests that stories which are lived out, told and retold narratively represent how teachers make sense of their experience. Second, narrative inquiry, as a research methodology, is viewed as both a phenomenon and method (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). For one thing, our participant's lived experience is the manifestation of phenomenal world where experience is endowed with meaning through story. For another, inquiry into his lived story is itself a narrative process, which requires us to restore his narrative data as a method of data analysis.

3.1 Participant & Data Collection

In this study, the participant we selected came from western Europe, whose pseudonym was Jack. At the time of data collection, he was working for a local university in Bangkok. The stories that Jack shared with us were obtained from four face-to-face life history interview, each of which last for about 1.5 hours. Adapted from Goodson (1992)' sources of life history data, the investigating aspects covered Jack's family background, career stages, schooling as well as EFL teaching profession. In addition, each interview was individually audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for the purpose of our analysis. All interviews were conducted at a quiet place convenient for the participant. After transcription, Jack was also invited to check the accuracy, completion and appropriation of the transcribed data and decide if certain stretches of the interview should be deleted. Within human experience, we are fully aware that the standard concerns for any research are those of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality (Ryen, 2004). However, there is still a chance that readers can identify our research informant through the data provided. In view of this concern, additional pseudonymity will be used if it comes to institutions and individuals mentioned by the participant. For example, a specific institution can be broadly depicted as a key university in Bangkok. It is assured that no university or individual involved can be identified by name in any research reports or publications.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis was adapted from the procedures which Creswell (2005) outlined. At a first step, we read and re-read our transcription to familiarise with what the data entailed. In the meanwhile, we jotted down some interesting notes to have our initial sense-making of his tellings. Then we moved on to restorying stage which involved a process, according to Creswell (2005), that researchers analyse collected stories for ‘key elements of the story’ (p. 509) and reorganize the stories in a chronological order. From the step one, we already noticed that what Jack recounted was overlapping and not logically developed. Therefore, his overlapping plots were first separated and then pieced together on the basis of key elements. Through deconstructing and constructing his narrative, Jack’s story was sorted chronologically and contextually from his family history to learning experience, to teaching career. Within qualitative research, Creswell (2005) pointed out that all the qualitative data could be divided into themes. In the case of narrative research, identifying themes provides the ‘complexity of a story’ and deepens the ‘insight about understanding individual experiences’ (p. 511). Thus, after retelling the story, we began searching for themes according to our understandings of sociocultural constructs. It was this implantation ‘sensitizing concept’ (Patton, 2002, p.456) that permitted us to garner three critical episodes from Jack’s narratives which are being white, being homosexual and being non-native.

4 Findings

4.1 Being White

Before embarking on his teaching career, Jack was working in the insurance field. But, due to his lack of passion, he opted to give up his profession after he heard that EFL teachers was in great demand in South Korea. Taking his friends’ advice, he applied for a job and landed it before he moved there. Upon his arrival, he was surprised to know that how easy it was to find an English teaching job. He said,

My first impression is anybody can do it. I don't know it before. Anybody can do it. You don't need any experience. You don't even need to be a native speaker. You just need to look like a native speaker. I look like a native speaker, because I'm white. I was quite young. At that time, I was handsome.

As seen in his narrative, what he witnessed was completely beyond his expectation. Teaching industry in South Korea constructed Jack’s reality, as hinted by “anybody can do it”, that being an English teacher did not need any specific skills and teaching experience. More strikingly, it appeared that whiteness, regardless of one’s native language, played a crucial part in this profession. In other words, possessing a Caucasian look did privilege Jack to obtain this job. Looking back on his teaching experience in South Korea, he added,

Most of teachers are just fresh graduates, or study something completely unrelated like Geography. They want to make some money or have some experience in Asia. So they move to Korea to do that. That’s still the case these days. I think, most of teaching industry in Asia, Korea for sure, the majority of EFL teachers have no experience, no education in teaching. They look like a native speaker, which looks extremely important.

Through his account, Jack depicted a picture of unprofessional English teachers in the Asian context. Driven by the cultural experiences and financial benefits, a great number of foreigners relocated themselves to become an English teacher. However, most of them did not have relevant credentials or sufficient background knowledge, which, unexpectedly, failed to pose a threat to their recruitment chances. Instead, their native look-alikes face served as the decisive element to secure a job. In a way, Jack's description reflected the current hiring practice in Asia that placed more emphasis on one's age, appearance rather than capability (Ruecker & Ives, 2014). Another instance of whiteness, could be traced down to Jack's teaching practice. As a white English teacher, Jack realised that his lessons were not just limited to the white culture, because most of his students, after all, were from Asia. He said,

I also need to make sure the topics I bring into classroom are not just what white male / female people do in their free time, because it might not be relevant to my students. You know, I symbolize English for them. A white English person. They come to ask me anything about their lives in English. Also, there are a lot more different people in this world than white male / female people in their [students'] course book.

In Jack's telling, we can see that his white social status did have an impact on his teaching philosophy. For one thing, most characters in English textbooks are imbued with white people, which, in Jack's opinion, were not the real representation of social practice. Having realised this limitation, Jack would like to make his students aware that a wide range of skin color had bearing on western culture. Thus, it is necessary to include this type of information in his lesson as part of teaching pedagogy. For another, there was no denying that Jack was considered to be an English role model for his students. But his white identity did not resonate with learners' sociocultural backgrounds. To put it simply, the notion that English language teaching should be grounded in the western-oriented perspective is not helpful for students to pick up a foreign language, because the background knowledge is out of students' reach in their daily interaction. Instead, Jack decided to make his lesson more localised, such as "talking about minority issues in Thailand, there are all kinds of minorities, like people living with HIV, or people living with physical handicap."

4.2 Being Homosexual

Having taught English in the current university for three years, Jack as a homosexual sensed that his job was not completely focused on what role a traditional teacher plays. Part of the job, in his view, was to 'make student aware of culture or current issues.' Reflecting on his lessons, Jack said,

When it comes to my teaching or my lessons, I find the most successful lesson is when I don't necessarily teach something from the book, when I try to bring the real world to the classroom.

Meanwhile, Jack made it clear that there was no point of introducing it to class if it was out of his reach. He emphasized that the topic outside the book should rest in his own interest, which he found that it was a bit challenging to conduct resulting from the constraints of an existing syllabus and students' anticipation of a structured exam to pass his subject. As the plot unfolded, we got to know that the real-world teaching material incorporated into his class was none other than legalized 'gay marriage' in the US. He said,

I have done that in the context of current issues -- Gay marriage. It was last year, legalized in US, right? Before that, it was progressively legalized state by state. There're lots of interesting materials out there...the fact that I think this issue is important, partly because of myself, because I think I have some gay students in class. Also in this society it [gay marriage] is something we should be aware of. It was part of English-speaking world, being discussed by many people. Even if people don't discuss about this issue, they at least heard about it.

It goes without saying that same-sex marriage, in Jack's view, was rich in topicality. Progressive legalization made him realize that abundant course materials could be adapted to engage in his lesson. Through his narrative, we also felt that his homosexual identity enabled him to be conscious of the existence of LGBT students in class. More importantly, this topic for Jack had a wide audience and generated social impact, though this issue arose from an English-speaking country. Therefore, Jack's homosexuality was able to be blended into his teaching pedagogy, which not only created an inclusive learning atmosphere through the inclusion of gay marriage, but also hinted the fact that language teaching was not just teaching language itself, but an integration of language and education since language is closely attached to reality, responsible for societal issues. However, when we inquired about his own sexuality at workplace, Jack held the view that there was no need to explicitly come out to his students, even if his university is seemingly LGBT-friendly. He said,

I didn't come out in class. I'm just an English teacher. I feel like a teacher should be asexual in class. I'm sure some of my students may sense that I am gay. But, to be honest, I'm not bothered, because as a teacher, you have lots of duties to cope with like teaching and being a supportive role for your students."

Jack's narrative informed us that his homosexuality within the classroom setting had nothing to do with professionalism. He sensed that no matter what your sexuality was, the 'asexual' attribute was what a teacher should be assigned. In class, a teacher had certain responsibilities to bear, which was bound to be aligned with their professional roles rather than the disclosure of their sexuality. Thus, Jack did not opt to reveal his homosexual identity in front of his students.

4.3 Being Non-native

After finishing his master's degree in the US, Jack decided to come back to Thailand pursuing his teaching career. He said,

One reason why I ended up here is there are many opportunities for me. Because of my nationality, even though I have white background in my profession, I can't teach any country in Asia. Lots of countries restricted their visas for so-called non-native speakers. They only look at the passport and make up their minds. Not based on the education or the actual English level.

Through his description, it painted a picture of Jack's potential vulnerability in job hunting as a non-native speaker. This gloomy professional prospect also showcased that non-native English speakers had an unrecognised social status in Asia, compared to their native-speaking counterparts. To some degree, it limited Jack's career choice, though Jack was well educated and spoke perfect English. What mattered to be an English teacher was only restricted to one's passport which was utterly irrelevant to a teacher's actual qualification. As Clark and Paran

(2007) notes, many non-native speaker teachers of English have experienced discriminatory attitudes when applying for jobs. Luckily, this reality did not stop him landing a teaching job in Thailand. Working as a non-native English teacher, he remarked,

as a non-native English speaker who lived in three different contexts, I think that teaching culture is an important part of my lessons. I lived and worked in different cultures, speaking in different languages. Lots of my students have while others haven't at all... like the class I am teaching now. I have to talk about their countries. I have to show pictures. I have to point the things on the map all the time.

Jack's reflection told us that his status of being a non-native speaker made him more aware of the importance of culture. Having lived in three diverse social spaces, it conceptualised his teaching philosophy that language did not extricate itself from culture learning. As Tseng (2002, p.13) puts it: "success in language learning is conditional upon the acquisition of cultural knowledge: language learners acquire cultural background knowledge in order to communicate, and to increase their comprehension in the target language." Like what Jack did in his class, through incorporating topics such as learner's home country and teaching tools, it would encourage students to have the communicative desire. What's more, Jack added that this was an effective way to learn from each other's culture which paved the way to acquire intercultural competence.

5 Discussion & Conclusion

Jack's narratives suggest that there is a dynamic interplay between English teaching practices and sociocultural identities. To be exact, the topic he brings in, the teaching method he employs and the activity he prepares have historical, social and cultural connotations which, to some degree, produce a powerful educational impact. For example, his life experience equips him with the awareness that the relationship between language and culture is rather relativistic. It dawns on him that language teaching is more than just teaching language itself. Culture should be an indispensable part of pedagogical practices. Not only is this recognition of great help to his classroom teaching, but also constructs Jack's non-essentialist teacher image. As Sachs (2015) claims, teacher identity is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience' (p. 15).

On the other hand, Jack's narratives also reflect that identity has the shifting nature. Through the findings, we can see that his homosexuality in class has been positioned as asexuality. It showcases that identity as a social construct is bestowed on one's sense of being, and also requires individuals to align their behaviours with social expectations of being a language teacher (Hall, 1990). In other words, professionalism, in Jack's eyes, should be amplified in class due to his teacher status. What's more, in order to assist learners with their cultural and cognitive correlations, Jack realises that his sociocultural selves can be transformed into pedagogical significance, which is more important than revealing his own sexual orientation. This notion, in a way, manifests Johnson (1996)'s statement that teaching is considered as social practice where one's sense of being a teacher can be fulfilled via interpreting and negotiating meanings rooted in the classroom setting.

This paper has investigated how a non-local EFL teacher navigated his sociocultural selves in a tertiary setting. Examining the participant's narrated stories, it illustrated that the participant's sociocultural selves embedded in personal histories played a crucial part in shaping pedagogical

practices. It reconstructed the way that a language teacher projected teacher identity in a classroom environment. At the same time, the participant faced challenges in negotiating identity and power relation. We argued that sociocultural underpinnings should be incorporated in the teaching curriculum, particularly in the transcultural setting where the participant is negotiating more than sociocultural selves.

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