Understanding TEFL teacher identity: Agency, authority, and vulnerability

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Teacher identity is inherently negotiable, flexible, adaptive, and conflicted (Teng, 2019). Authoring identities as a teacher of English as a foreign language (TEFL) and a researcher is complex. It is influenced by internal (e.g., emotions and efficacy) and external (e.g., language policy, classroom structures, and research requirement) factors. Despite the need to broaden the knowledge base on teacher identity, research around how TEFL teacher identities are forged had not received sufficient attention; much remains to be discovered about factors that evoke changes in identities and TEFL teachers’ commitments to teaching and research. Drawing upon notions of agency, authority, and vulnerability, and on my personal experiences, this article aims to provide new knowledge on TEFL teacher identity.

TEFL teachers are the key agents who directly impact TEFL students’ learning and growth. Agency can be defined as individuals’ capacity to make their own free choices and act independently amidst cultural and societal constraints (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2013). Closely related to agency is authority and vulnerability. Authority refers to one’s ability to make choices without hesitation, even if the teacher is in a constrained setting (Alsup, 2018); vulnerability refers to anxiety or fear that one’s decisions might be incorrect, dangerous, or self-defeating, or a multidimensional emotional experience that individuals may encounter in an array of contexts (Lasky, 2005). The three notions are assumed to reciprocally affect TEFL teachers’ identity development and TESOL practice.

2 | THE TEACHER’S PERSPECTIVE

I was born in the countryside in Mainland China. Educational resources for learning English were woefully insufficient. I graduated at a time when university enrollment was expanding. It was difficult for someone like me, born and raised in the countryside with no personal or professional connections, to find a job as an English teacher in a public school. I saw no other options but to work at a small private school; however, the salary was half of what staff in public schools earned. I decided to earn a master’s degree for better job opportunities. After completing this degree in 2009, I still could not find a job in public schools. I accepted an English teaching position at a non-prestigious private university. The students’ English proficiency level was low. I wanted to teach my students English conversation.
skills rather than test-taking strategies, but such actions were constrained in an exam-oriented culture. I received limited institutional support. I had to figure out my professional development. Being a teacher under such circumstances, and striving for research development, I was confused. I devoted much of my time to writing research manuscripts for publication. However, writing for publication is never easy, particularly for a teacher who was expected to teach 20 hours per week. I spent countless sleepless nights writing articles for international journals. As argued by Hammersley (1993), teaching involves a process of reflective inquiry wherein the instructor must assume the mindset of teacher-as-researcher. My newfound identity of teacher-as-researcher compelled me to work harder and pursue a PhD degree. After graduation, I realized that the PhD learning experience would facilitate my professional development as a researcher. My learning and teaching experience illuminated the struggles for identity development as a TEFL teacher and researcher. Such professional identity construction was influenced by the institutional administration, power relations, the “publish-or-perish” regime, accountability mechanisms, and managerial culture. TEFL teacher identity, per my own interpretation, has four layers of meaning, as described in the next four subsections.

2.1  TEFL teacher identity: A process of seeking and gaining authority

Identity involves mutuality between one’s meaning to oneself and one’s meaning to others (Flum & Kaplan, 2012). Related to this, one’s identity is subjective, malleable, and dependent on contextual factors (Teng, 2019). The constant balancing and rebalancing of self and other as a TEFL teacher often remind me of a spiral or double helix, as suggested by Alsup (2018). I began to reflect on my authority as a teacher.

My TEFL practices in Mainland China were underpinned by issues with authority; however, such cognitive and emotional struggles encouraged my identity growth (Teng, 2017). I attempted to seek authority as a TEFL teacher through organizing extracurricular English activities, such as English Corner, International Corner, and other means. I wanted my students to know I wished to make learning a pleasure for them and demonstrate that I was an approachable, proficient teacher whose primary focus was on enriching their English learning. As a university English teacher, I was required to teach the same college English course to more than five classes per week. At the beginning, similar to other TEFL teachers, I regarded it as tedious. After teaching for some time, I asked myself, “How can I make this different? Could classroom teaching be less boring for my students?”

Upon reading research literature in the field, I experimented with metacognitive training for my students to enhance their self-regulated writing. Students’ recognition of these new methods helped me adopt strategies that benefited my teaching. I felt myself to be an innovative instructor. Because of my incorporation of metacognitive guidance into classroom teaching, my students showed better writing outcomes than students in traditional Chinese classrooms. Students with metacognitive guidance also reported they were better in reflecting on how to plan, monitor, and evaluate their written product. This is not an easy task in Chinese collectivism. In a collectivist culture, the teaching mode is to spoon-feed knowledge to students in a clear, structured, and direct way, whereas in Western educational practice, the teacher expects students to be active in giving and sharing ideas. Although recent emphasis of educational reforms in China was on self-directed learning, such practices are still incongruent with deep-rooted Chinese cultural beliefs. In addition, the exceptionally large classrooms compared to Western classrooms made such practices more challenging. Seeking authority as a TEFL teacher requires revisiting and contemplating challenges within conflictual circumstances, including the Chinese sense of collectivism and classroom practice. Gaining authority as a TEFL teacher implies a positioning of self and the other. I gained students’ recognition in employing metacognitive
training. I also published some studies on adopting metacognitive training for second language (L2) writing. Related to this, how I positioned myself relative to others was largely shaped by English language learners, as well as peer recognition; such positioning strengthened my authority as a TEFL teacher. The identity (re)negotiation as a TEFL teacher was, to some extent, a result of seeking and gaining authority while “positioning through opposition” (Søreide, 2006, p. 534).

My self-constructed identity positions contrasted with the sociocultural discourse. For example, while being required to succumb to the university requirement in helping students pass exams, I positioned myself as effective and sensitive to EFL students’ needs. This positioning perhaps enabled me to contribute credibility to the authority of the TEFL identity, “an effective teacher” in meeting students’ actual needs in learning English. My students were of different backgrounds and some were from minority groups. I might not share similar cultural and linguistic histories with them. I took cultural diversity into account for my EFL teaching. Such practices encouraged me to reject, construct, or negotiate identities. The relational and oppositional identities were basic elements leading me to reflect on my professional identity as a teacher. The interplay between the self and the institutional context leads to a gap between desired and performed identities and creates a process of “making and remaking of identity” (Liu & Xu, 2013, p. 595). I understand that a TEFL teacher is not only a guide or resource to students in their language development, but also a bridge between EFL learners and culture. TEFL teachers need to understand the cultural transformation their learners go through. Through this, TEFL teachers can build authority as a qualified TEFL teacher.

2.2  

TEFL teacher identity: A sense of overcoming vulnerability related to the status of English

The process of constructing one’s identity meaning is subjective, idiosyncratic, and objective (Teng, 2019). I developed a sense of authority as a TEFL teacher, but this authority was also undermined. I felt vulnerable as a TEFL instructor. For example, English has been adopted as the most important foreign language in China. The number of students learning English increased sharply during the 1990s and 2000s. In the 2010s, however, students’ interest in majoring in English diminished. Accompanied by China’s dramatic achievements in economic development, the idea of learning English to promote China’s modernization, as proposed by Hu (2005), also faded (He & Teng, 2019). The changing status of English affected my identity and attitude toward English teaching. I experienced a rise and then drop in passion for my profession, particularly when I heard that many universities were eliminating the English programs because of challenges in recruiting students.

Responding to this sociocultural change, TEFL teachers in China, including me, need to be pioneers in finding a way forward for the development of English programs. Although policy documents contain normative demands that influence our teaching and our reputations as a TEFL teacher, the extent of these documents’ influence on our educational practice relies on our experiences with breaking away from vulnerability. I began to evaluate and reflect on the breakthrough for developing English programs. I developed a personal professional agenda. I reflected on what I should do to become a proper TEFL teacher. I also assessed my general and social identities by asking, “What is my role in this society?” and “How is my identity recognized in this society?” Along with the trend toward globalization and mobility, the global market of learning English will expand and become more competitive. The social aspects of life shaped my perceptions of who I should be and guided me in what to think and do. Related to this awareness, I started to look for the motives behind my decision to become a TEFL teacher or what compelled me to remain in the TESOL profession. I introduced to my students the global status and spread of English. I encouraged them to learn English for academic and specific
purposes. The interactive process between me, my students, and the TEFL context in China shaped my view of what it means to be a TEFL teacher.

2.3 | TEFL teacher identity: A sense of conquering vulnerability related to cultural boundaries

Against the backdrop of globalization, Chinese universities are continuously calling for an increase in cultural diversity by hiring more native English teachers. TESOL pedagogical practices and curricular development in China have become more globalized. The university at which I worked in China recruited many native-English-speaking teachers (NESTs). The initial rate of Chinese teachers to native English teachers in the English department was 10:1. After a few years, although most instructors were still Chinese due to the policy of maintaining Chineseness, the ratio shifted to 10:4 under the trend of internationalization. The phenomena of privilege and marginalization have since become increasingly apparent; Chinese TEFL teachers are marginalized in terms of pay, work, and living conditions. NESTs can secure higher pay and better housing and are not required to do research. Conversely, Chinese TEFL teachers must publish papers in national or international journals to earn promotion. The inequities of native English speaker privilege have become a phenomenon in China’s TEFL practice. Such NEST-oriented ideology also shapes the globalization of English language teaching (ELT) and leads to marginalization of nonnative-English-speaking teachers (NNESTs).

Although NEST-oriented ideology demarcates privilege and marginalization, I agree with Fang’s (2018) argument that the TESOL profession is in a state of transition; thus, the power wielded by native and nonnative-English speakers should be reconsidered. Chinese TEFL teachers, including myself, struggle to attain professional authority. The dichotomy between native- and nonnative-English speakers compromises TEFL practice as well as diversity across TEFL classrooms. TEFL teacher identity can thus be understood in terms of the groups to which teaching professionals belong, including nationality, culture, ethnicity, and myriad other classifications. Instead of assuming native speaker or nonnative speaker identities, TEFL teachers need to acknowledge and understand different cultural values, integrate these elements into their own teaching, and adopt positive identity repertoires (e.g., multilingual). TEFL teacher identities can be conceptualized not as a given entity, but as a dynamic self-understanding forged, created, transmitted, reproduced, and performed by TEFL practice within and across cultural boundaries.

I suggest the following to combat inequities of native speaker privilege based on my experiences. First, I seek to establish a mutual understanding with my students. The mutual understanding has led me to cultivate a positive TEFL teacher identity in a multilingual context. I can better understand students’ cultural values because I speak the same language with them. Being a bilingual teacher is an asset to my TESOL practice. Second, through understanding students’ cultural needs, I attempt to cross cultural boundaries to develop cultural and linguistic authority relative to a nonnative-English-speaking teacher. Finally, I keep updating my TESOL knowledge and methods. I try to continuously enhance my teaching skills, be creative, and keep pace with the times.

2.4 | TEFL teacher identity: Developing agency through seeking a balance between authority and vulnerability

Agency, authority, and vulnerability are intertwined in complex ways, influencing each other. Duff (2012) argues that a sense of agency enables people to imagine, take up, and perform new roles or
identities and to take concrete actions in pursuit of their goals. In my case, a sense of agency should be developed through seeking a balance between authority and vulnerability. To be a qualified higher education TEFL teacher, one must engage in teaching and research to survive higher education reform, characterized by the “publish-or-perish” syndrome (Teng, 2020). I have shifted and negotiated my identities to adapt to the duties of teaching and research, but conflicts between the two duties has occasionally prevented me from deriving meaning from being a TEFL teacher.

I sought to balance my dual roles and lessen the clash between these disparate identities. To address the incongruences between my various identities, I strove to attain greater agency in synergizing my conflicting identities. During this process, an ever-shifting array of identity options led to more competing identities. In an attempt to elicit consistent cognitive, affective, and behavioral patterns with my membership in the TESOL community, I attended conferences and networked with researchers. I gained peer recognition. I have come to consider research findings as tools that could enlighten TESOL practitioners. Doing research and TEFL practice are not separate entities but interdependent.

Hence, TEFL teacher identity, based on my experiences, is constructed through a reciprocal balance and imbalance of authority and vulnerability. During this process, becoming the teacher I aspired to be required actions involving self-consciousness and reflexivity arising from deliberation and choices (Priestley et al., 2013). I sensed the need to possess agency in reflecting on my work and coping with uncertainties. I understood that such agency would come not from myself but from engagement with “temporal-relational-contexts for action” (Priestley et al., 2013, p. 189). Such capacities, consciousness, flexibility, and openness to experience may have helped me to adapt constructively—with minimal turmoil—when encountering challenges in my TEFL work. Authority and vulnerability are not polar opposites; rather, they have played reciprocal roles in the creation and realization of my desired teacher identity. To me, the perceived dissonance between the meanings of different identities can pose obstacles to the management of these identities; reconciling such discrepancies has increased my personal and professional well-being as a TEFL teacher. At first I experienced difficulties balancing authority and vulnerability, as the two seemed to be opposing emotional forces. As my experience grew, I became more comfortable allowing myself to be vulnerable to myself, my colleagues, and my students. I learned to be more adaptive to teaching and research requirements. I discovered authority and vulnerability are not polar opposites but helpmates. Each is dependent on the other for building agency, and the enactment and development of an ideal TEFL teacher identity.

3 | IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall, this article unveils the complex process of identity development as a TEFL teacher and the challenges that nonnative-English speakers face. Nonnative-English teachers must aspire to a higher level of research or otherwise wrestle with their identity, mentally and emotionally, in the competitive TESOL field. The construction of TEFL teacher identity is influenced by one’s agency, authority, and vulnerability. TEFL teachers should reflect on their classroom space, critically consider their self-conceptualizations, negotiate challenges and affordance on being a teacher, and engender change by engaging in research. Implications for TEFL teachers are as follows. First, TEFL teachers are struggling for professional authority in a field where research seems to be more significant than teaching. Becoming a researcher did not inhibit better teaching practice; rather, it has provided us with endless inspiration for exploring promoting effective teaching and learning practices within the classroom (Teng, 2020). Second, TEFL teachers need to set objectives, evaluate students’ performance, determine students’ needs and proficiency, tailor teaching materials to suit students, design activities for learning, interpret the results
of assessments, and use the findings to plan the next round of teaching and research. Third, teaching depends on professional, research-based judgment. Research involves exploratory inquiry; it is a genuinely intellectual pursuit. My experiences have illustrated that with a researcher’s mindset, teaching represents an exploration of the complexity of learning and leads to boundless inspiration. In addition, research empowers teachers with the necessary competence and grants them a legitimate position in justifying theories and pedagogical practices (Hammersley, 1993). Finally, bilingual or multilingual teachers of English can be an asset to TESOL practice. TEFL teachers can work to understand their students’ needs and goals in English learning. Teachers should strive to be sensitive to the local context of language teaching and negotiate their professional identities within local TESOL practice (Fang, 2018). The global status and spread of English challenges the ownership of English and the NEST-oriented ideology. Globalization has urged us to view TESOL from a broader perspective.

4 | THE AUTHOR

Mark Feng Teng is a language teacher educator with extensive teaching and research experience in China. His main research interests include metacognition and second language writing and vocabulary acquisition. His publications have appeared in Computer Assisted Language Learning, Language Teaching Research, TESOL Quarterly, Applied Linguistics Review, and other international journals.

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