Changes and Characteristics of EFL Teachers’ Professional Identity: The Cases of Nine University Teachers

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Abstract

Teacher identity has emerged as a central topic in educational research since 1990s. Professional identity among university EFL teachers is however understudied, especially those were engaged in in-service PhD study. Drawing on the interviews with nine EFL teachers in a Chinese university, this qualitative case research explored the changes of their professional identity with in-service PhD study experience. Positive changes were reported by all nine teachers, although with varied foci. Consistent with prior studies, the nine teachers demonstrated multi-leveled, achievement-oriented and discipline-focused professional identities. This research highlights the powerful influence of policy upon their identity changes. Their professional identities are shaped and reshaped in the process of negotiating and balancing between personal beliefs and rules at different levels. Teachers with non-English PhD academic background displayed conflicting professional identity, with institutional pressure being the important sources of their struggle and dilemma.

Key words: university EFL teachers; professional identity changes; characteristics of professional identity; academic study towards a PhD degree

1. Introduction

With the blossoming of the reform in China’s higher education since the end of the 20th century, university teachers are expected to adopt a new view of their roles and professional development in the rapidly changing modern society, and a different answer to the question “who am I as a faculty member.” Learning to live with expanding roles and expectations and increasing complexity and contradiction is an urgent challenge
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facing all academics. Many university teachers are making efforts to become both qualified researchers and excellent teachers.

The exploration of university teachers’ professional identity thus has great implications for curriculum reform, classroom teaching and student learning as well as university teacher development in China. As is well-acknowledged, “consciously we teach what we know, and unconsciously we teach who we are” (Hamachek, 1999: 209). Since teachers are not instruments, they will have their own interpretations of the curriculum standards and textbooks, their own styles of teaching, and their own understandings of student learning, based on their professional identities. Therefore, discussion of issues in teaching and learning cannot be divorced from a consideration of teachers’ professional identities.

Since the end of the 1990s, more and more university EFL teachers have gotten into PhD programs. Surprisingly, according to my previous survey, in the key comprehensive university in China where the participants of this study work in, among the twenty-nine university EFL teachers who had studied or are still working for their PhD degrees, fifteen of them chose to study for PhD programs in fields such as philosophy, mass media, education, international politics, business administration and so on, eight of them chose to study for PhD programs in literature which was set in school of liberal arts, six of them chose PhD programs in linguistics. Were their professional identity changed with their academic study experience and change of major? If so, what are these professional identity changes like? Have these changes promoted or hindered their professional development? So far, no research has been conducted on these issues.

Based on the cases of nine Chinese university teachers with in-service academic study experience towards a PhD degree, this qualitative study explored the changes and characteristics of their professional identity.

2. Understanding university teachers’ professional identity

2.1 A General review of studies on teachers’ professional identity

During the 20th century, an enormous amount of research was carried out in psychology and philosophy on issues of identity. In the areas of teaching and teacher education, with teachers’ lives and the development of their careers and identities having been the focus of much recent research, the theme of teacher identity has begun to attract the widespread attention of researchers since the 1990s. In the last decade, teacher identity emerged as a separate research area (Beijaard et al., 2004). In second language (SL) education research, concern about identity is also increasing. Many studies on SL learners’ self-identity have been carried out (e.g., Gao et al., 2002, 2003, 2005; Norton, 1995, 1997, 2000). Meanwhile, studies on SL teachers’ identity have also been attracting interest in SL education (e.g., Clarke, 2008; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Liu, 2009; Tsui, 2007).

A review of the relevant literature suggests that two major issues are widely explored in both general education and foreign language (FL) education. The first
issue is the multifaceted nature of professional identity and the relationships between these facets, in which themes such as characteristics of teachers’ identity, or how much teachers identify with their work and their perception of themselves in their professional work (e.g., Beijaard et al., 2000; MacLure, 1993), the internal and external factors that affect their identity, are explored. The second issue is identity formation or construction, which falls into two focuses. One is the complexity of the identity formation or construction process (e.g., Tsui, 2007); the other is the tension between personal agency and social structure in identity formation (e.g., Coldron & Smith, 1999; Reynolds, 1996). Some researchers have studied the above-mentioned issues through other inner world dimensions (Liu, 2009): emotions (Zembylas, 2003), knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), and commitment (Day et al., 2006). Perspectives such as gender, power relationships and different voices (e.g., Dillabough, 1999; Lortie, 1975), personal life experience (e.g., Huberman, 1993; Knowles, 1992; Sugrue, 1997), and the landscape of the workplace (Reynolds, 1996) have been taken into consideration. Regarding research subjects, there are studies on the complex identities of beginning teachers, student teachers (Volkmann & Anderson, 1998), primary teachers (Nias, 1989; Woods & Jeffery, 2002), secondary teachers (Bejaard et al., 2000), and tertiary teachers (e.g., Liu, 2009; Moore & Hofman, 1988; Nixon, 1996).

Comparatively speaking, studies in the Chinese context related to teachers’ professional identity are very limited. In general education, the earliest studies can be dated from 2004. Most of the early studies were literature reviews of foreign studies (e.g., Shen, 2005; Wei & Shan, 2005) or discussions of the concepts, characteristics, importance and factors related to professional identity. Empirical studies have mainly been restricted to static research investigation on the present situation and decisive factor analysis for primary and secondary school teachers (e.g., Wei, 2005, 2008), such as teachers’ perception of their professional roles, and the degree to which they identify with their work. Very little dynamic research has been done on the complex processes of teachers’ identity formation, the on-going development of those identities, changes in those identities. In the FL education context, a series of studies concerning teacher identity (e.g., Gu, 2007; Liu, 2009) have emerged in recent years. These studies explored the construction of teachers’ identity through their experience in language learning and teaching.

2.2 Definition of teacher’s professional identity
Some studies define professional identity as teachers’ concepts or images of self (e.g., Knowles, 1992; Nias, 1989), some as teachers’ senses and perceptions of their roles (e.g., Goodson & Cole, 1994; Volkmann & Anderson, 1998), some as reflection or self evaluation (e.g., Cooper & Olson, 1996; Kerby, 1991), some as teachers’ perceptions of themselves as an occupational group (e.g., Beijaard et al., 1995, 2000; Coldron & Smith, 1999), and some as a kind of argument to explain, justify and make sense of themselves in relation to others, and to the world at large (MacLure, 1993).
It is also widely acknowledged that identity is socially-related, such as “Who or what someone is, the various meanings people can attach to themselves, or the meanings attributed by others” (Beijaard, 1995). Teacher identity is constantly becoming in a context embedded in power relations, ideology, and culture (Zembylas, 2003). To be specific, teachers’ sense of identity is the means with which they respond, reflect upon and manage the interface between their educational ideals, beliefs, social situation and broader social and policy context (Day & Leithwood, 2007).

All these definitions mentioned above view identity as fluid and relational phenomenon. A teacher’s professional identity consists of sub-identities that more or less harmonize (Mishler, 1999). Identity development occurs in an inter-subjective field and can be best characterized as an ongoing process, a process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context (Gee, 2001).

As far as teacher identity or professional identity is concerned in this study, it refers not only to who and what teachers view themselves as, to what is important in their professional work and life, but also to where they “stand” or how important they are in relation to others, and to the world at large. The shaping of their professional identity is also a process of interaction between teachers’ life history and institutional ethos.

2.3 Levels of academic identity

Peter Taylor’s research (1999) on university teachers’ academic life provides information about academics’ experiences of their changing roles in changing universities. According to Taylor (1999: 41-42), the “academic identity” is not a unitary construct, but multi-leveled, achievement-oriented and discipline-focused, and can be thought of in terms of levels or layers of symbols. Taylor holds that it is possible to distinguish at least three levels of academic identity: signs linked to the site of one’s work; signs linked to the discipline of one’s work; and more universal signs of “being an academic”. The first level involves relationships with the employer and work. That is, academic’s index of self is signaled by the type of institution and work which they are involved with. For example, they may identify themselves by saying, “I’m from Harvard.”

The second level of identity involves identification with an academic discipline. Here the identity is signaled through reference to the discipline as in “I’m a biologist.”

Academics have to learn to work with two “publics”: the general community and the discipline community. Therefore, very early on in their careers, academics learn to live by two sets of rules: a set of discipline-focused rules and a more publicly recognizable set of rules. The third level of identity is this public set of rules and values, which is a more universal image of the academic identity which overlaps disciplinary boundaries—a cosmopolitan identity. This aspect of academic identity is centered around two values: “academic autonomy” and “academic freedom” (Aronowitz, 1997: 202, as cited in Taylor, 1999). This is the identification with the career as in “I am an academic.”

Taylor’s views of levels of academic identity lend a useful lens to explore the complexity of Chinese university EFL teachers’ professional identity.
2.4 Identity changes

The question of how identities change has been a topic of theoretical interest in the field of social psychology for a number of years (Burke, 2006: 81). According to Peter Burke (2006: 81), identity change involves changes in the meaning of self, that is, changes in what it means to be one who is as a member of a group, who is in a role, or who is as a person. These meanings are held in the identity standard, which is the part of the identity that serves as a reference for judging self-in-situation meanings.

Wallace E. Lambert (1975) explored the issue of the identity of the bilinguals and biculturals and proposed two forms of bilingualism, “additive” and “subtractive”. With subtractive bilingualism, the native language and native cultural identity are replaced by the target language and target cultural identity. With additive bilingualism, the learner’s native language and native cultural identity are maintained while the target language and target cultural identity are acquired in addition. Lambert’s theory indicates that a person’s cultural and personal identity may change or develop positively or negatively as a result of their language learning experience.

Fromm’s concept of “productiveness”, including “productive orientation”, “productive character” and “productive thinking”, is another perspective from which we can explore one’s identity change. According to Fromm (1947: 91, 92), productiveness refers to a fundamental attitude, a mode of relatedness in all realms of human experience. It covers mental, emotional, sensory response to others, to oneself and to things. Productiveness is individuals’ ability to use their powers and to realize the potentials inherent in them. It means they experience themselves as the embodiment of their powers and as “actors”; they feel themselves with their powers, and at the same time these powers are not masked and alienated from them. Productiveness is an attitude which every human being is capable of, unless one is mentally and emotionally crippled. Fromm’s concept of “productiveness” and related terms provide us the possibility to look for what positive or ideal identity changes may be like.

Lambert’s theory (1975) and Fromm’s theory (1947) were applied in many studies in the context of EFL and ESL education research (e.g., Gao, 1994, 2001; Gao et al., 2005; Norton Peirce, 1995). For example, Gao et al. (2005) explored the Chinese college students’ self-identity changes associated with English learning. In light of Fromm’s “productive orientation” (Fromm, 1947), Lambert’s “subtractive bilingualism” and “additive bilingualism” (Lambert, 1975), and her extension of their theories, “productive bilingualism” (Gao, 1994, 2001, 2002), she proposed six types of self-identity change (Gao et al., 2005): self-confidence change, subtractive change, additive change, productive change, split change, and zero change. Gao’s studies set good examples for future research in exploring the different phases or states of people’s identity changes.

According to Gao et al. (2005) and Lambert (1975), language is related to a set of behavioral norms and cultural values, which construct one’s self-identity or personal identity. With the learning of a new language, one’s perceptions of his or her competence, communication styles and value systems may undergo some changes, which are a set of “non-linguistic outcomes” to which self-identity changes belonged (Gardener, 1985, as cited in Gao et al., 2005).
College English teachers’ in-service academic study toward a PhD degree is much more than just acquiring professional knowledge and research methods. It is closely netted with their working life and prior educational experience and is definitely related to the teachers’ perception of themselves as members of professional groups and as persons, to their understanding of who they are in different professional roles, and to their choice of way of life, which will comprehensively construct their professional identity. It may thus be assumed that a professional’s personal identity and professional identity may undergo some changes as a result of his or her taking further academic education, becoming members of different academic tribes, and taking different roles.

However, the change of professional identity among University EFL teachers who are and were engaged in PhD study are much less explored in western academia and in particular, remains a virgin land in China.

Enlightened by Peter Burkes’ concepts of “identity change” (Burke, 2006), Taylor’s concepts of levels of academic identity (Taylor, 1999), Lambert’s concepts of “additive bilingualism” and “subtractive bilingualism” (Lambert, 1975), Fromm’s “productive orientation” (Fromm, 1947), Gao’s application of Fromm’s theory and Lambert’s concepts, and her proposal of six types of self-identity changes (Gao et al., 2005), this study was intended to explore the types of these teachers’ professional identity changes as members of an institution, of one or two disciplinary tribes, and of the general academic community, and also in their teaching and research roles. Two specific research questions were thus formulated:

1. What are the professional identity changes associated with these EFL teachers’ academic study experience? Does “productive professional identity” exist among them?
2. What are the characteristics of these changes?

3. Research method

3.1 Participants
The participants in this research were nine English teachers of a key comprehensive university in China who were either studying for their PhD degrees or had already obtained their PhD degrees when they were first interviewed. All of them had taught non-English major students for years. The details about their demographic data can be seen in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Date of Birth</th>
<th>Discipline of the PhD program</th>
<th>Title (when interviewed)</th>
<th>Degree (when interviewed)</th>
<th>Times of interview</th>
<th>Length of interview (hr)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>late 1970s</td>
<td>History of Art (Arts)</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>PhD candidate</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5; 1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>early 1970s</td>
<td>Philosophy of language (Philosophy)</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>late 1960s</td>
<td>Western Ethics (Philosophy)</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>PhD candidate</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2; 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
College EFL teachers who have had the experience of academic study toward a PhD degree were chosen as research participants in this study. The reason is as below. It was found that there were several vital moments in the development of professional identity, such as the first time to think about and select a major (e.g., College Entrance Examination), the first time to choose a career and get employed, the first experience of organizational changes, finding a new job again and getting promotion, and so on (Liu & Su, 2006). It goes without saying that the selection of the major is a critical moment and academic study toward a PhD degree is a critical event in the university EFL teachers’ identity development.

### 3.2 Data collection

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the nine participants. Each of them was interviewed at least once and the length of each interview ranged from one hour to three hours. The interviews aimed at collecting information including the participants’ reasons for studying for a PhD degree, their relevant academic study experience, their self-perceptions in different communities and their views of teaching, research and professional development prior to and after taking PhD program. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, and were all audio-recorded and transcribed in full. Since the language of this paper is English, the quoted data were translated into English in the writing up of this paper. As for the translation of some expressions with special cultural connotations, Chinese *pinyin* and supplementary explanations were provided.

### 3.3 Data analysis

The transcriptions of each participant’s data were first categorized according to the emerging themes and analyzed line by line with my comments. Then, comparison and interpretation were made between all the participants’ categorized data in light of the above-mentioned different types of identity changes at different academic identity levels. Commonalities, noteworthy differences, and recurring patterns were highlighted.
4. Findings and discussion

4.1 The professional identity changes of the participants

Four types of professional identity changes, productive change, additive change, subtractive change and split change, were reported by the nine participants at the three levels of academic identity. More than one type of identity change occurred in every teacher’s professional identity, and it was hard to label a teacher as a representative of a particular type of identity change. However, different teachers displayed different focuses at different levels of professional identity.

4.1.1 Productive identity changes

The productive professional changes were mainly reported in the nine participants’ identification of themselves as academic person, disciplinary teacher and researcher. To be specific, their in-service PhD study experience and work experience positively reinforced each other; their commitment to and identification with the English discipline and the work of English teaching and research were improved; deeper understanding and appreciation of their PhD program and learning experience went hand in hand with deeper understanding and appreciation of their former professional identity; their cognitive, affective and behavioral competence were enhanced as a whole.

Because of widening of horizons, greater openness in their ways of thinking, and improvement in their research ability and self-confidence following their experience of academic study, they began to psychologically identify themselves as quasi-researchers or researchers. Furthermore, various forms of recognition from authorities, colleagues, and peers all enhanced the teachers’ identification with their legitimate researcher identity and qualifications as academics. Obtaining the PhD degree was just an important form of recognition from the academic authorities and system. So, it can be concluded that their professional identities have gone beyond their identification as “craftsman”, and this change of identity has greatly improved their sense of self-value. Consider the following:

I had not thought my working as a college English teacher valuable, and I often took a negative attitude toward being a college English teacher. However, with my experience of academic study toward a PhD degree, the subsequent enrichment of my knowledge and horizons, and better insights into many philosophical, social and teaching problems which had puzzled me in the past, I began to recognize my value as a college English teacher. (Jenny)

Five of the nine teachers, who had got non-English PhD degrees, did not feel any improvement in their English language competence, linguistic knowledge or teaching skills as a result of their academic study experience. However, they reported having experienced obvious improvement and enrichment in humanities and social knowledge, together with better understanding of both Chinese culture and western culture. These were all unexpected benefits from the experience of academic study. Meanwhile, in contrast with
their past experience and understanding of English as objects of teaching or research in their career life, their experience in using English as a tool for the purpose of information and communication in their PhD academic community provided them with opportunities to reflect and review the value of English as a language.

As a case in point, Mary experienced productive professional identity change as she became a member of two different disciplinary communities. Her development in PhD discipline (business administration) and her competence in English and English teaching had greatly benefited one another. She said:

"It was just after I took a new major (business administration) and combined English with it that I became aware of the usefulness and value of English. Otherwise, I wouldn’t think English and what I learned before could be useful. You won’t feel happy if you cannot use the language appropriately. Now I can use many words much more accurately than before and know exactly the meanings behind them. For example, if I hadn’t studied management, I wouldn’t be aware of the subtle difference between “administration” and “regulation”.

I took the management major, which seems to be my goal. In fact, the learning experience and research from the perspective of management has greatly enhanced my English proficiency."

Mary’s strengths in English and her development in the field of management have positively reinforced each other and enabled her to become established in both the community of English teaching and community of management. Not only was she recognized as somebody in the field of management soon after her graduation, she also found that she could provide whatever her English students wanted to know about this field, and this made her feel terrific as an English teacher. It was in the course of English teaching after she took her academic study that she surprisingly found English very attractive. Meanwhile, positive feedback and recognition from her students and peers greatly promoted her sense of being an English teacher. She said, “I feel so proud that I am such an excellent teacher.” All these experiences strongly enhanced her identification with English and management, and her identification of herself as an English teacher and management researcher. She said that she was quite proud and confident that she was able to be both a qualified researcher and an excellent teacher in her professional life, and she felt a sense of responsibility for the people she was working with and the environment she was working in. She established the commitment and determination that “I would like to contribute to the development of our field and our society.” Mary attributed these productive changes to her supervisors, whose guidance and generous help in academic research provided her with opportunities to grow up and be recognized as a leading researcher. Such guidance and help not only built up her competence, sense of confidence and pride in her work, but also enhanced her consciousness and sense of mission as an academic and an intellectual.

According to Fromm (1947), sense of responsibility is not exposed by external power but the natural response to what we care about. So, the passion, commitment and sense of responsibility for the discipline, teaching and research which are rooted in teachers’
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inner heart and their whole life are no doubt the ideal result of teacher learning and development.

The two participants who were studying for PhD degrees in English linguistics reported productive identity change mainly concerning their identification as researcher and researching teacher. Both Helen and Jane expressed their solid confidence in being qualified linguistic researchers in terms of academic expertise and sense of belonging in becoming qualified members of an academic community. Meanwhile, they said they had more research-consciousness in teaching than before. For example, Helen said she was more conscious of fostering students’ academic development in her teaching. Jane found that now she was not reluctant or did not feel forced but was more willing and confident to offer a new academic course if her job required; she said:

It is something I can make it with more efforts…It is also my responsibility to do it, since I have the PhD education experience.

4.1.2 Additive identity change
Additive identity changes were mainly found among the interviewed teachers with non-English PhD degrees. Their identification with two disciplines co-existed. That was, their positive identification with the new discipline was not at the cost of that of their original discipline; rather, the two bodies of knowledge were mainly on a parallel rather than in an integrated form, each specified for particular contexts. The teachers felt they were just like two different persons in different circles of teaching and researching, but they were trying to reconcile the two sets of disciplinary rules, behavioral patterns and values,

Cindy was an example. When talking about the interaction between her academic learning experience and her English, she said,

I don’t think my English level is greatly improved because of my PhD learning experience, but my ability to transfer between the two sets of languages is much stronger. I feel like two different “me’s” in two different ways of thinking in the academic research seminars of my PhD major and in the college English classroom. Well, the feelings are completely different and it’s just as if the two things had nothing to do with each other. Fortunately, I am able to handle it and the shifting isn’t difficult and doesn’t make me feel uncomfortable. And my PhD major is still related to language and my present teaching.

Cindy felt comfortable about the shifting between the two circles, and she did not think her PhD major had nothing to do with English teaching, but she admitted that there had been some gaps between her two identities as an English practitioner and literary criticism researcher. She had the feelings of being “exceptional”, but she firmly believed that she could accommodate the two academic identities.

This kind of shifting was not an exception among the university EFL teachers whose PhD degrees were in a field other than the English discipline, but the teachers reacted differently to the shifting. A number of them complained that the college did not provided
opportunities for teachers to exert their potential, such as the opportunity to offer new courses according to their interest and students’ needs. So the teachers could only make some improvement in their own classes. However, there were also teachers who just lived with the existing system and working environment, reading, teaching and doing research following their interests, enjoying the company of peers who shared their interests.

The coordination and effective integration of the college English teachers’ present research interest and their work of English teaching and research in terms of content, emotion and pace is a challenge that all university EFL teachers are faced with. There is still a long way to go for teachers to positively identify themselves and be recognized in terms of their academic status.

4.1.3 Subtractive identity changes
Subtractive changes of professional identity means that teachers’ identification with the original discipline (English teaching and research), working environments and professional roles are severely threatened or even denied. The teachers’ original disciplinary and professional commitment was being replaced by their commitment to the new PhD disciplinary identity and academic culture.

Wendy’s story was an example. Though access to a PhD degree made her feel relaxed, she didn’t think she was now more competitive and enjoyed more capital than before in the institution where she worked. Her achievements, qualification and capabilities were well recognized and respected in her PhD research field. However, when it came to academic promotion in her workplace, her publications were not considered qualified and competitive by the existing rules and regulations. She “had to” frequently refuse many contribution opportunities from the key periodicals of her PhD research field in order to save time to “make up for” her research in the English discipline. Wendy’s disappointment of not being recognized, together with her anxiety of keeping up with the research progress in the related field, not only severely hindered her identification with her workplace, her original discipline, and herself as a teacher and researcher, but also reduced her passion for research. Negative identification came into being. For example, she said determinedly, “If I were given another chance, I would neither choose English as my major nor choose to teach English.” As to research in the field of English, she said,

I just feel pressured. I don’t believe research in English teaching or literature is useful or valuable to society.

Though there were certain research issues she was interested in, the difficulty of publishing made her feel “it is hard to find the right position”.

On the other hand, what Wendy had experienced in her three-year academic study for her PhD in the field of arts was considered a quite different academic culture which followed the tradition of academic freedom and academic autonomy. According to her, this kind of professional life with academic freedom and autonomy was exactly what she had long been desiring since her recruitment. She had experienced this way of life in the
academic community of arts but she had not felt it in the English teaching and research community, and this partly explains why her identification with English disciplinary life was reduced or even replaced.

It must be pointed out that subtractive identity changes do not necessarily follow college English teachers’ negative identification with academic life. On the contrary, all of the teachers desired a better academic life and working environment and were trying hard to change and improve the quality of their professional life.

4.1.4 Split identity changes

Split identity changes did exist, especially among those teachers whose PhD programs were other than the English discipline. They were either suffering from identity conflict of double disciplinary memberships or struggling between should-be academic teacher and real teaching-oriented craftsman; therefore, they were at some loss about where to go in light of their professional future.

For example, when talking about sense of belonging, Jenny said, “I had enjoyed the sense of belonging to a professional community in my years of working on my PhD program and thereafter, but at times I feel I am close to neither community.” It was hard for Jenny to define or classify herself. But considering her involvement in terms of time and energy, she said, “My focus is still on the English community.”

Wendy had suffered from similar identity conflict. When asked about how she felt about her academic study experience, she said without any hesitation, “Conflict!” The struggle she has been facing mainly included the identity conflict between the two disciplines. For example, she said, “I have always been struggling between the two disciplines, wondering where my focus should be,” and “I found much effort I had made before turned out to be meaningless.” Another identity conflict was between teaching and research roles. Though she was popular among students, teaching was not enough to provide her with sense of achievement. As Wendy said, she would like to be an excellent and popular teacher, but the pressure of research and academic promotion ruined her enjoyment of teaching.

Should she persist in her beliefs such as academic freedom or adjust herself to the existing system so as to ensure smooth promotion in her career? Should she learn for teaching well or for her professional development as a college person? These seemingly compatible choices have become the roots of many college English teachers’ identity conflicts. Wendy identified herself as “Xu Shu”, a historical figure in The Romance of the Three Kingdoms who served a master while thinking of assisting another. However, in spite of all the dilemmas in her professional life, out of realistic considerations such as housing and her child’s education, she firmly indicated that she would not leave for another workplace though there were a lot of opportunities.

Possibly, being an excellent teacher and enjoying teaching rather than struggling to do research without passion might be a preferable choice for many college English teachers, if the scholarship of teaching could be properly respected and well acknowledged.
4.2 The characteristics of the participants’ professional identities

First, “productive identity change” and “additive identity change” were commonly reported. Table 2 shows almost all the participants reported both “productive change” and “additive change”. This indicates that the academic study experience generally builds the participants’ professional identity. What should be specified was that the foci of these “productive” and “additive” identity changes varied from teacher to teacher. For example, Jenny reported “productive change” as a knowledge holder. As she put it, “my horizon has been greatly enlarged; Ethics enriched both my life and my English teaching career.” Mary confidently identified herself as an excellent teacher and researcher. Besides the difference in foci, the degree and periods of identity change also varied from teacher to teacher. For example, it was after they started academic study toward PhD that some participants began to shape or confirm their identification with a certain academic discipline or research field, with academic teaching identity or research identity, while some other participants had already established clear career goals and academic ambition prior to the PhD program. In spite of the diversity of their identity changes, the tendency of their identity development or change was positive and active. All the participants established some degrees of commitment and love for some research field or certain roles.

It was also noticed that, of the nine participants, those with professorship or associate professorship often reported very little “subtractive professional identity change” or “split professional identity change”. This may indicate that those with higher academic ranks in the hierarchy of the academic community tend to have more “productive” and “additive” identity changes. They have more abilities and resources to manage their work and life, and they enjoy more autonomy and opportunities to participate in social and academic affairs. Besides, with support from a stable network of academic community, social relationship and respect from others (though they are also faced with pressure from work), they are able to deal with the pressure and find more support and ways of relaxation. Therefore, they are more likely to have a sense of achievement and have productive identity changes.

Table 2. Distribution of participants’ report of professional identity changes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Productive changes</th>
<th>Additive changes</th>
<th>Subtractive Changes</th>
<th>Split changes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of mentions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Second, the most prominent identity change occurred at disciplinary level and among the teachers who had studied and were studying for non-English PhD degrees.

The nine teachers’ identity changes at the three academic identity levels are demonstrated in Table 3. Without exception, all the nine were eager to identify or distinguish themselves by the discipline and research field to which they belonged. This supports Tony Becher’s (1989: 20) claim that academics identify themselves more strongly with the “characteristics and structures of the knowledge domains” of their disciplines than with their institutions. However, their identity changes at the discipline level revealed great diversity. In some teachers’ cases, productive changes were more prominent. The academic study experience enhanced their identification as researchers, teachers and members in both their English and PhD program communities, such as Mary and Helen. In some other teachers’ cases, their identification with the original discipline community was either in conflict with new academic interest or was threatened or even denied, such as Wendy, who experienced both split identity change and subtractive identity change.

Fortunately, the teachers who suffered identity crisis did not give up their desire and pursuit for academic freedom and academic autonomy. While revealing the dissatisfaction and low identification with the English discipline, working environments, daily work and administrative rules, they still thought highly of their professional identity as college academicians and their social status as university faculty. They made great efforts to pursue the way of life as academics, which they valued. For example, both Lily and Jenny indicated that they would like to reconcile the identity conflicts.

| Table 3. Teachers’ identity changes at the three academic identity levels |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| level                      | type            | Productive change | Subtractive change | Additive change | Split change |
| Institutional identity     | ×               | √               | ×                | ×               |
| Disciplinary identity      | √               | √               | √                | √               |
| Cosmopolitan identity      | √               | ×               | √                | √               |

Third, the participants’ identification as English professionals revealed the complexity and diversity in different contexts. There existed not only the identification that college English teachers were in disadvantaged, inferior, less qualified and subordinated positions, but also the feelings of confidence and sense of superiority as skillful English practitioners. Their low sense of self-value as college English teachers was mainly related to their negative perception of the work they were doing, their disadvantaged positions in their institutions and disciplinary community.

Fourth, as member of the general academic community, most teachers’ professional identity were mainly shaped at the institutional and disciplinary level. Nearly all the nine college English teachers identified themselves as “college people” and “English practitioners” in the general sense. Only two out of the nine teachers expressed the hope of becoming members of the international academic community.
Fifth, most of the teachers were struggling between should-be academic teacher and real teaching-oriented craftsman. The lack of harmonization of the two identities in these teachers’ professional life was to a great extent caused by institutional pressure. The nine teachers all identified “English teacher” as their basic identity while what they valued most was their identity as “university faculty”. Most of them had complex and conflicting feelings about academic research. Though they identified academic research as an indispensable part of their professional life, they doubted the meaning and practical value of doing such research. So, there is still a long way to go for some of them to build strong professional identities as confident and qualified researchers.

Finally, the nine teachers shared a tendency of identity changes associated with their academic study experience. They were going beyond identifying themselves as mere “professionals”. In fact, they gradually and consciously attached great importance to their value and responsibility as members of society, intellectuals, and members of the general academic community. Their sense of mission was growing up. Hard as it was, they were trying their best to balance the conflict between their personal and professional life, the day-to-day teaching-centered working life in the disciplinary institutional context and the publicly recognized research-oriented academic life in the cosmopolitan academic context.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore Chinese college EFL teachers’ professional identity change associated with their academic study toward PhD degrees and the characteristics of their professional identities. The major findings are summarized as follows.

First, “productive identity change” and “additive identity change” commonly existed among the university EFL teachers with in-service PhD study experience, and the changes mainly concerned their identification as knowledge holder, qualified teacher and researcher in terms of both expertise and virtues. This indicated that this academic learning experience positively influenced college teachers’ professional identity.

Second, though there also existed obvious “split identity change” and “subtractive identity change” among the teachers, it was not a terrible thing. As to the commonly existing identity struggle between should-be academic teacher and real teaching-oriented craftsman, and the dilemma caused by double memberships, the teachers concerned all made efforts to reconcile these identity conflicts. As Gao Yihong (2003) has indicated, the experience of identity conflicts does not necessarily lead to passive or negative consequences. The split and subtractive identity changes revealed in this study more often than not happened during certain periods of most teachers’ professional identity development.

Third, Consistent with prior studies, the nine teachers demonstrated multi-leveled, achievement-oriented and discipline-focused professional identities. This research
highlights the powerful influence of policy upon their identity changes. For example, their “productive” and “additive” identity changes were basically concerned with their sense of competence and satisfaction in terms of knowledge, ability to do research, horizon and so on, while split and subtractive changes were mostly related to structural and institutional pressure. Their professional identity was greatly symbolized by promotion, status and resource distribution. It can be concluded that their professional identities are shaped and reshaped in the process of negotiating and balancing between personal beliefs and rules at institutional, disciplinary and public levels. Teachers with non-English PhD academic background displayed conflicting professional identity, with institutional pressure being the important sources of their struggle and dilemma.

In addition, there is something that cannot be ignored. That is, the disciplinary nature of college English teaching has already become a critical factor that affects university EFL teachers’ identity and career development. Without the disciplinary nature of college English teaching being recognized, the construction of professionalism in the college English teaching faculty will just be a myth. In the cases of this study, since there was no commonly recognized standard for college English teachers’ competence, the English teachers with non-English PhD degree were questioned about whether their knowledge was exactly what was needed in their English teaching and research. With the legitimacy of their knowledge being questioned, and their promotion, status and resource consequently being affected, these teachers have been faced with sense of confusion about their professional identity and career development.

Last but not least, this article draws on the data collected for my PhD project at the early stage. Findings at the later stage with more participants from English PhD background included and follow-up interviews conducted, which I will present in another article, further reveal the fluidity as well as complexity and diversity of professional identity, subject to the change of institutional policy. This suggests that findings discussed in this paper are situated in specific time and space, with great relevance to participants’ specialty fields.

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References


Changes and Characteristics of EFL Teachers' Professional Identity: The Cases of Nine University Teachers


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