On Transferred Primary English Teacher’s Identity*

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With the increasing number of primary schools having English classes and the lack of English teachers, teachers of other subjects have been transferred to teach English since 2001 in China. As teacher identity has great impact on classroom teaching and teacher’s professional development, this case study aims to find out the status quo and the contributing factors of the transferred primary English teacher’s identity. The results show that the transferred English teacher has strong professional identity and personal identity in spite of being unwilling and unhappy to be transferred to teach English from Chinese, while the expertise identity and contextual identity are quite low. Both personal and contextual factors contribute to the formation of teacher identity. And then proposals were put forward to promote the transferred English teacher’s constructing positive identity.

Keywords: transferred, primary English teacher, teacher identity

Introduction

Since 2001, most of the primary schools in China have started teaching English from Grade Three. Due to the lack of primary English teachers, teachers of other subjects were transferred to teach English. More than 6,000,000 primary school students started to learn English and 50% primary English teachers were transferred. In remote rural areas, even 80% primary English teachers were transferred from other subjects (TAN, 2010). Recent years see the researches on transferred teachers, such as the problems they face and possible solutions (TAN, 2010; WANG, 2012), in-service teacher training (HUANG, 2012), and so on. But researches on transferred primary English teachers’ identity and professional development are rare.

It is widely recognized that teacher identity plays a significant role in ELT (English Language Teaching). Teacher identity can determine how well they teach, how they cope with the curriculum, and how well they can do in the classroom and in the future professional development (Tsui, 2007). Besides, identity acts as an organizing element in teachers’ professional lives, reflecting their beliefs, so it has great impact on classroom teaching. Teacher identity has significant impact on the teacher’s professional development in the long term, especially teachers’ commitment to the profession and the quality of teaching. Researchers found that teachers entering the profession without a clear identity were likely to leave the profession and even if they stayed in the profession, they could hardly find the job rewarding or satisfying, and thus not devoted to teaching (Alsup, 2006;

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Thus, to study transferred primary English teacher’s identity is beneficial to help teachers better understand and develop themselves; to enhance teachers’ devotion, enthusiasm, and sense of belonging in the profession; and to promote teachers’ quality and professional development so they can better cope with the educational reforms. This case study aims to find out the status quo and contributing factors of transferred primary English teacher identity and put forth the proposals for constructing positive teacher identity, so as to promote primary English teacher’s professional development, teacher quality, and teaching effects and the quality of rural primary school English education.

**Teacher Identity**

Teacher identity is about how teachers define themselves. It means a teacher’s perception and belief of “Who am I?”, “What are my roles?”, “What is the significance of my teaching?”, “Why do I belong to this community?”, etc. It is a dynamic and complex process of the interaction among personal identity, professional identity, and teacher roles (Volkmann & Anderson, 1998). A foreign language teacher identity refers to a foreign language teacher’s belief, perception, and identity of social and cultural roles. It is the key factor for effective teaching (Richards, 2008). According to Day and Kington (2008), the nature of teacher identity can be indicated by such constructs as job satisfaction, motivation, self-efficacy, and occupational commitment. Teacher identity has impact on teachers’ professional development, on teacher’s attitude toward educational reform, as well as teaching effect (Tsui, 2007).

In this study, teacher identity refers to the teacher’s understanding of her roles, her profession, and the process of constructing her identity as an ideal teacher by reflecting teaching experiences and thereafter adjusting teaching activities, so as to promote her professional development and attain the sense of accomplishment and happiness. This paper adopts XUN Yang’s (2012) components of teacher identity (see Table 1), in order to elaborate the transferred primary English teacher identity and analyze the contributing factors in details.

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**Research Questions**

This research intends to discuss the following questions:

1. What is the status quo of the transferred primary English teacher’s identity?
2. What are the factors contributing to the formation of the transferred primary English teacher’s identity?
3. What can promote the construction of the transferred primary English teacher’s positive identity?
Subject

The subject is a female teacher named Lisa (pseudonym), a transferred English teacher in Jietong Primary School which lies in a rural village of Lvnan County, Shandong Province. Lisa majored in Chinese education and graduated from Weifang College in Shandong province and has been teaching for 20 years. Lisa had taught Chinese for 11 years (see Table 2). In 2006, the school had English courses for all students. Due to the lack of English teachers, she was transferred to teach English after one month’s training.

Table 2

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Instruments and Data Collection

We did a longitudinal narrative case study lasting from September, 2015 to February, 2016. Data include semi-structured interviews (face-to-face interview and telephone interview) of the teacher, the headmaster, and the students, records of classroom observations, the teacher’s journals, notes, and reflections.

Results and Discussion

The Status Quo of the Transferred Primary English Teacher’s Identity

Though Lisa was unwilling to be transferred to teach English, she has been highly responsible and has always loved teaching and her students very much. As a Chinese Education graduate, she is quite aware of the insufficient knowledge and low competence in English, as well as the lack of systematic training of English teaching methodology, which causes her lack of confidence and knowledge in teaching English and outdated beliefs of English teaching and learning at the beginning. As time went on, her attitude towards English teaching changed from being casual to serious and then highly devoted. But due to the poor conditions of the school, the lack of modern technology and facilities for language teaching and learning and the lack of the environment of students’ using English and the support of the administration, she finds it hard to teach English well. The following will analyze the details of each component of Lisa’s teacher identity.

Professional identity. Professional identity includes teacher’s ethic devotion and sense of belonging. Lisa loves teaching and has great ethic devotion.

“I think a teacher has great influence on students’ life. A good teacher can change the student’s life and leads a student to heaven, while a bad teacher can destroy a student. Hence I am determined to be a good teacher. I love children and teaching children very much” (Interview, 10/09/2015).

Lisa has great responsibility for her class. She is very strict with the students, who are highly disciplined.

“I don’t like my class to be in chaos, so I set the strict rules for students from the first day on, e.g., students are forbidden to look around, to talk, or to fidget. When anyone breaks the rules, his parents are requested to
come to my office. Once a naughty boy was absent-minded and didn’t behave well, so I asked him to stand in the corner throughout the lesson. All the other students were scared. As time goes on, the students become obedient” (Interview, 10/09/2015).

Though Lisa is extremely strict with the students in class, she cares for every student.

“One student in my class had a fever today. She seemed to be very uncomfortable and very sick. I telephoned her parents, but they were too busy. So I brought the student to the village clinic and had an infusion. Actually the child is the same age as my daughter. I cannot stand by and I just treat her as my daughter” (Journal, 10/08/2007).

Lisa has great sense of belonging to her class. After the first examination, the results of her class ranked the last, so she felt greatly frustrated, disappointed, and disgraced.

“I felt so ashamed. So I observed the experienced English teachers’ classes and discussed with them about the problems, trying ways and means to improve my teaching. I can’t afford to see my students get poor grades” (Interview, 10/09/2015).

From the above, we can see that Lisa loves teaching and loves her students and she has great ethic devotion, great sense of belonging, and therefore high professional identity.

**Expertise identity.** Expertise identity mainly includes the teacher’s teaching beliefs and English competence.

**Teaching beliefs.** Teaching beliefs (teacher’s view of English, English teaching, and English learning) have great impact on how a teacher teaches. At the start of being transferred to teach English, Lisa transferred her ways of teaching Chinese to her English class. Jug-and-mug methods dominated her teaching.

“Today the headmaster told me to give up teaching Chinese but teach English to two classes instead. I was very unhappy. I preferred to teach Chinese. I don’t know how to teach English. Shall I teach the students to pronounce the new words and then read aloud the dialogue? I really don’t know” (Journal, 09/01/2006).

“I was used to the ways of teaching Chinese which I had been trained when in college, so I taught English in the same way. I did not know how to teach English, so I just got the students to read aloud and memorize the words, phrases, and sentences. When necessary, I explained some difficult words or phrases in Chinese. I remembered I used the same mechanical methods and procedures during the first few weeks” (Interview, 10/19/2015).

Due to this teacher-centered and book-centered teaching, the students were interested in neither participating in class nor learning English out of class.

Fortunately, as time went on, Lisa’s professional identity prompted her to participate in teacher-developing programs and observe other teachers’ classes. Hence she gradually changed her views of language learning and teaching.

“I think interest is the best teacher. In primary English teaching, to motivate students to learn takes the priority. Students can learn English well in all kinds of interesting activities and tasks” (Interview, 10/19/2015).

At the initial stage of transferring to teach English, Lisa had misunderstanding of ELT and thus did not achieve good results in teaching English.

**Low English competence.** As Lisa majored in Chinese when in college, her English level was far from satisfactory. At the beginning of teaching English, she was not so accurate in English grammar, she even made mistakes in pronunciation, and she had limited knowledge of English culture and literature.
“I learned English just to pass exams and I never practiced English listening and speaking. I was quite nervous during my first English class. I found it so hard to read and speak English as if my tongue were stiff. Later on, I was so shameful to find I could not recognize some new words. I could not pronounce some difficult words correctly and my tone sounded strange” (Interview, 10/09/2015).

Anyhow, with more practice in speaking English, Lisa has been improving her English. According to The Professional Standards for Primary English Teachers, an English teacher should be proficient in subject knowledge, i.e., correct pronunciation and intonation, fluent oral English, vocabulary associated with children’s daily life, solid knowledge of grammar and rhetoric, and English culture, such as history, literature, geography, and art of English speaking countries. Besides, primary English teachers should provide students with plenty of comprehensible input and design various interesting activities to prepare students for authentic communication.

From the recent classroom observation, we find that though Lisa is more confident and efficient in her class and manages to involve most students in her class, she still makes a few mistakes in pronunciation, such as the word “China”, and she could not integrate the cultural knowledge into teaching culture-loaded words. In one word, Lisa’s expertise identity needs improving.

**Personal identity.** Personal identity includes the teacher’s commitment, enthusiasm, devotion, and engagement in the job and perception of one’s roles.

*From low commitment to great devotion.* As Lisa was transferred to teach English by the headmaster, she was quite unwilling and irresponsible in teaching English at the beginning. She even resisted teaching English, so she did not spend much time preparing her lessons and she just taught English the same way as she taught Chinese. But students’ poor grades in the examination stimulated Lisa’s self-esteem and professional identity, so she had to become serious and responsible. Gradually, she became more engaged and enthusiastic in teaching English.

“I was so shameful of the students’ poor grade in English after the first semester that I started to seriously reflect my roles as an English teacher and my teaching. Then I started to learn English as well as how to teach English. I spend lots of time preparing my lessons. Recently I have become more interested in teaching English and been mostly devoted to improving my professional knowledge and teaching methods” (Interview, 10/19/2015).

Lisa changed her attitude toward English teaching from low commitment to great devotion.

**Perception of one’s roles—an excellent model of students.** Lisa thinks that a teacher plays many roles, but the predominant role is to be an excellent model of students in learning and in life.

“Students at this age are very active and observant. They are prone to take the teachers as examples and follow the teachers’ actions. There’s a Chinese saying: If students love the teacher, they believe in what the teacher says and does. So I pay special attention to my speech and my action. I follow the tape and read aloud the materials in the textbook. I tell the students how English is widely used by referring to the materials on the Internet, on TV and products in daily life” (Interview, 11/02/2015).

An interview with the students shows that most students like Lisa very much. “I don’t think Miss WANG is very strict with us. I’d rather say she is very responsible for us. She cares us, so we like her. We consider her as our mother”.

Therefore, Lisa has very positive personal identity.
**Contextual identity.** Contextual identity includes contextual support (support of institution and colleagues) and attitude toward educational reform. Social-cultural theory holds that social interaction is important for a teacher’s professional development and context plays a significant role in constructing teacher’s identity.

**Contextual support.** Lisa could not get much support due to the poor conditions of this rural primary school. There was a lack of facilities, supplementary English materials, and environment for learning English.

“The only teaching aid was a tape-recorder which was used by the English teachers in turns. There were no multi-media yet. I couldn’t find any reference book for teaching. I could only depend on the textbook” (Journal, 09/06/2006).

The headmaster did not attach great importance to English teaching nor pay much attention to the transferred English teacher.

“Lisa has been teaching for many years. I don’t think there’s any problem in her teaching. Besides, English is not as important as Chinese and Math. Teaching kids English is just for fun” (Interview of the headmaster, 10/19/2015).

Luckily, Lisa got plenty of support from her colleagues. She had a harmonious relationship with them. She observed other teachers’ English classes and discussed lesson planning and other problems with her colleagues, who gave her constructive advice, encouraged her, and helped her a lot. As a result, she became confident in teaching English and had a better sense of belonging.

The poor conditions and the leader’s indifference of the importance of English teaching in primary school caused the newly transferred English teacher’s unhappiness and low self-esteem, thus it took quite a long time for Lisa to adapt to her new role as an English teacher.

**Teacher’s attitude toward educational reform.** Lisa’s attitude toward educational reform is complicated and contradictory. She welcomes the reform but she finds the new ideas and ways are so challenging and hard to be put into practice.

“Educational reform has great impact on my life. I had been very happy to be a Chinese teacher and I enjoyed teaching Chinese for so many years. I knew everything in the textbook and even beyond the textbook. But suddenly I was requested to teach English, which I knew nothing. It’s hard for me to accept the change of role from a confident and experienced Chinese teacher to a green hand of teaching English. I was so doubtful about myself. Then I had to learn everything about teaching English” (Journal, 10/08/2006).

“I support the reforms because a teacher should keep pace with the times. When I attended the teacher training program, I was so excited to learn the new ideas and new methods of teaching, such as student-centered teaching, task-based teaching, etc. But when I return to my class, I find it so hard to put the new ideas into practice. After some time, I taught as before” (Interview, 10/19/2015).

Lisa likes the new ideas and methods of ELT. But due to poor conditions of her school and the students’ differences, she finds it hard to put these new ideas and methods into practice and return to her comfort zone and teaches as before.

Educational reform forces Lisa to change her roles, which brings about her unhappiness, lack of confidence, and low identity. These emotions have negative impact on her commitment, devotion, and teacher identity. With more practice, self-study, teacher training program, and support of colleagues, Lisa gradually picked up her confidence and constructed her roles as an English teacher.
Factors Influencing the Formation of Teacher Identity

Wenger (1998) suggested that central to identity is the meaning that one experiences, which is located in its negotiation: Our identity is defined both by the ways we experience ourselves through participation in communities and the ways we are reified by ourselves and others. Hence, teacher identity is continually constituted in practice. It is a dynamic interaction between the teacher and the context. Both personal and contextual factors influence the construction of transferred English teacher identity.

**Personal factors.** Personal factors have many components, such as subject knowledge, professional competence, experiences of teaching, personal style, motivation of teaching, etc. Among them, motivation of transferring to teach English, teaching beliefs, and English competence mostly influence the transferred English teacher’s identity construction.

“Of course I didn’t want to teach English. I have been teaching Chinese for so many years, and I know everything about teaching Chinese but I know nothing about teaching English. I was so worried” (Interview, 10/09/2015).

Low motivation and anxiety caused Lisa’s low teacher identity at the beginning.

“I haven’t read or spoken English for N years. I had to learn English just to pass the exam when in college. It’s so hard for me even to read aloud the words in the textbook. I was not sure about my English pronunciation. My tongue felt so stiff when pronouncing English words” (Journal, 09/12/2006).

As Lisa did not major in English when in college, her low English level caused her lack of confidence in classroom teaching. With the lack of training in ELT, she just transferred her ways of teaching Chinese to English class, making her students bored, which resulted in her class ranking the last in the final exam. This brought about Lisa’s lack of sense of accomplishment.

The transferred English teacher’s low motivation, low English competence, and lack of professional training directly caused her low teacher identity.

**Contextual factors.** Teacher identity can be shaped by school, reform, and political contexts. Contextual factors, such as teachers’ salary and social status, reform in education, administration, in-service teacher training, relationship with colleagues, etc., have great impact on teacher identity. For example, teachers working in a school with inquiry-based teaching culture would have different self-efficacy or sense of achievement from teachers affiliated with a school which is strongly exam-oriented.

“I used to teach Chinese, which was the staple subject in primary school and both parents and students pay great attention and efforts to it. But English has a subordinate position, especially in the rural area. Neither parents nor students pay much attention to it. They don’t think they will have any chance to travel abroad or use English. Students’ motivation in learning English is low, so I muddle along and do not have the least pressure in teaching” (Interview, 10/09/2015).

Social recognition of the significance of English and students’ motivation have effect on teacher’s commitment and identity.

Besides, support of the school, such as the leader’s recognition of the importance of English teaching, teaching facilities, and chances of attending in-service teacher development programs, etc., influence teacher identity. As a rural primary school, there was no language lab, no English books for students to read after class, and even no multi-media in classroom, which makes teaching English hard and the teacher had to depend on chalk and talk.
“When I ask the headmaster for permission of attending teacher-training program, he said that I had been teaching for many years and I’m so experienced that it’s unnecessary for me to attend all the teacher-training programs” (Interview, 10/09/2015).

Lack of support of the administration also caused the transferred teacher’s low motivation and low teacher identity.

Summary

Though Lisa was unwilling and unhappy to be transferred to teach English and she knew little about English learning and ELT from the very beginning of teaching English, she has always been loving teaching, loving her students, and has been greatly responsible for her classes. She has great ethic devotion and deep sense of belongings. Hence, Lisa has positive and high professional identity. Lisa’s attitude toward English teaching was from being causal to serious to highly responsible. She sets excellent examples of learning English to the students and she comes to be enthusiastic about teaching English, so she has very positive personal identity. On the other hand, as a graduate of Chinese major, Lisa’s English proficiency is far from satisfactory and her English knowledge and teaching beliefs needs improving, so Lisa’s expertise identity is quite low. Due to the poor conditions of the rural primary school and the lack of the support of the administration, her contextual identity is low. Both personal and contextual factors have great impact on teacher identity.

Proposals for Promoting Transferred Primary English Teacher Constructing Positive Teacher Identity

Teacher identity does not remain unchanged, but it is a process in which the teacher keeps constructing and changing his/her perception of roles based on the interaction between the personal factors and external factors. In the following, proposals will be put forward to promote transferred primary English teacher’s constructing positive teacher identity.

Suggestions to the Transferred English Teacher

Improving English competence. It is imperative for the transferred primary English teacher to improve her English competence which is a key component of teacher expertise identity. At the initial phase, the transferred teacher was not adapted to teaching English based on the ideas of The National English Curriculum due to low English proficiency and the lack of proper training as an English teacher. This inadaptation in the job, along with the teacher’s unwillingness and demotivation, caused great anxiety and unhappiness in teaching, and therefore low level of sense of achievement and low teacher identity. Hence, firstly, the transferred teacher should accept the fact of being transferred to teach English and face the challenges courageously. Secondly, the transferred teacher must improve her English competence by making use of the numerous English learning resources from the Internet and magazines. All English teachers are supposed to have a sound command of English, as subject knowledge lays a solid foundation for a teacher’s teaching. To serve a better model of the students, the teacher needs to pay special attention to the pronunciation and intonation and oral English. Thirdly, by attending the in-service teacher training programs, the teacher can renew her teaching beliefs and reform her teaching. She can learn from the experts, the peers, and colleagues in the English teaching and research group. In this way, she can promote expertise identity.
Promoting teaching by reflective teaching. Wallace (1991) put forward a reflective model of teacher professional development. A teacher’s professional development involves language development, learning, practice, and reflection. With the ever-deepening understanding of teaching and learning and with the ever-changing needs of the society, of education, of students, and of the teaching requirements, a teacher must keep on learning, practicing, and reflection so as to keep up with the moving target of professional competence. Both individual and collaborative reflection will help the teacher have better understanding of the problems in teaching and therefore explore solutions, which will stimulate creative teaching and achieve better effects.

Firstly, the transferred English teacher needs to reflect the differences between teaching English and the subjects she taught before in perspective of subject knowledge, students’ different attitude and strategies in learning English, and the different ways of teaching English. With the teacher’s own progress in English and teaching methods, English teaching will become more effective. Secondly, the transferred English teacher needs to reflect daily lessons before, during, and after the class by taking notes or writing journals. She may alternatively choose different focus for reflection from the questions about teaching to questions about students. Then she can change her teaching based on reflection and students’ feedback. Besides, the transferred English teacher can reflect her teaching by learning from other teachers, such as talking with peers, observing others’ teaching, and cooperating with other teachers. Teacher development programs can also prompt teacher’s reflection.

Higher English level and deeper reflection of teaching make the transferred English teacher more confident in teaching English and promote expertise identity and happiness in the teaching profession.

Suggestions to the Institutions

Better environment to support English teaching in primary schools. More support from the education administration and school helps to promote teacher identity. The leaders of the primary schools must recognize the importance of teaching English and the status of English teacher. More financial support must be given to provide better and more modern facilities for teaching English, such as multi-media, English reading materials, etc. Better assessment of teaching is needed to encourage the transferred English teachers who need more of the leaders’ recognition and care. And more chances should be especially given to the transferred English teachers to attend in-service teacher development programs to promote professional development.

Community of teacher learning and practice shall be founded to help transferred English teachers learn, teach, and reflect collaboratively. Teacher learning community can be formed with the English teachers of the school and with peers from other schools and experts from higher education. Experts of teaching English can be invited not only to give lectures to help the transferred English teacher renew the teaching beliefs, but more importantly to diagnose the teacher’s classroom teaching and give timely and practical help.

Improving the quality of in-service teacher training program. In-service teacher training program should be more trainee-oriented and practice-oriented, i.e., the transferred teachers’ needs should be first carefully examined by questionnaire or interviews and then curriculum can be designed based on their needs. The curriculum should focus on tackling the teachers’ practical problems in teaching. A problem-based timetable which involves the trainee’s reflection, inquiry, experience, and collaboration is recommended. Topics which the teachers are highly concerned, such as how to integrate the ideas from The National English Curriculum into
classroom teaching, how to analyze the teaching materials and design the lessons, how to teach vocabulary & reading, how to teach listening & speaking, story-based teaching, and so on, are to be focused. Theories of ELT and the latest development of teaching English will be elaborated with the classroom teaching by the experts. Guided by the experts, collaboratively reflecting teaching with the peers, the transferred teacher will practice again and reform the teaching gradually, and hence, promote confidence and positive identity formation.

**Conclusion**

Teacher identity has great significance for teacher’s professional development, teacher’s attitude toward educational reform, as well as teaching effect. The transferred primary English teacher has a strong professional and personal identity but a weak expertise and contextual identity, due to the low level of English competence, poor conditions of the rural primary school, and the lack of the support of the administration. Hence, the transferred teacher needs to improve her English competence and teaching by reflection and autonomous learning, while the institutions need to provide better environment to support English teaching in primary schools and improve in-service teacher training program, which will greatly promote the transferred English teacher’s identity.

**References**


