
Complexities of Identity Formation: A Narrative Inquiry of an EFL Teacher

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This article explores teachers' identity formation through a narrative inquiry of the professional identity of an EFL teacher, Minfang, in the People's Republic of China. Drawing on Wenger's (1998) social theory of identity formation as a dual process of identification and negotiation of meanings, it examines the lived experience of Minfang as an EFL learner and EFL teacher throughout his 6 years of teaching, the processes that were involved as he struggled with multiple identities, the interplay between reification and negotiation of meanings, and the institutional construction and his personal reconstruction of identities. The stories of Minfang highlighted the complex relationships between membership, competence, and legitimacy of access to practice; between the appropriation and ownership of meanings, the centrality of participation, and the mediating role of power relationships in the processes of identity formation.

Teachers' professional identity is considered a critical component in the sociocultural and sociopolitical landscape of the classroom and in teachers' professional development (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). In the field of TESOL, although research on teacher cognition, teacher knowledge, teacher learning, and teacher development has burgeoned in the last two decades, only a very small number of studies have focused on teacher identity (see, e.g., Duff & Uchida, 1997; Morgan, 2004; and Pavlenko, 2003). A review of the literature in this area suggests that relevant studies converge on three major issues. The first issue is the multidimensionality or multifaceted nature of professional identity and the relationships between these dimensions or facets. Although researchers seem to agree that professional identities are multidimensional or multifaceted, they hold opposing views with regard to whether the "sub-identities" (Mishler, 1999, p. 8) should or could be "harmonized" and "well balanced" (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004, p. 122) or whether the construction of identity is a "continuing site of struggle" between conflicting identities (MacLure, 1993, p. 313; see also Lampert, 1985; Samuel & Stephens, 2000).

The second issue is the relationship between the personal and social dimensions of identity formation. Most studies emphasize the personal dimensions, focusing on self-reflection on who one is, what one wants to become, and teachers' personal practical knowledge (Antonek, McCormick & Donato, 1997). However, a number of researchers have pointed out the importance of the professional context, which is part of the broader sociocultural and political context, in shaping teacher identity (Duff & Uchida, 1997; He, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c; Reynolds, 1996).

The third issue, which is closely related to the second, is the relationship between agency and structure in identity formation. Coldron and Smith (1999) stress the importance of agency over social structure and argue that the choices that teachers make constitute their professional identities. On the other hand, Moore, Edwards, Halpin, & George (2002) argue that teachers' active location in social space can be undermined by policies or institutions that require conformity, which could marginalize their positionings in that space.

Relatively little attention, however, has been given to understanding the processes of identity formation, the interplay between these processes and the identities constituted as teachers position themselves. In this article, I explore the complex processes of teacher identity formation through a narrative inquiry of the professional identity of an EFL teacher, Minfang,¹ in the People's Republic of China. Drawing on Wenger's (1998) social theory of identity formation, I examine Minfang's lived experience of Minfang as an EFL learner and teacher throughout his 6-year teaching career, the processes that were involved as he struggled with multiple identities, the interplay between reification and negotiation of meanings, and the institutional construction and his personal reconstruction of identities.

METHODOLOGY: NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF IDENTITY FORMATION

The investigation of Minfang's identity formation as a teacher was conducted through a narrative inquiry. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) refer to teachers' professional identity in terms of "stories to live by" (p. 4). According to them, stories provide a narrative thread that teachers draw on to make sense of their experience and themselves. As Beijaard et al.

¹ To protect the real identity of the EFL teacher, Minfang, all personal names, and names of institutions are fictitious. The place of origin of Minfang was also deliberately vague. This does not in any way affect the authenticity of the stories, however. The author wishes to thank Minfang for sharing his moving stories with her.

(2004) point out, "Through storytelling, teachers engage in narrative 'theorizing' and, based on that, teachers may further discover and shape their professional identity resulting in new or different stories" (p. 121). Minfang's narrative was constructed and reconstructed over a period of 6 months. It started with face-to-face storytelling when we met at a conference and was continued and reshaped through Minfang's reflective diaries which he wrote for himself and shared with me. These reflections were further reshaped and enriched as I responded to his diaries by sharing my own experiences and probing for more information. Finally, we had intensive face-to-face conversations over a period of one week during which Minfang relived the stories that he had told. During this period, we met four times for about 4 hours each time.

The analysis of the data were conducted in the following manner. First, the data were sorted chronologically from his childhood learning experience to his last year of teaching before he left for further studies. Second, the data were sorted according to the identity conflicts that Minfang experienced. For example, the conflicts he experienced as an EFL learner and as an EFL teacher were sorted and the relationships between these conflicts were analysed. This process involved reorganizing the flashbacks that he used as he explained the psychological struggles he experienced when he was a learner and a teacher. Finally, the data were analyzed according to the framework of the dual process of identity formation proposed by Wenger (1998), that is, identification and negotiability of meanings. In particular, the following aspects are examined: forms and sources of reification, participation and nonparticipation in reification, negotiability and nonnegotiability of meanings, and participation and nonparticipation in the negotiation of meanings. Again, the relationship between the processes was examined.

In the rest of this article, I present Wenger's framework and a brief outline of the ELT landscape in China in which Minfang's stories were situated and interpreted. Next, I analyse and then discuss the stories.² This article concludes by showing how the interplay of identification and negotiation of meanings shapes teacher identity and highlighting the centrality of participation in both processes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE DUAL PROCESS OF IDENTITY FORMATION

One of the most powerful theories of identity formation, which illuminates the three major issues of teacher identity research outlined

² The excerpts from the written narratives by Minfang will be presented verbatim so as to retain the original flavor. The conversations were conducted in Cantonese and every effort was made to keep the English translation as close to Cantonese as possible.

earlier, is that proposed by Wenger (1998). In Wenger's framework, one's identity does not lie only in the way one talks or thinks about oneself, or only in the way others talk or think about one, but in the way one's identity is lived day-to-day. Wenger proposes that identities are formed amid the "tension between our investment in the various forms of belonging and our ability to negotiate the meanings that matter in those contexts" (p. 188). Therefore, identity formation is a dual process of *identification* and *negotiation of meanings*. By identification, he means the investment of self in building associations and differentiations. Identification is reificative: We identify, or are being identified, as belonging to socially organized categories, roles, and so on.³ It is also participative: It is the lived experience of belonging that constitutes who we are. Therefore, identification is both relational and experiential.

Identification

Wenger (1998) proposes three modes of belonging as the sources of identification: *engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment*. Engagement in practice is a powerful source of identification in that it involves investing ourselves in what we do as well as in our relations with other members of the community. It is through relating ourselves to other people that we get a sense of who we are; it is through engaging in practice that we find out how we can participate in activities and the competence required.

Another source of identification is imagination. Imagination is a process of relating ourselves to the world beyond the community of practice in which we are engaged and seeing our experience as located in the broader context and as reflective of the broader connections. Imagination is "the production of images of the self and images of the world that transcend engagement" (Wenger, 1998, p. 177). However, imagination, Wenger observes, can also lead to stereotyping when practice is not fully understood and when overgeneralizations are made on the basis of specific practices.

The third source of identification is alignment. It is a process in which

³ Wenger's concept of *reification* refers to giving concrete form to something which is abstract. For example, the blindfolded woman holding a scale is a reification of *justice*; the award of a certificate to an individual at the end of a course is a reification of the learning experience that this particular individual has gone through. As Wenger points out, reification is a process in which "aspects of human experience and practice are congealed into fixed forms and given the status of object" (p. 59). In other words, through reification the meanings produced by our experience are projected and concretized into an independent existence. (For a detailed exposition of the concept of reification, see Wenger, 1998, pp. 58–62, 287.)

participants in a community become connected by bringing their actions and practices in line with a broader enterprise. It is through alignment that the identity of a large group such as an institution becomes the identity of its participants. Alignment allows us to see the effectiveness of our actions beyond our own engagement. It involves power and, as such, it is often achieved through a complex interplay of compliance and allegiance. Wenger (1998) points out that alignment achieved purely through coercion and oppression not only affects our identities but also leads to dissociation and alienation.

Negotiation of Meanings

The other process of identity formation is the negotiation of meanings that are defined in the processes of identification. The negotiability of meanings, according to Wenger (1998), determines the extent to which one is able to contribute to and shape the meanings in which one is invested; it is therefore fundamental to identity formation. Meanings are produced in the process of participation and they compete for the definition of events, actions, and so forth. Some meanings have more currency than others because of the different relations of power between those who produced them (see also Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Their relative values, however, are subject to negotiation. People claim ownership over the meanings produced in the sense of being able to use, modify, and appropriate them as their own. Ownership of meanings is increased if many people participate in the negotiation process. Wenger refers to the processes in which the value of meanings is determined as the “economies of meanings” (p. 197). Wenger points out that the inability to negotiate and claim ownership of meanings, often because of asymmetrical power relations, can create an identity of nonparticipation and marginality. The appropriation of meanings can alienate those who produced the original meanings when they find themselves unable to reclaim the meanings they produced.

In a community of practice, engagement in the negotiation of meanings involves the production and adoption of meanings: The two must go together. Members whose meanings are consistently rejected and whose experiences are considered irrelevant, and hence not accepted as a form of competence, will develop an identity of marginality.

Wenger’s theory of identity formation just outlined provides a powerful framework for exploring the major issues delineated at the beginning of this article and for making sense of the lived complexity of teachers’ professional identity formation. In the following section, I present a narrative inquiry of Minfang’s professional identity formation.

A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF MINFANG'S IDENTITY FORMATION

EFL Landscape in China: Deaf-and-dumb English and Communicative Language Teaching

Since China adopted an open door economic policy in 1978, the dramatic increase in the need to use English in face-to-face interactions with foreigners threw into question the prevalent EFL teaching methodologies at the time. These methodologies consisted of a combination of Chinese traditions of learning, such as intensive study and recitation of texts, and western influences, including grammar-translation, extensive and intensive reading, linguistic analysis, and the study of literary texts (Burnaby & Sun, 1989). University graduates were found to be highly competent in writing and grammar, but poor in speaking and listening. In 1986, the then-State Education Commission (now the Ministry of Education) conducted a national survey in 15 provinces and cities, and the findings revealed that most middle-school graduates found it hard to converse in simple English even after 900 hours of learning (Liu, 1995). The term *deaf-and-dumb English* [*lungya yingyu*] has been used to describe the English taught in schools and universities in China.

To address the problem, a large number of native speakers of English have been recruited since the eighties from the West to teach English, mainly in universities, and they have been referred to as *foreign experts*. Communicative language teaching (CLT) was introduced to China in this context and taken on board initially by a small team of professors who produced a textbook series based on this approach, called *Communicative English for Chinese Learners*. In 1980, the series became part of the State Education Commission's (later the Ministry of Education) 5-year plan for producing higher education foreign language curriculum materials, and the textbook series was further developed jointly with the British Council and a number of ELT specialists from the West acting as advisors. In 1985, the Ministry of Education recommended it for nationwide adoption. This series has won numerous awards at national and provincial levels.

The adoption of CLT in China was highly controversial at the time. Questions were raised about the appropriateness of a methodology rooted in Western cultures for Chinese learners with different cultural backgrounds. In some universities, CLT was vigorously promoted and the prevailing methodologies were lumped under the term *traditional method* (TM), as opposed to CLT which was considered a new method and approach. It was in the ELT context just described that Minfang's lived experience of EFL learning and teaching was situated.

Minfang's EFL Learner Identities: Social and Educational

Minfang was born in a poor village in a minority region on the eve of China's open door economic policy in the midseventies. His family was originally from Guangdong but his father, a medical professor, was posted to this region during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) for re-education by peasants. Like most people in China, the family went through a great deal of hardship; resources for living and education were scarce.

Minfang's father was very strict with his two children. From a very young age, Minfang and his sister had to finish tasks such as practicing Chinese calligraphy, reciting classical Chinese poems, doing their multiplication tables, and copying the English alphabet before they were allowed to have their meals. They worked very hard, and they were both top students in the province's best school. In Minfang's parents' eyes, going to university was the only way to escape poverty. Learning English was highly valued because it offered the possibility of going overseas, which was generally referred to as getting *gold-plated*.⁴ Therefore, his parents were delighted when Minfang was admitted to Nanda, a prestigious university in the Guangdong province that has a strong reputation for its English language teaching.

Minfang's first year at Nanda was a "painful" experience. First of all, he spoke a dialect that, although mutually intelligible with standard Cantonese, made him feel as though he sounded like a country bumpkin to the city folks in Guangzhou. His peers nicknamed him Brother Fang after a TV character who was a caricature of an immigrant from a poor inner region living off his relatives in an affluent city. His classmates made fun of him by mimicking the way he spoke and acted. He felt that not only was his English poor, but his communication style was also different. He wrote in his narrative, "Most of the students from Guangzhou were very talkative and communicative, using 'sandwiched English' in their daily conversation, that is, code-switching between Cantonese and English in class. Compared with them, I was an inert and quiet country bumpkin who was ignorant of this cosmopolitan fad." He was scared of going to class because he could not follow the teacher's instructions. For the first 3 months, the teachers constantly reminded him that he was on the wrong page. He was sent to evening classes in the language laboratory tailored for students with poor listening and speaking skills. Despite his good knowledge of English grammar and good written English, he was stigmatized as the "deaf-and-dumb English

⁴ Getting gold-plated (*dujin*) is a Chinese expression commonly used to refer to people getting qualifications overseas and thereby adding value to themselves.

learner” with “special needs.” Nevertheless, he embraced the opportunity because he had never been in a language laboratory before, and he considered it a golden opportunity to improve his English.

Reconstructing Learner Identity

Minfang worked hard to be accepted by the learner community at Nanda. He started socializing in the local Cantonese community and learning to speak standard Cantonese, code-mixing and picking up Cantonese slang, which took about a year.

After settling into the Cantonese culture, I found myself mingling very well with the community; my roommates lending me English magazines and my classmates helping me with my pronunciation. The communicative English teacher (that is, the teacher responsible for teaching CLT) even sent a bag of crackers to my dormitory hearing that I did not know the English word ‘crackers.’ While enjoying the crackers with me, my roommates urged me to tell the teacher that I did not know the word ‘watermelon’ next time. Although they did it jokingly, I was happy that they *talked to me like an insider*, which made me feel affiliated and assured. In the rest of the year, therefore, *I could completely concentrate on my studies* and I even won the first prize in the pronunciation and intonation contest at the end of the year. (Emphasis added)

Appropriating and Reclaiming Meanings of EFL Learning

Investing his self in his relations with his peers constituted one aspect of Minfang’s identity. The other equally important aspect was investing his self in what he did as an EFL learner. Nanda offered two parallel courses in the first year, Intensive English, which was intended to help students master vocabulary, grammar and syntax, and CLT, which aimed to develop students’ communicative abilities. However, the CLT course took up seven lessons a week, whereas Intensive English took up only four lessons.

Although Minfang did very well in English, he was not able to identify his learning with the CLT approach much celebrated in his university. He described the teaching style as “soft and unrealistic” and was skeptical about the basic assumptions of CLT. It was “soft” because the linguistic points were not made entirely explicit in the communicative activities. Students could finish a host of activities without knowing how these activities were related to the language system and what was learned. It was “unrealistic” because it required the teacher to have pragmatic competence. Minfang pointed out that most of his teachers had never interacted with native speakers of English, had never gone overseas, and had never found themselves in a situation where they had to use English for

daily interaction. It was therefore unrealistic to expect them to evaluate the appropriateness of utterances and communication strategies. Moreover, he felt that these activities carried underlying cultural assumptions which required students to assume different personae if they were to participate fully. For example, instantaneous oral participation in class required students to express opinions spontaneously without careful thinking. For Minfang, this activity went against the Chinese culture, which attaches a great deal of importance to making thoughtful remarks and not babbling before one has thought things through.

Neither Minfang nor his classmates felt that they had learned much in the CLT lessons. Minfang defined learning as being able to understand what he was reading and doing and to clarify what he did not understand. He liked Intensive English which required rigorous text and grammatical analyses and learning new vocabulary. These learning tasks made him feel that he had learned something solid. He wrote,

I loathed the communicative activities with loud students huddling together and performing mini-dramas. The teacher told us that the activities were designed to help us develop communicative competence, but I just could not understand why we should stay together [sitting in groups] and call out loudly to learn.

For him, the CLT classroom was “a battlefield” in which the teacher fired questions at the students and the students had to shield themselves with answers. He added, “I like to learn individually and enjoy the *autonomy* of being myself. On the surface I did not defy CLT and [was] actively engaged in the activities, but *I knew what I liked and disliked*” (emphasis added).

CLT as “Cruel Language Teaching”

Minfang had a clear idea of how he would learn best, but he also knew that he needed to cope with the demands of the CLT teacher. His coping strategy was to distinguish between what he called the “regular” and the “peripheral” time slots. “Regular” time slots were periods of time when he was able to concentrate on his work, such as between 8 and 10 o’clock in the evening, and he spent most of this time on Intensive English assignments and reading English novels. “Peripheral” time slots were times before meals and going to bed when he worked on his CLT assignments.

In the second year of his university studies, the examination pressure began to mount. Minfang and his classmates felt that CLT tasks got in the way of preparing for the examination. They started skipping CLT assignments and cutting corners. The teacher reprimanded them and, as a penalty, gave them more assignments. For 3 months before the examination, they had to finish their homework in the bathrooms because the

lights in their dormitories went out at 11 o'clock in the evening. Minfang wrote in his diary, "Huddling in the stinking place, we cursed CLT and called it Cruel Language Teaching because it intensified our pain and sufferings."

In-Class and Out-of-Class Learning: Intensive English Versus CLT

Minfang also made a clear distinction between learning inside and outside the classroom. According to him, EFL learning during class time should focus on understanding the building blocks of a sentence and how they are configured to sound logical and meaningful. This understanding laid the foundation for a student's self-learning outside the classroom. He also believed strongly that he could develop communicative competence through daily interaction with his friends. He felt that too much valuable class time was spent on the CLT textbook and that students could have learned more using other resources outside the classroom. He wrote,

Although I did not understand the term 'communicative competence' and what it implied at the time, *I knew that only hard work and serious learning mattered*, and the so-called interpersonal [communication] skills were developed from my integration into a community of culture and practice. (Emphasis added)

Minfang and his classmates actively sought opportunities for learning in the social space in which they were located. Minfang used the analogy of looking for food and feeding. He said,

If I had the space, I would be able to look for food. They kept feeding me, and did not allow any freedom for me to choose what I wanted to learn In fact, those classmates who were able to learn very well were the ones who did not take the CLT course seriously; they looked for alternative ways of learning.

For example, the more well-off students read magazines and watched English TV programs from Hong Kong. Poorer students, like Minfang, listened to the radio. Every evening at 6 o'clock, Minfang and his classmates would run to the classroom to catch the BBC news because the wireless reception there was better. Minfang always made sure he was fully prepared for the listening task. He read all the Chinese news articles and listened to the international news on the Central People's Broadcasting Station in China so that he had an idea of the most important international news stories and could therefore follow the news in English. After the 6 o'clock news, he and his classmates would stay in the classroom and listen to the same news broadcast again at 7 o'clock. They also paired up with each other for campus walks every evening during which they had conversations in English for about an hour.

When Minfang's English improved, he was most unhappy that his teachers ascribed his improvement to CLT. He wrote,

The teachers always boasted how much Communicative English had helped us improve our linguistic competence, as well as pragmatic competence and affective competence,⁵ but I knew that linguistic competence was achieved through hard work after class rather than [through] the communicative buzz in class. . . . My excellent academic achievement . . . reinforced my belief that TM [Traditional Method] is no worse than CLT.

Minfang's EFL Teacher Identities: A Genuine Product of CLT

After obtaining his first degree at Nanda, Minfang was offered a teaching post there. The appointment, however, was highly controversial. Minfang did not make the highest grade, though he had received an outstanding graduate of the year medal. He did not have a master's degree, which was a new university requirement for teaching. He was told that there had been heated debate about his eligibility for the position. He felt that the stigma of a "deaf-and-dumb student with special needs" from a minority region was still attached to him. Many senior teachers told him that he should be grateful for the appointment and that "he must behave himself." He was also told that he was a "genuine product of CLT" and there was a strong expectation that he would be a good CLT teacher. Ashamed of his "disgraceful" past and grateful to his teachers, he tried to live up to their expectations. He wrote,

From then on, I stuck the label 'a genuine CLT product' on myself to conceal my disgraceful identity . . . and to sound as though I 'fit' very well into the culture of the department. . . . However, I still had an implicit belief that TM worked better.

The "Deaf-and-Dumb Student" and the Marginal EFL Teacher

At Nanda, the CLT component was considered the core and was taught by the best teachers. All the other areas, such as grammar, vo-

⁵ In the Foreword to the *Communicative English for Chinese Learners* textbook series, the author of the series proposed that communicative competence in English consists of three component parts: linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, and cognitive and affective capacity (which Minfang referred to as "pragmatic competence"). The author argued for the inclusion of this component on the ground that language is best learned when it is a medium for learning some other subject or an exchange for affective or humanistic purposes. Therefore, she argued, acquiring a language and increasing and refining one's cognitive and affective capacity are intrinsically concurrent and contribute to each other's development. Minfang explained his interpretation of *affective competence* as "the ability to show your feeling, be it joy or sorrow, appreciation or criticism, praise or complaint." In his teaching, he tried to create opportunities for the students to express their feelings because he felt that the emotional aspect of student learning was very important.

cabulary, intensive reading, and listening, were considered auxiliary. Among them, listening was ranked least important and usually given to new teachers. Even the pay of the listening teacher was the lowest. In his first year of teaching, Minfang was assigned to teach listening skills. "It was made very clear that I had to improve my English proficiency, my teaching skills, everything. That's why I was given the teaching of listening. I had to practice [my skills], and when I proved to be okay, I could be promoted," Minfang recalled in his written narrative. Therefore, when he was teaching, he cautiously monitored his utterances and made sure that he did not make any grammatical mistakes so that his students would not consider him to be professionally incompetent.

Minfang found that the listening activities in the textbooks were structurally oriented, and he thought that in the spirit of CLT, he should add many interactive activities, such as morning reports, song dictations, and so on. He was also concerned that if his students had poor examination results, he would not only lose face but also his position. However, his students did not respond well to what he thought would be "interesting communicative activities." They described his listening lessons as "concentration camps," which required them to do listening tasks for 90 minutes with no breathing space. Eventually they complained to his division head. Minfang received a report from the head of his department which stated that he should adjust the workload given to students and improve on his teaching techniques. He recalled, "I was desperate and I blamed it on CLT."

On getting such feedback, he decided to revert to what he referred to as the TM of teaching, with plenty of exercises on studying and reciting texts, and listening to and transcribing news excerpts and audio novels. He said, "My behavior matched my beliefs for the first time since I began teaching." At the end of the year, two of the three classes he taught ranked first and second respectively in the examination among all the first-year classes. Although he was told that the differences in scores among the classes were statistically not significant, he still felt very proud of himself. This further reinforced his belief in his approach to language learning, which he described as the "hard learning approach."

A Personal Struggle to Construct EFL Teacher Identity

Reflecting on his first year of teaching, Minfang wrote,

It was a personal struggle to construct my identity as a teacher in a well-regarded English department in China . . . I consciously and probably tactically buried my former identity as a crippling student.⁶ My age,

⁶ By "crippling," Minfang meant the stigma of being "deaf and dumb."

experience, educational background, and family situation all came into play in my first year, blurring the boundary of being an authoritative teacher and a humble student.

He did not know how to deal with the intimate relationship with his friends, 1 year or 2 years his junior, who had now become his students. They made fun of him and greeted him cheekily as *Lin Laoshi* (Teacher Lin) in his dialect and called him by his nickname, Brother Fang. Senior teachers criticized him for being too friendly with the students and reminded him that he was no longer a student but a teacher. To avoid being criticized as *gao guanxi* (building relationships) which, in this context, means playing a popularity game with the students, he tried to put on a stern face even when his students smiled at him, because he thought that smiling too much would undermine his authority. He stopped asking his students to call him by his English name, Matthew. Despite his attempts to distance himself from his students, at the end of his first year of teaching, he became known as the popular listening teacher. However, Minfang got no personal satisfaction from this positive reference. He did not want to encourage any discussion in case his “disgraceful past” was inadvertently revealed in the course of the discussion. Nor did he want to be a popular teacher, because in Chinese culture, a teacher who is popular with students is perceived as a teacher of little substance and one who has nothing but *guanxi* (relationships) to win the students’ hearts. He found working in a hierarchical institution oppressive with so many powerful people above him. During his first 2 years of teaching, Minfang never once felt that he was a member of the English Department.

The CLT Teacher and the Demolition of the TM Approach

In his third year of teaching, Minfang was assigned to teach the CLT course. Because CLT was considered the core course in the English program, this assignment played a critical role in Minfang’s identity formation. For the first time, he felt that he was fully accepted as a member of the Nanda staff. This identification, however, did not entail a change in his beliefs about TM and CLT. When he was using the CLT textbook, he incorporated what he thought was good for the students. For example, after teaching skimming and scanning skills in reading comprehension, he would use the same piece of text as a springboard for teaching linguistic structures and vocabulary. The students welcomed this approach. However, after an unannounced visit by an internal inspector, his TM approach was completely demolished.

As a quality assurance mechanism, the university appointed senior professors from different departments to act as internal inspectors and

conduct lesson observations. Minfang was under the impression that the inspectors would give him advance notice before visiting his class. He was traumatized when one of them appeared at the back of his classroom one day. He had not been feeling well the day before and was ill prepared. He initially planned to ask his students to do some silent reading in class. However, he could not possibly do that in the presence of an inspector, nor could he ask the inspector to come back another day. His mind went blank. All he could see was the inspector, crossing his arms, putting on a stern face and sizing him up.

The class that he was teaching was quiet, and he had not had much success in getting them to participate in class. He thought it would be disastrous if he used oral activities and the students did not respond. He said, "At the time, my understanding was that if the class was not active, if nobody responded to you, how could you call it communicative language teaching?" So he decided to adopt an avoidance strategy. He started with reading comprehension instead and hoped that by the time he had finished the part on reading for gist, the inspector would have gone. But when he had finished that part of the lesson, the inspector showed no sign of leaving. To avoid oral activities, he used the same reading passage for intensive reading comprehension and explained the linguistic structures and vocabulary in detail. He stumbled and sweated. At the end of the lesson, the inspector gave him a piece of paper full of comments and said sternly, "Young man, CLT should not be taught like this. You have to work hard on this. Don't ruin the reputation of the CLT course." Minfang was horrified. He read the inspector's comments but he could not understand a word.

After the round of inspections was completed, the head of the department said at a departmental meeting that if teachers did not teach CLT properly when they were inspected, the reputation of the department would be ruined. He cited an example of how CLT was taught, and Minfang knew that he was talking about his lesson. He could not look the head of the department in the eye and he was convinced that he would be fired. After this traumatic experience, Minfang decided to stick to CLT and follow the textbook doggedly. He was afraid that an inspector might show up at any time. The burden of ruining the reputation of CLT and bringing shame to the department was too great for him to shoulder. Yet, in his heart of hearts, Minfang believed that something was missing. He recalled his learning experience as a student and how frustrated he was when the teacher did not make explicit the linguistic objectives of the activities and he was left groping in the dark. He knew that his students would feel the same way.

Minfang was caught between his allegiance to his institution and his moral responsibility to his students, both being part of what it meant to

him to be a teacher at Nanda. He felt that he was pulled one way or the other depending on where the pressure came from. After the inspections were finished, he felt that he had more space to explore methodologies suited to the needs and wishes of his students. When his division head monitored his teaching and pointed out that he focused too much on linguistic structures, he would lean more toward the communicative activities.

The “Model CLT Teacher” and the Custodian of CLT

In his fourth year of teaching, Minfang was selected as the “model teacher of CLT” because of his high student evaluation scores. Colleagues from his department as well as from other departments thronged to observe his teaching with or without advance notice. To live up to this award, he abandoned his eclectic approach and stuck firmly to CLT. In the same year, Minfang was given the responsibility for new staff induction. As part of the induction, he talked about the success of his department in CLT teaching. He pointed out the importance of using the CLT textbook series, highlighting that it was developed with the help of the British Council and a number of big names in the field of English language teaching, and that it had won numerous awards. This enhanced his identification as a member of the department. He drew an analogy between his role and the role of the eldest son of a traditional Chinese family who explained the family’s traditions and secret skills that were passed on from generation to generation,⁷ and how all members of the family had to strive to preserve the reputation, the tradition, and the skills of the family. In his fifth year, he became the deputy director of the Teaching Research Office (*jiaoyanzhi*) and was made the director the following year. He was also appointed the course leader of CLT and the coordinator of a project.

Engagement of this nature was a source of identification with the institution for Minfang. He invested his self in building up the institution’s reputation and inducting new teachers into the pedagogical practices that the institution advocated. He also invested in his relations with colleagues such that he saw himself and was seen as the custodian of CLT pedagogy. He said,

I was responsible for an office; even if I did not believe in what I was doing, I could not say so. I was representing the Office. . . . [What I said] would influence my audience, which could be . . . a hundred people if I was

⁷ According to the Chinese martial art legends, each family had developed a set of expert skills which would not be revealed to outsiders.

talking to the public. Your own beliefs are something personal, so is your psychological struggle. You have to behave responsibly. Therefore, I was very cautious about what I said.

He also felt that it would not have been possible for him to provide leadership if he did not embrace CLT as the official methodology.

His identification with the institution, which was both reificative and participative, did not entail a change in beliefs, however. Because of his official positions, Minfang became very cautious about disclosing his views about CLT. He was worried that he might be considered an outlaw by the authorities. He spelled out the following criteria when deciding on how frank he could be with his colleagues: social distance, professional relationship, formality of context, age, and experience. He would not disclose his views to his former teacher or to teachers who were older or more experienced than he was. Nor would he discuss his views if the conversation was less than informal, for example, a sit-down conversation in which his views were solicited. However, if the teacher was of his age or younger, less experienced, and he knew that he/she was simply venting his/her frustrations and that his words would not get back to the powers that be, he would empathize and disclose that he was not entirely in agreement with some of the pedagogical suggestions in CLT.

Theorizing Practical Knowledge and Reclaiming Meanings of EFL Teaching

As soon as Minfang settled into his teaching job after the first 3 years, he enrolled in a master's degree program in EFL teaching at Nanda to obtain the missing qualification for his appointment and completed it in his fourth year of teaching. The exposure to theories and models of English language teaching provided a different perspective on the conflicts that he had experienced during his 4 years of teaching. In particular, he found discussions of the misconceptions of CLT very useful. He realized that accuracy and fluency should not be seen as dichotomous, and that one was not supposed to be achieved at the expense of the other. Similarly, student-centeredness was not to be understood as the absence of teacher guidance.

He was relieved to see that he could actually defend some of his pedagogies that were based on his own learning experience rooted in Confucian learning culture. He also felt that he was able to see intuitive classroom practices in a theoretically principled way. For example, an understanding of the principles behind information gap activities enabled him to understand how inappropriate modifications of the activities might destroy their communicative purpose. An understanding of the difference between intensive and extensive reading enabled him to

use reading texts appropriately. He provided room for students to explore the linguistic structures for themselves without relinquishing his responsibility as a teacher to provide explicit explanations of these structures after the students had completed the task. He felt “more comfortable” about the eclectic approach that he had adopted.

The theoretical input from the master’s program enabled Minfang to theorize his personal practical knowledge, which empowered him to reclaim the meanings of EFL teaching. However, it did not empower him to do that in public. He said, “I was only a teacher with a Master’s degree. How could I assert my views in the midst of all the professors and teachers with PhDs?” With coercion being the dominant mode of alignment, Minfang taught according to what he felt “comfortable with” and what students responded well to only if he felt no external pressure to conform.

He narrated an episode in his sixth year of teaching that epitomized the conflict he had experienced. He was put in charge of preparing for the Ministry of Education’s quality assurance inspection of CLT and was appointed by the university to conduct a demonstration lesson to illustrate the principles of CLT. The pressure on him was enormous. He started to prepare the most detailed lesson he had ever planned according to the officially sanctioned methodology. The lesson was recorded in a studio and televised live in the department.

The demonstration lesson, in Minfang’s eyes, was a disaster. The students, highly excited under the spotlight, were over-responsive. He described the lesson as “unreal” and the experience as “traumatic.” He was disgusted by his “dual identity as a faked CLT practitioner and a real self [that] believed in eclecticism.” He felt that CLT had been elevated as “a religion” in his institution rather than an approach to learning.

At the end of his sixth year of teaching, he took leave to pursue a doctoral degree in the United Kingdom. Reflecting on his emotional journey, Minfang wrote,

The conflicts were not resolved until after I left the institution. Now that I am pursuing my doctoral degree in the U.K., and with two years of research study [behind me], I feel that I am more solid and I know what I am doing.

He began to question whether there was such a thing as the most suitable methodology, be it CLT, task-based learning, or some other methodology. He felt that the teacher’s lived experience in the classroom was the best guide for pedagogical decision-making. He remarked, “My understanding now is that no matter what methodology you use, you have to be humanistic. The essence of CLT is humanism. I do believe teaching is an integrated skill developed through experience, inspiration and passion.”

DISCUSSION

Minfang's stories show that identities are constituted by identification and negotiation of meanings, as Wenger (1998) points out. Identification is both reificative and participative. Reification involves inclusion as well as exclusion from membership in various communities. Membership is inseparable from competence. Central to the process of identification is participation as well as nonparticipation. As Freeman and Johnson (1998) point out, participation in the social practices and the sociocultural environments associated with teaching and learning is essential to learning how to teach. Participation is contingent on legitimacy of access to practice. Negotiation of meanings involves being able to shape and hence claim ownership of meanings that matter in the community. In other words, participation as well as nonparticipation in the negotiation of meanings is central to identity formation.

Membership, Competence, and Legitimacy of Access to Practice

Membership in a community consists of not just the reified markers of membership but more important, the competence that membership entails. As Wenger (1998) notes, the recognition of one's competence as valued by the community is an important source of identity formation. This competence encompasses knowing how to engage with other members, understanding the enterprise in which members are engaged, and sharing the mediating resources. When Minfang first joined Nanda, although his membership as a student of Nanda was reified through formal admission procedures, he was not fully accepted as a member of the learner community by his peers. Instead, the *othering* (Said, 1978) of Minfang through reifications such as a "deaf-and-dumb student with a special need" and "Brother Fang" indicated his marginality in the learner community. The marginality of membership was the result of an unequal power relationship, which was socioeconomic as well as symbolic. Because of the asymmetrical relationship between the economic powers of the inner and coastal regions in China (Hu, 2005), Minfang's previous learning experiences, despite his outstanding achievements in English, were rendered irrelevant; so was his mother tongue, a dialect of an inner region. The marginalization had a profound effect on Minfang's sense of self-worth and identity, which, as we have seen, kept surfacing throughout his teaching career.

To be fully recognized as a member of the community, he acquired the competence that defined this learner community through engaging

in the social discourse and activities, and aligning himself with the norms and expectations of its members. This included, among other things, being able to speak standard Cantonese, to code-mix, to use Cantonese slang, and most important of all, being proficient in English, particularly in spoken English. Minfang's outstanding achievement in English, the core competency on which the reputation of his department rested, was crucial to his recognition as a member of the learner community.

Similarly, the recognition of Minfang's competence in EFL teaching was a major source of identity formation. In his first 2 years of teaching, Minfang's identity of marginality in the EFL teaching community was largely shaped by the fact that the teaching community did not fully recognize his EFL teaching competence, as evidenced by his being assigned to teach listening skills, which were least valued, being reminded of his "disgraceful history" as a "deaf-and-dumb student," and being told that he was recruited as an exception to the rule and that he should be "grateful" for the appointment. It was not until he was given the responsibility to teach CLT, which was a recognition that he possessed core competence, that he began to identify himself, and felt that he was identified by others, as a full member of the department.

Closely linked with the concept of competence as a source of identity formation is the concept of legitimate access to practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) propose the concept of *legitimate peripheral participation* as an important form of learning in which learners are given access to practice without assuming full responsibility. Wenger (1998) further distinguishes between peripherality and marginality according to the trajectory of participation: Peripherality leads to full participation whereas marginality does not. Minfang's stories show that apart from the trajectory of participation, *legitimacy of access* to practice was critical in reshaping his identity as an EFL teacher. It encompasses not just being given legitimate access to participation but also *legitimizing access to practice*. For example, in his third year of teaching, even though Minfang was given legitimate access to Nanda's core practice, that is, the teaching of CLT, he tried to legitimate this access as well as his reification as a CLT teacher because of his identity as a former student in Nanda who did not make it to the top of his class. He tried to demonstrate that he possessed the necessary professional competence by aligning his practice with that sanctioned by the institution despite his reservations about it, and by obtaining a master's degree in TEFL, which was the required qualification.

Minfang's lived experience shows that there are two important sources of identity formation: The individual recognizes that he or she possesses competence that his or her community values, and the individual is given legitimacy of access to practice. These two sources are dialectically related. Recognition of competence valued by a community and legitimacy of access to practice are mutually constitutive.

Appropriating and Reclaiming Ownership of Meanings of EFL Learning

The ability to participate in the construction and negotiation of meanings, and to claim ownership of meanings is another crucial aspect of identity formation. Minfang's identity as an EFL learner was deeply rooted in his lived experience of learning at a time when resources were scarce and education was highly competitive. He had to grab every possible opportunity for learning. The learning strategies that he developed and his allocation of time and place for different types of learning tasks were all part of the education landscape, which is inseparable from the socioeconomic landscape at the time.

The identity conflicts that Minfang experienced as a learner could be attributed to the fact that the students and the teachers, or rather, the authorities at Nanda, defined the meanings of the learners' enterprise differently. For Minfang, developing a high level of English proficiency meant gaining a good understanding of the English language system through the intensive study of language structures, texts, and vocabulary. According to him, the learner should achieve this understanding under the teacher's guidance, which he believed was the most efficient and effective use of class time. The development of communication skills should take place outside of class time and could be managed perfectly well by the students on their own. Minfang defined the meaning of EFL learning as "hard work and serious learning," and he and his peers defined the meaning of CLT as "fun activities," which included oral participation, moving around in the classroom, and shouting at each other. However, their CLT teachers appropriated their experiences of learning EFL outside the classroom as the experiences of learning CLT in the classroom. This rendered Minfang's learning experiences and learning strategies irrelevant. The reification of Minfang as a *CLT product* by his teachers was an appropriation of Minfang's meanings of EFL learning. As Wenger (1998) observes, appropriation of meanings often leads to the alienation of the original producers of those meanings. In Minfang's stories, the alienation took the form of his, as well as his peers', nonparticipation in the CLT approach to learning.

Similarly, Minfang's participation in the act of teaching shaped his understanding that an EFL teacher does more than simply adopt officially sanctioned pedagogical approaches. He was constantly coerced, however, to relinquish this ownership and to align with the meanings defined by the institution. Even when he was given legitimate access to CLT, he played a minimal role in the negotiation of its meanings. The institution's appropriation of Minfang's meanings of EFL teaching through reifying him as a *model CLT teacher* led him to resist the CLT

approach. Minfang resisted alignment by coercion and reclaimed ownership of meanings by integrating TM into CLT when he was not under external pressure and being cautious about deciding to disclose his views on the institution's version of CLT.

Power and Economies of Meaning

The complex interplay of appropriating and reclaiming ownership of meanings between Minfang and his teachers could be explained by Wenger's (1998) concept of power and economies of meaning. CLT has higher currency than other ELT methods in China because the government has recognized it as the most valued approach to EFL learning. More important, such recognition, shaped by Western-dominated ELT discourse, has been supported by authoritative voices in the field of ELT. Minfang's resistance to appropriation took the form of othering CLT. Instead of trying to understand the theoretical assumptions underpinning CLT, Minfang reified his own approach as the TM, and he reified CLT as *cruel language teaching*. Hence, Minfang's identity as a *CLT product* never took root although he had won prizes in English. Neither did his identity as a *CLT teacher* despite his leadership positions in ELT. In fact, the more responsibilities he was given, the more he was under pressure to align with the goals of the institution and the less ownership he had of the meanings of what he was doing.

Studying for a master's degree provided Minfang the opportunity to understand the theoretical underpinnings of CLT and enabled him to theorize his personal practical knowledge. This blurred the imagined boundaries that he had previously drawn between his own pedagogical approaches, reified as TM and CLT, and broke down the imagined dichotomy. By *imagined boundaries* I mean boundaries that are brought into being through imagination as a mode of belonging (Wenger, 1998). Only when the imagined boundaries were broken down did Minfang begin to gain confidence in his own pedagogical strategies and feel empowered to adopt an eclectic approach. At the same time, he began to see the inadequacies of some of his pedagogical strategies and started to modify them. The sources of Minfang's empowerment were the possession of knowledge and a master's degree, both of which were valued by the EFL community. However, such empowerment, as we have seen, was not sufficient for Minfang to negotiate the meanings of EFL teaching and learning with the powers that be. In an institution with a clearly delineated hierarchy of power, the asymmetrical power relationship, which led to the nonnegotiability of the meanings of CLT, was a major reason why Minfang's identity as a CLT teacher never took root.

CONCLUSION: IDENTITY FORMATION AS PARTICIPATION

The narrative inquiry of Minfang's experiences as an EFL learner and teacher shows that teacher's identity formation is highly complex. Wenger's (1998) social theory of identity formation provided a powerful framework for making sense of the processes involved. Minfang's stories show that identity is relational as well as experiential, reificative as well as participative, and individual as well as social. The lived experiences of reifying oneself and having oneself reified as a member of a community constitute an important aspect of identification. The legitimate access to practice and the competence so developed constitute another crucial dimension of identity formation. This study further shows that identification involves not just being given legitimate access to practice but also legitimating one's access to practice as well as legitimating reifications, no matter whether these reifications are given by oneself or others. Both processes could be captured under the broader concept *legitimacy of access to practice*.

The process of identification interacts with the participation in negotiating meanings, that is, participation in negotiating meanings and sharing the ownership of meanings. Participation as well as nonparticipation in negotiating meanings is shaped by power relationships among members of a community. Being able to participate in the construction of meanings that matter in a community is just as important as being given legitimate access to practice through reification. In other words, participation is central to identity formation.

The interplay of identification and the negotiability of meanings could generate identity conflicts. These conflicts could lead to new forms of engagement in practice, new relations with members of the community, and new ownership of meanings. Or they could lead to identities of marginality, disengagement, and nonparticipation, as Minfang's stories showed. Teacher educators and teacher mentors must understand that the processes of identity formation are complex and that participation plays a central role in those processes so that teachers, especially new teachers, are afforded legitimacy of access to practice and opportunities for developing professional competence and having their competence recognized. Equally important, they must also understand that legitimacy of access to participation is often shaped by power relations in communities' social structures, which are inseparable from the broader sociopolitical contexts (see also Freeman & Johnson, 1998).

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