

# I Speak Chinese but I Am Teaching English: Exploring the Influence of Nonnative Speakership in the Construction of Language Teacher Identity

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**Abstract**—This research aims to explore how two Chinese English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers construct their professional identity as nonnative English teachers with the influence of the social factor – nonnativeness. It adopts a modern approach of identity that its formation is an ongoing process, and Wenger’s (1998) theory of identity that one acquires identity through the participation in various communities of practice. It is designed to be a qualitative study of two Chinese EFL teachers’ construction of teaching identity. The subjects negotiate the meaning of “teaching English” within various communities of practice. Findings suggest that the process of negotiation begins long before they enter their teaching career. And this process has been going through the whole process of identity construction. Findings also reveal a dual identity discursively constructed by the two subjects – both as an English teacher and learner. In addition, their nonnative speakership has played a significant role during the formation of teaching identity and has greatly influenced the way they teach. Finally, being nonnative can be advantageous in terms of language teaching.

**Index Terms**—nonnative speakership, communities of practice, professional identity

## I. INTRODUCTION

In language education, there has been a deeply rooted idea – the native speaker<sup>1</sup> fallacy (Phillipson, 1992), which argues that the most ideal language teacher is the native speaker of the target language. As a result, native speakers of English are more welcomed even when they don’t have teaching experience. In fact, many private language schools “prefer white only” (Shao, 2005) when hiring English language teachers and almost in all institutions native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) are better paid than nonnative English-speaking teachers, sometimes twice the salary (Yang, 2011).

In China, where most English teachers are nonnative English speaking teachers, it is of great significance, therefore, to explore how their nonnative speakership influences the way the teachers perceive themselves as nonnative English speaking teachers. It is with this intention that this research is conducted with the following research questions:

(1) *What is the professional identity constructed by the two subjects?*

(2) *How does nonnative speakership play a role in the construction of teaching identity?*

Identity, in modern times, is defined as what we know, what is foreign and what we choose to know, as well as how we know it (Wenger, 1998). It is the process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context (Gee, 2001). Norton (2000) adds in the aspect of “how a person understands possibilities for the future” when studying identity.

In other words, identity is not a fixed, stable, unitary, or internally coherent phenomenon but is multiple, shifting and in conflict. It is not context-free, either; it derives from individuals during the interaction with society (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & Johnson, 2005).

Gee’s (2001) proposes that, one might have a “core identity” but operates in multiple forms across different contexts (p. 99). This multifaceted nature of identity enables individuals to present different forms of self under different situations, as in Jackson’s (1981) classification<sup>2</sup> of identity. Professional identity is one of the presentations, is individuals’ presentation of self in the context of a specific profession.

Wenger (1998) describes the process of identity formation as developed within various communities of practice<sup>3</sup> (also known as CoP). He proposes that one constructs his/her identity when he/she participates in various communities of practice. When participating in the practices of these communities, one negotiates the meanings which contribute to

<sup>1</sup> Braj Kachru’s (1992) defined “native speakers of English” as speakers from six countries, namely, the UK, the US, Australia, Canada, Ireland and New Zealand. Speakers out of these countries are referred to nonnative English speakers.

<sup>2</sup> Based on the situated nature of identity, Jackson (1981) identified several types of identities: associational identities; kinship identities; peer identities; recreational identities; religious identities; professional identities, etc.

<sup>3</sup> A community of practice, is a group of people who share an interest, a craft, and/or a profession (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

one's learning. Identity, then, is a way of talking about how learning changes whom we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of the communities.

Teachers' experiences in these communities, classroom and school environment, educational policy, as well as other social factors, can all have a great impact on the formation and maintenance of one's teaching identity (see Olsen, 2008). Conversely, the teaching identity constructed within the professional communities, poses an impact on the teacher's participation and engagement in the communities.

To sum up, one's identity is constructed through his/her engagement in various communities of practice. Then, identities formed through participation within various communities of practice are expressed in discourse, which consist of a system of beliefs, attitudes and values that exist within particular social and cultural practices (Danielewicz, 2001; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & Johnson, 2005).

In other words, identities constructed in the practices can be revealed through discourse in one's narratives. Based on this framework and the qualitative nature of the two research questions addressed previously, this study is designed to be a twin case study of two Chinese EFL teachers' construction of professional identity. It aims to explore the role of nonnativeness in the formation of their teaching identity.

By answering these two questions, this study is to provide a useful lens to examine nonnative English speaking teachers' professional identity in general, Chinese EFL teachers' in particular. It hopes to contribute to the literature of identity formation by means of incorporating the social factor – being nonnative, into the study of professional identity.

What needs to be clarified is that this study adopts Kachru's stance by, in the remaining sections of this paper, referring to "native speakers of English" as speakers coming from the inner circle while "nonnative speaker of English" as speakers from the outer and the expanding circles in his model of world Englishes, only for the pragmatic use of this dichotomy. It must be noted, however, that no derogatory judgment is intended when using these terms.

## II. METHOD

This research is designed to be two case studies since a case study provides us with "a thorough understanding of how the process develops" (Swanborn, 2010). It is a twin-case study of two Chinese EFL teachers' construction of professional identity in the hope of gaining rich information about the topic.

The two participants are purposefully chosen from a university of South China, with one male teacher and one female teacher in order to generate as much and diversified information as possible. Doris, having teaching English for 13 years, has always considered herself both a language teacher and learner. Don, with more than 18 years' teaching experience, described his career as a process of breaking away from cliché traditions of language teaching and learning.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with the two participants, each lasting about 50 minutes. Questions were semi-structured and centered around the subjects' negotiation of meanings of language teaching and their perception of being a nonnative language teacher. Triangulation was achieved through classroom observation and follow-up talks after the interviews.

The process of data analysis was guided by the research questions addressed at the beginning of this paper and data were developed and interpreted into three themes: identity formation, dual identity and making good use of being nonnative.

## III. FINDINGS

Developing a teacher identity involves the process of "gaining insights of the professional practices and the values, skills, knowledge" (Chong, Ling & Chuan, 2011) required and practiced within the teaching profession. The subjects were found to have gone through a complex negotiation of the insights of "English teacher" and "English teaching" over a long period of time. It began as early as they stepped into school communities as students, university communities, intern community and throughout their teaching career. This process developed gradually over the trajectory of becoming a teacher.

### *Identity formation: an ongoing process*

Before school, the image of "a teacher" mostly came from what their parents told them. As students, they began to negotiate the meaning of "teacher" through their involvement in practices within the school community. Their interactions with teachers and their observation of teachers' behaviors played a big part in shaping the meaning of "teacher" and "teaching", "especially when in early schooling days" (Don).

In Doris' memory, teachers always stood in the front of the class, which was an image of "almighty". While Don admitted that he didn't quite remember the way the teacher taught but he was very impressed with the teacher's "authority": teacher gives orders and students obey. As a result, the meaning of an English teacher, in these early communities, is negotiated to be one who knows everything well about English:

#### Extract one

*I didn't begin to study English until I was in the middle school. In my mind, my English teacher should be a very good speaker of English and understands everything in English. It was silly of me to think that way, you know. (Don)*

These early images, which focused on English teachers' expertise in the language, were later believed to be "immature and silly" (Don). And this is due to the deeply rooted concepts that a teacher needs to be knowledgeable and

omnipotent and is often idolized by students. Doris also described her surprise when she saw her English teacher doesn't know the meaning of a particular word:

Extract two

*I thought she (the teacher) was not a good teacher because she failed to answer a question raised by one of my classmates and she claimed that she needed more contemplation. I was thinking: how come could this have happened? She is AN ENGLISH TEACHER!*

As a middle school student, Doris concluded that her English teacher was not a good teacher because she couldn't answer students' question promptly. "Knowing everything about the subject" had become the premise for being a good teacher for the two subjects at a young age.

The process of negotiation of meanings continued with time going on. After finding themselves doing well in the subject of English, they decided to choose English as their major in the university. When studying in the university, student teachers were trained toward "proficiency" and "professionalism". As a student, Doris didn't see professionalism as important; instead, she had spent plenty of time working toward proficiency. She justified her efforts to improve her language proficiency:

Extract three

*As an English major, I need to be highly proficiency in the language itself; otherwise, how can I teach in the future? Foreign teachers speak English ever since they were born. But we are different and it is much more difficult for us. All the four years witnessed my hard work of studying the language, but compared with the native speakers, we are always in the unfavorable situation.*

Doris expressed a strong determination to further her study in the field of English language and education for she believed that the first thing for her to do is improve her English proficiency so that she might construct an image of a proficient English speaker among students while might empower her identity as a language teacher.

After entering the teaching community, the subjects began to realize, from their engagement in teaching, that a qualified English teacher not only needs to be proficient in English, but needs many more professional qualities. Apart from being proficient in English, they added in more rich meanings to the concept of "an English teacher": experienced, knowing how to teach, knowing the students well, well-informed.

In addition, it is only within this community of practice, did the subjects begin to think about the issue of being nonnative as a language teacher. They were exposed to the way native speaking teachers teach and the fact that these two types of teacher are paid discriminately. When knowing that many students prefer being taught by native speaking teachers, Doris once had "identity crisis":

Extract four

*I began to question my own qualification as an English teacher. I had never studied in an English-speaking country, nor had I ever been to any of these countries. I was not confident at all when I spoke English, especially with native speakers. As a new teacher, I was frustrated and was wondering how the language should be taught.*

"Identity crisis", refers to the phenomenon that nonnative English-speaking teachers often experience "fear, anxiety and confusion" (Liang & Rice, 2006, p. 167) when struggling between two "inner selves": professional self and nonnative self.

The identity crisis had come as a result of Doris' lack of experience in teaching English and language immersion. To deal with this crisis, she kept reflecting her own way of teaching and went into many colleagues' classroom in order to overcome the "disadvantage of being nonnative". Don also expressed his concern of being nonnative and reckoned that he had to improve his teaching skills "as a compensation of being less proficient in English than the native speakers".

In this process of identity construction, Doris continued to argue that it is the traditional way of English education, which could be described as "silent English"<sup>4</sup>, that resulted in their speaking incompetency. She explained that English learners of her generation had been the victim of it and she didn't want her students to follow suit.

Don also related his own language learning experience to his daily teaching. He recalled the traditional teacher-talk dominated teaching style when he was a student, and labeled it cliché. It is the idea of "breaking away from the cliché way of teaching English" that had played an important role in building up Don's own style of teaching:

Extract five

*I always encourage students to talk in class and focus more on the practical use of the language so that, unlike my generation, they would be able to use the language after years of learning. Therefore, I have been trying to avoid the teacher-dominated classroom and advocate student-based style. I give plenty of time in class for students to talk.*

As can be seen from the extract, Don has placed great emphasis on improving students speaking competency in his classroom. This was further reified in her classroom instruction where she arranged her students to practice their oral English for about 30 out of 45 minutes, either individually or in pairs.

Don's teaching focus has resulted from his perception that "nonnative speakers of English find a lot of difficulty in listening and speaking". That is, nonnative speakership has greatly influenced the way they teach.

To sum up, the subjects had never ceased to negotiate the meaning of "English teaching" even after they entered the teaching community. This echoes the previous claim that identity formation is an ongoing process (Gee, 2000; Van

<sup>4</sup> The phenomenon of "silent English" indicates the fact that many students are extremely good at reading and writing English, but fail in listening and speaking.

Zoest & Bohl, 2005) and it is not fixed (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & Johnson, 2005). The subjects have put “a high English proficiency” as a priority as an English teacher and setting up a powerful image of an English teacher among students is necessary.

*Dual identity: an agency for teacher development*

Doris kept emphasizing that she is still an English learner. As a teacher, she didn't give up further studying English in her spare time in order to get closer to “the height of a native speaker”. She knew pedagogy is also essential for a teacher, but for a language teacher, “proficiency is nonetheless more important” and since she was nonnative she needs to spend more time on it.

And Doris was not alone in this respect. Don also expressed his concern about being nonnative while having to teach the language:

Extract six

*I feel extremely nervous when a foreign teacher walks into my classroom. I am afraid that I might make mistakes when speaking or teaching English. You know, it feels bad. And it is discouraging by all means.*

Both Doris and Don admitted that they spent much more time preparing for the class which was to be observed in this study, for they “didn't want to make too many mistakes when speaking English and they (mistakes) were sure to be detected by the observer” (Don). This has, to a large extent, revealed their uncertainty of their spoken English.

Among all the language skills, reading is the skill the two subjects are most confident about and they both showed dissatisfaction toward their speaking competency. As a nonnative English speaking teacher, Doris said that sometimes she could not reach both fluency and accuracy simultaneously when speaking English.

Extract seven

*You know I have never been to an English speaking country and speaking has been a problem for me. I usually very hard to achieve both fluency and accuracy but the fact is that I can't do it well. For me, I could only guarantee fluency and I should say I make grammatical mistakes frequently* (Doris).

Encountering the same problem, Don, however, paid more attention to accuracy than fluency. He has been emphasizing the importance of “producing accurate sentences” all the time in terms of his learning and teaching English. He insisted that as a language teacher, it would depower his image among students if he makes mistakes in his utterances of English.

Observation in the classroom also indicated an obvious distinction between Doris' and Don's choice of “fluency or accuracy as the priority” when using English. Doris, in order to present herself as “a fluent speaker of English”, chose to use English as the medium of instruction in class and only use Chinese occasionally; in addition, she encouraged students to adopt an all-English approach in class. As a result, some small errors were detected without causing any communication failure, however.

Don, on the other hand, had spoken English with serious caution for fear that he “might set up an image of an incompetent language teacher because of the errors” (Don). Don's choice had impelled him to push his students to produce utterances with “correct pronunciation and grammar” (Don's discourse in class) in class.

Based on their perception of being incompetent in speaking English, both Doris and Don claimed that they had always been on the way to improving their English competency even after they began to teach the language. In order to reach a native-like proficiency to “compensate their nonnative speakership” and their “Chinese accent” (Don), Don attributed a certain amount of time every day to reading and listening in English.

Extract eight

*We have been speaking Chinese for decades and it is difficult to change (the accent) when we speak English. I mean, the accent. We have been working hard to get rid of the Chinese accent since we began our study in the university as English majors. But no matter how hard we've been trying, the fact is that we have to bear that accent all the way.*

Extract eight witnessed Don's efforts to get rid of the Chinese accent while speaking English and this partly revealed his admiration of speaking standard English as an English teacher. Even after he began his teaching career, he still worked hard toward this move – a native-like accent and competency of English.

Both the two subjects admitted to their dual identity – both as a teacher and a learner of English language. This awareness often helps them “to keep moving forward academically” (Doris) and “to be informed of all sorts of educational development” (Don). “Positioning ourselves as learners impels us to take in new things all the time.” Don says. What lies behind these efforts is the motive to become more proficient in English language and competent in English teaching.

In other words, the two teachers' awareness of the nonnative speakership of English, has become the agency for them to develop themselves as teachers. Teacher agency, as described by Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004), refers to the active pursuit of professional development and learning in accordance with an individual's goals. there are various ways in which teachers can exercise agency, depending on the goals they pursue and the sources available for reaching their goals.

Apart from devoting time to improve their English competency, Doris and Don both look forward to a language immersion period in an English-speaking country. They believed that such an immersion would surely improve their competency as well as confidence in teaching English.

Extract nine

*We didn't have language immersion program in university, which was still a pity. We were definitely made in China, never experiencing any form of English culture. However, we are teaching English. If there were opportunity for an immersion, I would definitely go.*

Don owed his speaking incompetency to the fact that he hasn't stayed in any English-speaking country for any period of time. He added that, if he had, things would have been different. Doris expressed her determination to pursue a doctor's degree in order to "make up for being nonnative":

Extract ten

*We could never be comparable to NESTs in terms of language proficiency. Therefore, what we can do to make up is get higher diploma to be competent as referred to as a language teacher. Sometimes students are critical about their teacher if s/he doesn't have high certificate. We become more confident once we are armed with a higher diploma.*

It is apparent that the heightened awareness of the dual identity had led to a strong sense of agency: Doris had hoped to pursue a higher degree in related field for she believed she would be more confident as long as she has the doctor's degree, which would greatly empower her qualification as an English teacher, despite her nonnative speakership in English.

Despite their awareness of the dual identity, Doris insisted that, in front of students, teachers should position themselves, first of all, as a teacher rather than a learner. Otherwise, "teacher identity would be in danger". She wanted to build up an image of "a fluent speaker" when she was teaching in the classroom. "When I am away from campus, I am an earnest learner of English. But when I return to class, I am a teacher of English." She managed to keep a balance between these two identities.

They tend to display their teaching identity more in classrooms while present themselves as learners after class when they are either alone or interacting with people, especially those whose English proficiency is perceived to be superior to theirs.

What is worth noting is that there had appeared a discrepancy of Doris' perception of "language teacher" after she entered the teaching community: Doris used to attribute the quality of making errors to an unqualified English teacher; however, she put more emphasis on fluency rather than accuracy in her teaching activities. This has again proved the previous finding that identity is not fixed but keeps refreshing itself all the way.

*Making good use of being nonnative*

While admitting that many students prefer to be taught by native speakers of English, the two subjects claimed that being nonnative also has its advantages in teaching English. Don referred to the limitation of native speaking teachers as "their taking the use of English for granted and ignorance of the process of learning the language":

Extract eleven

*These NESTs (native English-speaking teachers) speak English for granted and they won't be able to know students' difficulties in learning this language. Furthermore, most of them don't speak Chinese, which causes problem in communication sometimes.*

Doris added that "NESTs don't know much about Chinese students' situation". That is, NESTs are not familiar with Chinese culture and students' personalities, which hinder the two parties from effective communications. "These foreign teachers often teach according to students' needs in their own countries, which causes many shocks," she explained.

As a result of the limitations, Doris argued that "there are some subjects that NESTs are not suitable to teach, such as intensive reading, grammar, translation and alike". Local teachers are to fill the gap between students and native speaking teachers, according to Doris.

Don further pointed out that to make the best of the native and nonnative teachers, some form of cooperation between them should be introduced so that they complement with each other:

Extract twelve

*We want to know more about the language itself and its culture as well and they (native speaking teachers) need to better understand our students' difficulties and needs. More communication or cooperation should be introduced.*

Don believed that communicating with native speaking colleagues is another form of language immersion and undoubtedly it would help improve his English competency by any means. Therefore, he hoped that there would be cooperation between them.

In addition, Don pointed out that his own experience in learning English can benefit his students for they share similar first language influence. And this cannot be achieved through native speaking teachers. In other words, he makes himself a language model for his students, which he believed facilitates students' learning:

Extract Thirteen

*I often communicate with my students my own English learning experience. We have the same native language, which undoubtedly poses great impact on second language learning; and I understand better what their difficulties are so that the learning process may be much easier.*

Don was also observed to communicate with students after class sharing his own understanding and experience of English learning as well as how he coped with the difficulties. During the talks, they primarily used Chinese, which is their mother tongue. He later expressed his "gratitude to his mother language" which had greatly promoted the communication with his students. And he believed that it would have been even harder if they were to use English only.

Don's description of the role his own learning experience plays in helping with students' learning process can be

interpreted as the “language learning model for students” (Kirkpatrick, 2008). In his *World Englishes*, Kirkpatrick argued that a good language teacher acts a language learning model for his / her students.

To sum up, the construction of being a nonnative English-speaking teacher is an ongoing process within various communities of practice. During the process, these teachers have perceived themselves as both an English teacher and learner all the way throughout their career development. This dual identity has, on the other hand, functioned as the agency for their own development in terms of language teaching. Though nonnative, the teachers believe that they have their own advantageous qualities over native English teachers in many ways.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Being nonnative is a significant element in the construction of teachers’ professional identity as a nonnative English speaking teacher. It doesn’t appear in the subjects’ negotiation of the meaning of “English teaching” until they enter the teaching community. And ever since it plays a part, it continues to have an impact on their identity formation. It goes through the process of constructing and reconstructing teaching identity while teachers negotiate the meaning of “language teaching” and “language teacher” in their teaching practice.

As a nonnative English-speaking teacher in China, the subjects have to face up to their dual identity – both a language learner and teacher. They hide the learning aspect of identity when in the classroom and disclose it when engaging in learning communities such as talking to native speakers. This has in agreement with Wenger’s (1998) that identity is a nexus of multi-memberships in various communities.

This dual identity, on the one hand, has positioned themselves under an unprivileged status as compared to the native speaking teachers in the first place. In order to be competitive, these teachers are under the pressure of reaching a native-like proficiency of English, which is a second language studied through formal education.

On the other hand, it has also become the agency for teacher development. By pursuing language immersion programs as well as a higher certificate in English teaching, the subjects have been on the way to improving themselves in terms of both language and teaching competency so as to empower their teaching identity as a nonnative speaking teacher.

Being nonnative poses great influence in the way the teacher teaches. The subjects have come a long way from their early education of English and spare no efforts in class to encourage students to talk in order to avoid learning “silent English” as they did. This has resulted from their nonnative speakership which contributes to their lack of competency in speaking the language.

Despite the perceived disadvantages of being nonnative, the subjects also see their advantages in teaching English as nonnative speaking teachers and believe they have their own privileges over native speakers. First of all, their own experience of learning English may well help students since they provide a successful language learning model for them. Secondly, they know students and Chinese educational context much better, which they believe will facilitate both teaching and learning. Thirdly, there won’t be communication failure with students, which native speakers often encounter.

To summarize, for non-native English-speaking teachers in China, the dual identity both as a teacher and a learner is critical along the trajectory to become an English teacher. It has penetrated the process of identity formation for the Chinese local English teachers and should not be ignored while studying their professional identity.

#### V. DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Traditional ways of English teaching have led to what is recognized as “silent English” over the decades, which indicates one is unable to speak English even he/she has acquired quite a proficiency in reading and writing. Most Chinese students claim that among the language skills, they are most confident in reading and writing (Zhang, 2014) and least confident in speaking. This study partly reveals the English education outcome that people of the two subjects’ age (around 35 years old and older) have received.

In addition, an overall low level of English proficiency exists under the Chinese context. Students find themselves unable to use English freely even after decades’ English learning in various levels of education. Teachers, as well as policy makers, then need to see to it that the purpose of students’ learning English is to put it into use. It is, therefore, of great importance that the teacher-centered English classroom be critically evaluated while up-to-date and effective classroom instructions and activities be explored.

A “native-like” English proficiency has been claimed to be difficult under the Chinese context, where a favorable English language environment is lacked. English teacher preparation programs in China don’t offer any immersion program for student teachers nowadays. As a result, speaking has become the biggest challenge for them. These teachers, though having been exposed to modern language teaching and learning theories and practices, have recognized an urgent need of altering this situation.

This study is only a prelude study of Chinese English language teachers’ professional identity in terms of the small scale and the methodology used. It is anticipated to bring up the issue of native / nonnative in China so that it is incorporated into English teacher education since it plays an essential part in identity formation. It is also anticipated that this research may help nonnative language teachers to face up to their dual identity and make good use of it to

facilitate both teaching and learning.

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