



Language Teaching Research Quarterly

2024, Vol. 40, 94–112



‘Teaching Like a Robot’: Chinese English Language Teachers Perceptions of Identity¹

Yan Yao*, Carleigh Bristol Slater

The University of Edinburgh, Scotland

Received 06 December 2023

Accepted 21 February 2024

Abstract

Teacher identity is the reflection of teachers’ perception, position, and identification as teachers. Teachers’ identities are dynamic and continuously negotiated by the interplay of their professional practices, past experiences, and contextual conditions. Drawing on this understanding, this study explores Chinese English teachers’ professional identities within a private English institution in China. Research data was collected through semi-structured interviews with six Chinese English teachers from one private English institution. Interview data was analysed thematically. The study results revealed common teacher identities as advocates of learner autonomy, struggling teachers for higher-level students and sources of students’ learning motivation. Specifically, teachers were challenged in cultivating autonomous students by institutional and sociocultural contextual obstacles. They were also in a challenging situation to improve the effectiveness of teaching higher level students. However, teachers exhibited positive perceptions towards their influence on students’ learning motivation reflected in their effort to actively establish teacher-student relationships and utilize facilitative teacher roles. The research findings suggest the need for designing more effective teacher trainings, improving teachers’ working conditions and a call for re-evaluating English language learning among Chinese students.

Keywords: *Teacher Identity, Identity Construction, Private English Institution, Teacher Burnout, Teacher Learning*

Introduction

Teachers are no longer viewed as passive instructors to transfer teaching theories into classrooms but are active participants who engage in teacher learning and construct their teaching knowledge in specific sociocultural contexts (Johnson, 2009). Participation in continuous teacher learning develops teacher knowledge and competence, which is inextricably connected with the development of teacher identities (Yazan, 2023). Teacher identity is teachers’ perception, understanding and definition of themselves as teachers and

¹ This paper is extracted from a master thesis, the full version of which was submitted to the University of Edinburgh in August 2023.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: yanyao0919@outlook.com

<https://doi.org/10.32038/ltrq.2024.40.06>

their relation to others (Lasky, 2005; Mockler, 2011). Examining the unique behaviour teachers exhibit and the identities they recognise provides a dynamic method to understand how teachers carry out their profession, how they apply theories and theorise their practice, how they influence students' learning, and how they engage in interaction and collaboration with their colleagues in their social settings (Gee, 2000; Yazan, 2023).

Studies on L2 teacher identities between 2010-2020 primarily focused on teachers' professional identity construction through sociocultural theory, and on identity in discourses and practices (Sadeghi & Bahari, 2022). These studies highlight teachers' professional practices of their teacher knowledge and gaining recognition of their identity in their profession (Kanno & Stuart, 2011). By engaging themselves in continuous teacher learning, teachers' identities change, evolve, and transform in their exposed contexts, including their classrooms and schools where concrete teaching takes place, and the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts (Elsheikh & Yahia, 2020). The dynamics of social and cultural contexts shape the micro-contexts, which influence teachers' decisions on their instructional practices (Yazan, 2023).

L2 teacher identities have also been studied in relation to constructs such as teacher beliefs, teacher agency, power relationships and teacher-student interactions. Teachers have pre-established teacher beliefs and teaching theories from their previous experiences as language learners and student-teachers (Knowles, 1992). They are prone to encounter conflicts with their teacher beliefs at the initial stage of their teaching career (Flores & Day, 2006). However, teacher agency is an internal driving force for teachers to adapt their actions to maintain alignment with their teacher commitments, values, and identities (Haneda & Sherman, 2016). Research on language teacher identities also draws attention to power relationships. Critical sociocultural studies point out that language teachers are subject to the mainstream discourses of languages, teachers, and teaching, as in the cases of non-native-speaking English teachers negotiating for legitimate teacher identity (Kamhi-Stein, 2009; Varghese, 2006). Furthermore, teachers' identities are self-positioned based on the identities they ascribe to their students. Thus, they can develop strategies to enhance instructional practices for students with various needs and backgrounds (Reeves, 2009).

Research Context

Although research on language teacher identities burgeoned in the last two decades, few studies have investigated L2 teacher identity (Sadeghi & Ghaderi, 2022), and even fewer in the education of private tutoring institutions (Trent, 2016), particularly within the context of China (Zhang, 2018). China's private tutoring institutions increased drastically in the last decade with 48% of primary and secondary students' acceptance of private tutoring in 2017 (Liu, 2018). Most private institutions provide tutoring based on school subjects to supplement mainstream education. Thus, they are featured as supplementary and academic-oriented (Liu & Bray, 2017, 2020). However, some institutions are non-supplementary or academic-based, providing non-subject skills learning (Liu & Bray, 2017). The setting of this study is a private English institution exclusively for English language teaching and learning. Located in a first-tier city in Guangdong province of China, it is one of the institutions that belong to a foreign-funded, large-scale English language organisation with hundreds of institutions in China's developed cities. This private English institution is not a supplementary one because it does not

supplement the mainstream school English course but rather develops its own curriculum that encompasses a variety of courses to develop students' all-around language abilities with a particular focus on students' speaking ability. The teaching staff includes both Chinese and native English teachers teaching ages between 3 to 18.

Current studies have primarily investigated Chinese English teachers in supplementary private tutoring institutions (Trent, 2016; Yung & Yuan, 2020; Xiong et al., 2022) or teachers from different small-scale institutions (Liu & Sammons, 2021). Due to the tutoring nature of these institutions, teachers' teaching focus, teaching strategies and teacher-student relationships are constrained (Trent, 2016). Their teacher roles may significantly differ from those in non-supplementary private English institutions. Hence, this study seeks to explore teacher identities within this specific type of institution to contribute to an enhanced understanding of English teachers' identities. Potentially, this study may wish to attract attention to teachers' identity status within both supplementary and non-supplementary institutions and increase the awareness of enhancing L2 teacher education to support their learning in the field of TESOL.

Background Information

Language Teacher Identity

Language teachers are distinctive from teachers of other subjects due to their high involvement in communication and interaction with learners (Borg, 2006). Duff and Uchida (1997) conceive language teachers and learners as sociocultural representatives whose identities are socially, culturally, historically, politically and religiously positioned (Sang, 2022; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2024). Teacher identity formation has been widely studied as the result of the interactions of their professional practice, contextual factors and teacher biographies (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Richards, 2023; Yazan, 2023).

Teachers' professional practice is crucial in their identity construction (Miller, 2009), which is supported by the theory of community of practice holding that people develop understandings, expertise, and skills by participating in situated communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In this sense, teachers learn to teach by participating in practices and gaining membership in their teaching communities. Teaching communities refer to teachers of their own and other schools, and people associated with the teaching profession in broader contexts (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Teaching practice and teacher identities shape each other (Martel & Wang, 2014), as evidenced in the study of Kanno and Stuart (2011) in which two novice teachers finally gained their teacher authority and confidence through intense engagement with teaching practice in their first year. Further, teachers' identity construction also involves conflicts and power structures (Tsui, 2007). Tsui's study revealed a university teacher's arduous process of improving students' learning outcome by integrating traditional English teaching method into the school-promoted communicative language teaching (CLT) method. Criticized for being an inefficient teacher of the CLT, he compromised to follow the CLT textbook design and meet the university's requirements and eventually obtained recognition as a model teacher of CLT. His concession of teacher beliefs and identity was to exhibit competencies to obtain the university's acknowledgement. However, when members' contribution to the community is not recognised, there may be isolation from participation and identity marginalisation (Wenger, 1998), exemplified by the male teacher in

Trent's (2012) study whose ideal identity as a motivating teacher and preferred teaching styles were not recognised as competent among his fellow teachers, resulting in his low agency to negotiate identities in teaching and building interpersonal relationships at work. Further, it is noteworthy that in specific cultural and religious contexts, teachers' professional practices and identities are shaped by their religious beliefs which can influence their selection of teaching materials, reinforce the dissemination of religious values and caution them to smartly handle religious topics (Vaccino-Salvadore, 2024).

Contexts are various circumstances and conditions that influence L2 teachers' learning and teaching at both micro and macro levels (Yazan, 2023). Micro contexts are the classrooms, institutions, or interpersonal conditions (Duff & Uchida, 1997). Macro contexts refer to national, global, political, and sociocultural environments (Varghese et al., 2005). Morgan (2004) points out that no schooling environment is neutral but rather filled with values and ideologies. Thus, when unpleasant environments prevail, teachers may disengage themselves from the goals and ideals of their classroom behaviours and may feel demotivated to persist in their teacher values and beliefs (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Conversely, a pleasant environment helps develop teachers' positive attitudes toward their teacher beliefs and teaching practices (Flores & Day, 2006). Teachers working in cross-cultural contexts may encounter more challenges in making sense of their teaching and constructing intercultural identities because of the complexities of curricular, institutional, cultural and linguistic environment (Duff and Uchida, 1997). On a global scale, the sociocultural environment of privileging native and standard English consistently challenges non-native-speaking English teachers to be accepted as legitimate English teachers (Park, 2012; Pennycook, 2001; Varghese et al., 2005).

Teacher biographies, the prior experiences of pre-service and beginning teachers, influence teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning and subsequent teaching practices (Knowles, 1992). The memories of former teachers and experience of pre-service teacher education shape teachers' beliefs, meanings, and values of being teachers (Knowles, 1992). New teachers' teacher identities are strongly personally embedded at the initial teaching stage. However, their identities could be destabilized by adverse working conditions, such as unfavourable workplace culture and leadership styles (Flores & Day, 2006). If a teacher is insistent to advocate for her teacher identities, she would demonstrate strong agency in the implementation of innovative teaching strategies and teaching styles to overcome the contextual obstacles (He & Lin, 2013).

Chinese English Teacher Identities in Private Tutoring Institutions

Only a few studies have been conducted on teacher identities in private tutoring institutions (Trent, 2016). Current studies primarily focused on English teacher identities in supplementary and academic-oriented private tutoring institutions. The existing studies demonstrate similar teacher identities.

Teachers' identities are shaped by the social discourse of the exam-oriented culture both in Hong Kong and mainland China. Thus, teachers' identities tend to address the needs of the students and parents for the aspects that are not fully accommodated by mainstream schools (Yung & Yuan, 2020). In a review of empirical study, Yung and Yuan uncovered teachers' hybrid identities as authoritative exam experts, popular stars, and qualified English language teachers by analysing forty-one English language tutors' textual biographies on the website in Hong Kong. Their biographical texts highlighted their prestigious educational background and

their profile photos presented trendy looks to display a contrasting image with the simple-look schoolteachers. These teachers' biographies were depicted as catering to the social expectation of private tutoring to maximise students' learning outcomes. Trent (2016) also explored the Hong Kong English language tutors' identities through interviews and found that fundamentally, they were perceived as 'tutors' rather than 'teachers' due to their particular engagement with students' exam abilities, a lack of close relationships with students and colleagues, restraint from using diverse teaching strategies and lack of formal teaching qualifications, which were the characteristics of mainstream schoolteachers. In mainland China, teachers in private tutoring institutions were also pressured to optimise students' academic performance despite that they perceived themselves as legitimate teachers (Liu & Sammons, 2021).

Moreover, within private tutoring institutions in mainland China, teachers' identities are positioned mainly by students and parents. For example, Xiong et al. (2022) found that teachers were perceived as exam experts, salespeople, and underdogs. Further, the parents often inappropriately judged them on their choices to work for private tutoring institutions, making them underprivileged and inferior to their counterparts in mainstream schools. A similar but more disfavoured situation is found among the teachers in Zhang's (2018) study. Despite their endeavours to maintain positive relationships with students and parents, teachers were not adequately respected. They were denied as teachers but regarded as tutors without the legitimacy to educate students. As a result, teachers became negative in pursuing their identities in their institutions and even lost their passion for teaching.

Teacher Agency and Teacher Efficacy

Teacher agency is described as the extent of teachers' proactive endeavours to make choices and take intentional actions to make a significant influence in their teaching (Toom et al., 2015). Teacher agency empowers teachers to negotiate their identities in the complex and multi-layered contexts rather than being contextually constrained (Hong et al., 2024). Thus, teacher agency is not static but in constant interactions with social contexts (Kayi-Aydar, 2015). The exercise of agency is often in dynamic interaction with teachers' beliefs (Biesta et al., 2015) and motivated by their personal goals (Ketelaar et al., 2012). Pre-service teachers are found to have strong willingness in negotiating their identities, yet they vary in agency when positioning themselves in unequal power dynamics in their educational setting. The more sufficient power and autonomy teachers had, the more innovative and experimental they were in their teaching design and practices, compared with the teachers with limited power (Huang & Wang, 2024).

Teacher efficacy can be described as a manifestation of teacher identity (Richards, 2023). It refers to teachers' beliefs to overcome environmental challenges and their confidence in their ability to implement effective pedagogical strategies to enhance students' learning motivation and attainment, which is known as general teacher efficacy and personal teaching efficacy, respectively (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Teachers' sense of accomplishment in their past practice (Yada et al., 2019), their current classroom performance (Liaw, 2009), pre-service educational programs (Ortaçtepe & Akyel, 2015) and quality professional development programs (Eun & Heining-Boynton, 2007) are sources of teacher efficacy. Importantly for this study, teacher efficacy is also related to teachers' language proficiency (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Low self-perceived language proficiency

impedes teachers from engaging students in English learning and vice versa (Chacón, 2005; Eslami & Fatahi, 2008).

Burnout and Power Dynamics

Teacher burnout at work is generally referred to as the experience of emotional exhaustion characterised by overextension of emotional capacity and depletion of emotional resources (Evers et al., 2004; Maslach et al., 2001). Teachers with positive professional identity are found to have lower burnout than the emotionally negative teachers, which is mediated by a high level of work engagement, a sense of work accomplishment and subsequent positive teacher psychological state, which ultimately reduces teachers' job burnout (Zhang et al., 2024). However, if without understandings and expectations from the students and teaching community, teachers' commitment and dedication may cause exhaustion and stress and further challenge them in managing their emotions (Afreen & Norton, 2024). Teacher burnout is also associated with demographic characteristics such as age, gender, personality, and marital status, although studies show mixed results (Chang, 2009). Additionally, institutional conditions and work characteristics have an impact on teacher burnout (Chang, 2009), such as workload and time pressure (Kyriacou, 2001). An empirical study among Iranian EFL teachers reported a causal relationship between teachers' high workload and reduced personal performance and burnout (Karanfil & Khatami, 2021). In a Norwegian context, teachers' emotional exhaustion was linked to excessive time spent on lesson planning and teaching and insufficient time for rest and recovery (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010).

Teacher-student authority significantly influences students' learning experience and teacher's work (Pace & Hemmings, 2007). Traditional absolute teacher authority in imparting knowledge and having students' obedience to their intelligence and power has been criticized for making students the knowledge recipients rather than inquirers (O'Dwyer, 2006). Teachers who are willing to share authority develop students' capabilities to speak with authority and act as experts in their learning (Oyler, 1996). Further, they are more strategically inclined to develop autonomous learners. Actions that proved successful were identifying and satisfying students' innate learning needs, supporting their abilities and promoting collaborative learning (Hu & Zhang, 2017). In this regard, students are more empowered in taking control of their learning and teachers' power reduces accordingly. In addition, teachers' personal authority which is teachers' personal qualities such as wit, humour, patience, and respectfulness is argued to have significant influence on students' learning experience and can foster better teacher-student relationship (Macleod et al., 2012; Wrong, 2017). Nevertheless, the extent of power delegated to students and the overall classroom authority is influenced by various factors including students' constraints (low motivation, passive learning, low language proficiency), curriculum density, as well as institutional, societal and cultural environment (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Pace & Hemmings, 2007).

Methodology

This research employed the interpretivist approach to explore whether teachers share common teacher identities and how they would recognise their influence on students' language learning motivation in the setting of a private English institution in a first-tier city in Guangdong, China. Guided by the theoretical basis that a teacher's identity formation is influenced by the interplay

of professional practice, contextual factors and teachers' personal histories, this study aimed to address the following research questions:

RQ1: Are there common teacher identities within a private English institution in China?

RQ2: How do teachers perceive their influence on students' language learning motivation?

RQ2a: How do teachers use this influence?

Participants

Eight Chinese English teachers were contacted initially. Six agreed to participate in the research. All the participants were female Chinese English teachers who represent the majority of teachers in educational institutions in China. They had a minimum of two years English teaching experience and possessed nationally recognized English language teaching certificates and language proficiency levels (Ronny: IELTS 8; others: CET-6). Five participants worked at the same institution by the time the interviews were conducted except Ronny, a former teacher at that institution who continued working as an online teacher. All teachers are referred to by pseudonyms throughout analysis and discussion. These include Dong, Gai, Lian, Ronny, Shi and Ting.

Data Collection and Analysis

As the study intended to gain in-depth knowledge of teachers' perceptions of their teacher identities, semi-structured interviews were chosen to encourage participants to produce in-depth information (Gray, 2021). Each interview was scheduled for 45 minutes and was conducted online and audio-recorded synchronically. A question protocol was created to ensure the questions were meaningful in addressing research questions. Before conducting formal interviews, a pilot interview was conducted with a Chinese postgraduate student who was previously employed as a teacher. Two problems were identified. First, some questions asked in Chinese were not accurately understood by the teacher showing issues with translating questions between English and Chinese. Second, because of the pre-determined questions and Chinese cultural norms, the interviews became more rigid and formalized, affecting the overall data collected. Based on these reflections, the questions were repeatedly practised in Chinese and notes were made. Further, more flexibility was added during the formal interviews.

After the interviews, the data was transcribed and then translated into English. The transcribed data was read repeatedly, and extraneous information was eliminated to ensure clarity of meaning. The translated interview data was sent to every participant for member check and confirmation. The data was analysed following Braun and Clarks (2006) thematic analysis procedure which is a suitable method to interpret the broader meanings of teachers' understandings of their identities that are embedded in their responses (Crowe et al., 2015). Also, the online software Delve was used to help identify and organize the codes and themes. On this platform, the data was read multiple times, and several codes were generated. Next, codes were examined repeatedly and sorted into initial themes. At this stage, several themes emerged, and many were combined; for instance, 'high workload', 'emotional exhaustion' and 'problematic training' were integrated into the theme 'obstacles of constructing an identity for higher-level students. With the analysis proceeding, iterative checking and categorising of sub-themes continued. Certain sub-themes were excluded, while others were combined to form a major theme, accompanied by revisiting the data as per the guidance of Braun and Clark (2006).

Results

Using interviews and thematic analysis from the interview data, three main themes and a variety of sub-themes emerged. The first theme focuses on teachers' identity as advocates for student autonomy, containing their conceptions of learner autonomy and practice outcomes. The second theme reveals teachers' challenges in developing an identity that equips them to teach higher-level students. The last theme discusses the classroom authority between teachers and students.

Advocates for Student Autonomy

In the interviews, all teachers shared a belief in empowering students and enhancing their autonomy through student-centred teaching and learning. Regarding learner autonomy, teachers expressed a rather extensive understanding. Based on the occurrence, there emerged four codes which were giving students choices on classroom games and activities, creating a supportive learning environment, establishing democratic relationships with students and utilising student-to-student interactive pattern. Giving students choices was mentioned by all teachers when describing concrete classroom practices of student-centred classes. Further, the phrases 'creating a happy learning environment' and 'a sense of ownership in the class' were mentioned, indicating teachers' ideal learner-supportive classroom. In addition, equality and respect were emphasised by four teachers who attached the importance of developing students' criticality by providing them with a democratic environment:

I hope they feel they are seen, cared for, and can express themselves without being criticised or belittled by the teacher (Ronny).

Teachers' endeavours to improve student autonomy were full of challenges. Teacher Shi's challenge was caused by the difficulty of delivering substantial teaching content while offering students autonomous learning opportunities and the consequence of failing to finish the teaching task:

I have many teaching tasks to complete. If I frequently ask them how they want to learn, it will waste much instructional time and prevent me from achieving my teaching tasks...I would be questioned, and my co-teacher would face more pressure to help me cover the unfinished content.

Further, Dong encountered a challenge reconciling the prevailing idea of English learning for academic outcomes and the goal of cultivating student autonomy. She pointed out that teaching concrete knowledge was more desirable than improving students' autonomous learning because students' autonomy development was a long-term process which might not be acknowledged by the parents; thus, she believed that:

it is not wise for teachers to pursue too much on allowing students to choose what and how they learn. Parents may disagree with this approach because they expect improvement in their child's academic performance.

Besides, students with weaker learning ability and their teacher-dependent learning style

were mentioned by Ting and Dong to have affected them to develop autonomous learners. In many cases, Ting had to limit the use of student-student interactions and choose 'simple games or activities to help students focus more in class'. In Dong's descriptions, her efforts were influenced by students'

perception of themselves as recipients of the teachers' instructions rather than active participants in their own learning and evaluation.

Struggling to Teach Higher-Level Students

All teachers were confident in their identities in influencing young students' learning but found it challenging to teach higher-level students, particularly teenagers. Three sub-themes emerged as a response to the potential causes: insecurity in teacher knowledge, emotional exhaustion and less effective teacher training.

Although teachers acquired English language proficiency at levels qualifying them for teaching, they appeared to lack confidence in their language abilities to instruct higher-level students. For example, Ronny hesitated to identify herself as a qualified high-level teacher because of her self-perceived limitation in language proficiency. Despite adequate preparation, Dong felt discouraged for not explaining grammar concepts clearly to students, resulting in students' disengagement and her own decreased self-confidence. Moreover, Ting and Gai exhibited a sense of insecurity of their teacher identity in front of the students who demonstrated knowledgeability:

The students know many things that I don't know. I may not be as good as them in many aspects and won't be able to deliver an excellent class to them. (Ting)

Moreover, teachers were also found to be experiencing emotional exhaustion. They were under a highly demanding workload encompassing a packed teaching schedule and administrative duties. Ting reported an increased workload caused by a teacher shortage but an increasing number of students, which caused her insufficient time for lesson planning. In such a situation, teachers were expected to maintain lesson quality, which even stressed them. Dong described her work as 'teaching like a robot'. She pointed out the decreased teaching quality of the institution and explained that teachers' struggle with teaching quality was connected to the profit-driving nature of the institution which influenced the strategies and plans for teachers:

because the institution we work for is profit-oriented, and they have high expectations for teaching hours. At the same time, they expect high teaching quality. But due to a lack of time and external support, it's challenging to enhance their teaching abilities. Therefore, overall teaching quality is not as high as it could be. (Dong)

Overwhelmed with intense workloads and inadequately supported by the institution, teachers' well-being became an issue. Gai and Shi felt that their health and happiness were not adequately considered, resulting in their vulnerability to work and decreased motivation for self-development:

*The job is tiring, both physically and mentally. I don't have goals for development.
(Shi)*

Teachers' struggle with teaching higher levels could also be related to teacher trainings. Ting, Lian and Shi expressed satisfaction with the training because of the activities and games which they could immediately use to revitalize their classes. Comparatively, Dong and Gai were concerned about the effectiveness of the teacher trainings. In Dong's description, she felt squeezed in time to 'fully absorb the course materials' or apply the acquired knowledge into practice. While Gai was critical about the training content, the passive transmission of classroom games and teaching techniques without educating teachers on the underlying theories:

I feel that the content of those training recycles old knowledge and remains fixed without any updates...many training sessions focus on teaching teachers how to play games or different ways to teach grammar and reading. Still, they don't explain the underlying theories or why we should teach in those ways. (Gai)

Teacher as a Source of Students' Language Learning Motivation

All teachers expressed that teaching and interacting with students was the best and most enjoyable part of their job, from which they could gain a sense of accomplishment. Their interviews revealed a positive connection between their influence and students' learning motivation. In their own words, three teachers claimed they 'definitely' impacted students' passion for learning. The other teachers held the same belief but were slightly conservative. Based on the teachers' explanation, their influence was exerted through various means specifically by teachers' emotions and teachers' roles.

Teachers' emotions are the voices of their teacher identities (Zembylas, 2003). Negative emotions were mentioned to decrease students' enthusiasm for learning by four teachers. Due to the high workload, teachers often needed to 'teach consecutive classes for three hours' (Lian & Shi), resulting in their low energy left for the last class. Lian, Dong, Shi and Ting recalled that their negative emotions, such as low energy, irritability, dullness, and inattentiveness were sensed by students, causing decreased motivation:

Sometimes students did something wrong, and I easily got angry, but I wasn't angry at them, it's just because I was too tired. But the students didn't know that. They wanted to play with me but couldn't receive an enthusiastic response, so their willingness to participate decreased. (Shi)

While teachers were aware of showing their positive emotions to foster a more engaging learning environment. Gai, who experienced physical punishment because of her teacher's inability to regulate his anger, strongly opposed 'transferring negative emotions to the students'. She highlighted the relationship between positive teacher emotions to students' engagement in learning. Thus, she aimed to construct a cheerful teacher identity:

When it comes to teaching, my deepest feeling is having fun and learning. (Gai)

Teacher roles were also found to be related to students' learning motivation. Resisting a dominant teacher identity, all teachers emphasised adopting democratic teacher roles. Based on the analysed data, four major teacher roles were coded according to their occurrence: 'a friend of students', 'classroom participant', 'facilitator' and 'language role model'.

All teachers mentioned the identity of being 'a friend' to students. Casual chatting in English and less formal relationships with students were claimed to be able to increase students' intrinsic motivation to acquire a higher level of English:

...to achieve the level to speak to me in English about a topic they like, they need to learn the target language. Yes. And maybe, I'm more like a friend to them... If they want to hang out with me, they must be good at English. (Ronny)

The second role, 'classroom participant', was mentioned by five participants. For example, Gai believed teachers' willingness to participate in classroom activities indicated their 'enjoyment and dedication', which increased students' engagement. The role of 'facilitator' was concurred by Dong, Shi, Ronny, and Ting. They mentioned empowering students by involving them in classroom decision-making on games, textbook exercises, and preferred ways of learning, through which a positive effect on students' motivation was observed:

When they had the freedom to choose, they ... took on the role of leaders in their learning. (Ting)

The last role, 'teacher as a language learning model', was agreed by Ronny, Dong and Shi to have a lasting and impactful influence on motivating students. Dong shared that her image as a competent non-native English user could enhance students' motivation. Shi also reported that using English as the only instructional language made students perceive them as 'native-speaker teacher', which could intrinsically increase students' learning motivation.

Discussion

Results suggest that teachers' perceived identities develop through their teaching practices while also influenced by their educational contexts and personal histories. This research revealed that teachers needed to develop higher efficacy in teaching higher-level students but also that they perceived themselves as crucial factors in fostering students' motivation for language learning. Further, teachers identified as dedicated advocates of student autonomy but expressed difficulty in expressing this due to challenges from institutional and sociocultural obstacles. Based on these results, three points are further discussed: the potential issues of teacher trainings, potential teacher burnout and analysis of classroom authority.

Potential Issues in Teacher Training

Miller (2009) claims that 'what teachers know and do is part of their identity work' (p.175). As a vital method for teachers to know and do, teacher training programs should adequately prepare them to exercise various language teaching skills, develop reflective abilities and improve their teaching practice (Graves, 2009). In this study, teacher participants had a sense

of identity insecurity caused by their inadequacy of teacher knowledge and the stagnation in their development of teaching abilities, particularly when teaching and interacting with teenage students. This finding is consistent with the study result of Nazari et al. (2023) in which teachers' teaching practices became routinized without professional development support, thereby causing their negative emotions and impacting their identity construction. Even though teacher trainings were provided for the teacher participants, there remain issues regarding the effectiveness of those trainings in improving teachers' comprehensive abilities.

First, the training content and objectives seemed to cater to short-term benefits. As shown in the analysis, half of the teachers expressed the necessity of more trainings, particularly games and activities that they could use to update their teaching activity tool kit, which implies that those training courses may give prominence to temporary teaching benefits. Further, teachers' reliance on such 'quick effect' trainings rather than analysing what they need from those trainings, which is to deepen their comprehensive teaching skills, may impact their long-term teaching ability. Next, whether the training program design adequately addresses teachers' needs remains doubtful. It was revealed that further support is required for all the teachers to enhance their instructional ability for higher-level students. The trainings seemed not to have equipped teachers with sufficient knowledge but prioritised the passive transmission of teaching skills using repetitive training content, which did not benefit teachers for continuous growth in their professional ability.

A Warning of Teacher Burnout

Burnout is defined to be associated to emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and inefficacy (Maslach et al., 2001). 'Burnout happens when exhaustion replaces feeling energised, cynicism (depersonalisation) replaces being hopeful and being involved, and ineffectiveness replaces feeling efficacious.' (Chang, 2009, p. 195). In this study, teachers were prone to experience burnout manifested by emotional exhaustion and low teacher efficacy.

Emotional exhaustion is found to be related to workload, especially excessive overload (Maslach et al., 2001). In this study, teachers' extensive workload was partly caused by teacher shortages, which likely resulted in their extensive teaching hours and insufficient time for lesson preparation. In the meantime, the expectation of maintaining high lesson quality further stressed teachers and impacted their teaching performance. Further, the 'wrong kind of work' which refers to people's incompetence and low motivation towards a particular work is another aspect of workload (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 414). All teacher participants of this study showed their struggle with teaching higher-level students due to their lack of confidence in their teacher knowledge, which indicates that they may not have attained the level of competence needed to deliver high-quality lessons for advanced levels. If this exhaustion continues without monitoring or regulation, teachers' stress levels might be heightened, which may lead to secondary traumatic stress and to teachers leaving the profession altogether.

Teacher efficacy, teachers' belief in their ability to influence students' learning (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998), has been observed to be impacted among teachers. This finding aligns with the study result by Saloviita and Pakarinen (2021) who revealed that teachers with higher burnout had lower self-efficacy. The study results suggest that teachers have low confidence in their language proficiency and teaching ability to influence the advanced students' learning experiences, as exemplified by Dong's challenge with her

language proficiency in explaining specific language concepts to teenage students and teachers Ting and Gai's identity insecurity to instruct teenage students who have good English level. This finding further proves that L2 teachers' language proficiency impacts their classroom practice and students' engagement (Chacón, 2005; Eslami & Fatahi, 2008). Teachers' struggle reflects that their confidence in their approaches to educating higher-level students was low. If teachers are not adequately supported, such as through effective training programs (Eun & Heining-Boynton, 2007; Ortaçtepe & Akyel, 2015), they may experience even lower teacher efficacy, which further impacts the overall decreasing teaching quality of the institution.

Meanwhile, teachers faced difficulty in affecting the contextual conditions when negotiating their identities as advocates for student autonomy. At the micro level, as teachers must cover the specified lesson content, they found it challenging to allocate time to exercise student autonomy at the expense of students' mastery of knowledge and the consequential pressure from the school and the parents. At the macro level, teachers' teaching goals were influenced by the parents' expectation of improving their children's academic grades, which necessitated their decision not to pursue the exercise of students' learning autonomy as it would not be supported by parents, as Dong expressed. This finding aligns with the teachers' identities in private tutoring institutions from both Hong Kong and mainland China (Liu & Sammons, 2021; Trent, 2016; Xiong et al., 2022; Yung & Yuan, 2020; Zhang, 2018). Even though teachers demonstrated agency in developing autonomous students, they felt incapable of overcoming contextual factors to support them in achieving this goal.

Drawing from the discussion above, it can be inferred that teacher burnout may have a negative impact on teachers' professional identity, a finding that shares similarities to the study of Zhang et al. (2024). Emotional exhaustion and low self-efficacy are the manifestation of their low faith and value towards their capabilities in effecting changes in their job and to maintain high level of engagement with teaching, which potentially weakens teachers' positive professional identity.

Teachers' Dilemma with Dominance in Teaching

Teachers' extensive understanding of student autonomy such as empowering students in decision-making in their learning and fostering a democratic learning environment indicated their desire to develop students' learning autonomy. In their belief, establishing student-centred class was the premise for enhancing students' autonomy and their actual practices primarily focused on providing students with learning choices, which the teachers in Macaro's (1997) study placed the least priority on enhancing learner autonomy. And the notion of 'student-centeredness' for learner autonomy seems a confused understanding of learner autonomy (Chang, 2020).

Furthermore, despite teachers' attempts to empower students to enhance their learning autonomy, the learning environment still reflects a teacher-centred rather than student directed class. First, the pressure of institutional challenges to meet curricular demand while improving student autonomy and the sociocultural academic-oriented English learning objective forces teachers to take significant control in class to ensure the completion of teaching tasks and the attainment of anticipated learning outcomes. Such pressure influences their pedagogical practices, forcing them to make frequent adjustments to their roles, from advocates of learner autonomy to examination-focused instructors. Second, it can be related to the factor that only

a minority of more capable students could take control of their learning (Grasha, 1994), as evidenced by Ting's description that students' varying academic abilities decided her teaching strategies. Thus, although learner-centred pedagogical practices are used in classrooms, a high level of teacher control still exists in actual practice and teachers may consistently encounter such paradoxical situations (Holliday, 2013). Building on the discussion above, teachers' dominance in class is related to students' competence level, demanding curriculum, and the sociocultural exam-focused learning, which supports the major findings of the research by Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019). The sociocultural condition influences the institution's educational goals and strategies despite that the institution's focus does not intend to supplement the deficiencies of public schools. Subsequently, teachers' teaching objectives, pedagogical practices and their teacher roles have to be adjusted accordingly (Yazan, 2023), which, as a result, may strengthen the emphasis on academic-focused English language teaching and learning.

However, although teachers often find themselves torn between the goal to develop student autonomy and the challenges of achieving a satisfactory level in teaching practice, they do recognize their influence on students' learning motivation. Teachers in this study and previous research believe that their personal authority has a great bearing on students' motivation for learning (Macleod et al., 2012). In this study, teachers' awareness of displaying positive emotions, such as Gai's belief to be a cheerful teacher as a result of the influence of her former teachers' unregulated temper, the creation of learner-centred participatory classrooms by adopting facilitative roles, such as friends to students and classroom participants and their positivity towards teacher-student relationship are identified to have a positive connection with students' motivation for learning. Furthermore, their positive perceptions of their professional roles also suggest they do not experience challenges establishing the legitimacy of their teacher identities which is distinct from the teachers who face challenges to obtain legitimate teacher identity and find themselves restricted with using various teaching strategies and building relationships with students and parents (Trent, 2016; Xiong et al., 2022; Zhang, 2018).

Conclusion

This research explored the shared identities of Chinese English teachers in the context of a private English institution in a first-tier city in Guangdong province of China. The study results shed light on language teacher identities within the cohort of educators labelled as 'private institution' teachers. Unlike some teachers who face tensions in the legitimacy of their teacher identity, teachers in this study are not recognized to be in such a status. They perceive themselves as a source of students' language learning motivation, as rebels against traditional teacher authority and as promoters to create an autonomous learning environment. However, teachers showed low self-efficacy to teach higher-level students with a potential relation to their teacher knowledge, issues with teacher trainings, high workload and teacher emotional exhaustion. Moreover, they had to re-evaluate and compromise their beliefs while negotiating their identities as advocates for learner autonomy due to the contextual obstacles.

Based on the results, three implications emerged for potential educational changes. First, to better support teachers' learning and prepare them to be more competent teachers, it is crucial that teacher educators re-examine the current teacher training programs to ensure adequate consideration of teacher-learners' needs, ways of learning and program evaluation so that the

trainings could effectively help teachers bridge the gap between what they know and what they should know (Graves, 2009). Second, teachers' emotional exhaustion and low teacher efficacy are signs for private institutions to raise awareness of improving teachers' working conditions to support the effective implementation of their knowledge and skills and develop their sense of efficacy (Eun & Heining-Boynton, 2007). It is suggested to have regular communications between the managerial staff and teachers and involve teachers' participation in discussing and making important decisions regarding the institution's development plans (Tschannen-Moran, 2014), through which teachers can develop shared expectations for their work and improve their agency in initiating changes and overcoming challenges in their professional development (Lasater, 2016). Last, the results show that non-supplementary private English institutions had to adapt to the more academic-oriented educational strategies to accommodate the current English learning trend, the result of which is students' deprivation of opportunities to develop all-round English abilities. This calls for a re-evaluation by the policymakers and curriculum designers in China of the current English teaching goals and methods to consider enhancing students' comprehensive English language skills, especially speaking abilities that many Chinese English learners struggle to improve (Snow et al., 2017).

Future research could consider a larger sample size with an inclusion of individuals of different genders, native and non-native English teachers, and teachers from a variety of institutions affiliated with the same organisation. Further, as identity is dynamic and continuously negotiated (Pennycook, 2001), a longitudinal study could provide a more profound understanding of teachers' identity construction and reconstruction in their contexts. In addition, future researchers may find it valuable to explore and compare teacher identities between mainstream schoolteachers and teachers in private institutions to add more insights to the current literature.

ORCID

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7679-295X>

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6310-139X>

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethics Declarations

Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

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