

BRIEF REPORTS AND SUMMARIES

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Imagined Community Falling Apart: A Case Study on the Transformation of Professional Identities of Novice ESOL Teachers in China

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■ Many novice teachers experience a *reality shock* during the transition from teacher education programs to the first years of teaching, due to the unpredictable and dynamic nature of authentic educational contexts (Veenman, 1984, p. 143). To better understand novice teachers in transition, research on teaching English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) has explored their shifting behaviors and beliefs during the first years of teaching (Farrell, 2009). However, this line of research has rarely examined the transformation of professional identities of novice ESOL teachers in a comprehensive way that allows for a broader understanding of the reality shock from the teachers' own perspectives—how they understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, how they understand possibilities for the future (Norton, 2000) during transition from teacher education programs to real-world teaching contexts. In order to address this gap in the literature, this article reports on a 3-year longitudinal case study of the transformation of the professional identities of four Chinese ESOL teachers during the first years of teaching in K–12

schools in China. The article highlights how these novice teachers' professional identities changed from the initial imagined identities formed in the preservice stage to the practiced identities constructed in the novice stage.

In a broad sense, the term *imagined identity* refers to the identity constructed in the imagination about relationships between oneself and other people and about things in the same time and space with which the individual nevertheless has virtually no direct interaction (Anderson, 1991; Norton, 2001). Imagination in this sense allows people to create unlimited images of the world and themselves based on limited experiences. Their identities can hence outreach to imagined states beyond those constructed upon the real practices they are engaged in. Who they are will then depend not only on who they are in reality but also on who they imagine themselves to be. These imagined identities substantially constitute the imagined community in people's expanded life world (Anderson, 1991; Norton, 2001).

Imagined identity is an antithetical concept to *practiced identity*, which is nurtured through the particular composition of available resources that are valued, brought into play, and expanded or reduced through the social processes of concrete practices (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). To novice teachers, such concrete teaching practices are virtually unavailable during the preservice stage (Farrell, 2009). Novice teachers start the first teaching years with previously constructed imagined identities. Therefore, research that addresses such imagined identities in the imagined community, their differences from practiced identities, and, most important, how the former transform into the latter is of definite significance to knowledge of novice teachers' professional identities. To date, such inquiries have been rare.

It is probable that imagined identities and practiced identities differ substantially in nature, because the former stem from imagination and the latter from real-world interactions in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Accordingly, a closer look at their respective features should enhance understanding of identity transformation. In this light, this study drew on the theory of social cognition representation (Moscovici, 2000) to analyze the features of imagined and practiced identities. Social cognitions, of which professional identity is one kind, can be classified as based on *rules*, *cues*, *exemplars*, or *schema* (Moscovici, 2000). Rule-based identities are extrinsically stipulated by rules; for example, part of a police officer's professional identity should be determined by related laws and regulations about what he or she should be and do. Cue-based identity takes as its core content the differentiating features of social entities; for example, when a person regards himself or herself as a hero or heroine, such an identity is

likely to be cue based, because the features of a hero or heroine may be demonstrated by such cues as sacrificing oneself for the benefit of others. Exemplar-based identities rely on representative examples of social entities; for example, when a person tries to align himself or herself with his or her role model, such alignment usually reflects this kind of identity. Schema-based identity embeds a series of social cognitions and behaviors in response to a dynamic context or situation; for example, being a guest at a friend's house is associated with a series of mental states and physical actions, and such association is often culture specific.

In this study I used the concepts of imagined and practiced identities (Anderson, 1991; Norton, 2001; Wenger, 1998), adopting the theory of social cognition representation (Moscovici, 2000) as a conceptual framework, to explore the transformation of professional identities of novice ESOL teachers. The study attempted to answer two research questions:

1. What were the novice teachers' imagined identities like at the start of their teaching?
2. How did their imagined identities transform into practiced identities in the first years of teaching?

METHOD

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative approach to address the research questions. First, I aimed to explore the transformation of professional identities of novice teachers of English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) based on a variety of data sources, including regular interviews with participants, participants' journal protocols relating their reflections on their teaching and life as ESOL teachers, and occasional observation of their classroom teaching. Among the three data sources, interview data were primary. Journal protocols and observation provided supplementary data for explaining the changes in participants' professional identities and were used to triangulate and further validate or inspect the interview data. Second, I followed the qualitative analysis strategy proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), that is, data collection, reduction, displays, and conclusions. It should be noted that at the beginning of the study there existed no explicitly established theoretical framework to inform the types of data to be collected, classified, and comprehended. Instead, only a general and broad scope of inquiry (how professional identities changed in ESOL

teachers in the novice stage) guided and confined my field work. As the field work progressed and data accumulated, I gradually formulated a conceptual framework, revising it many times.

Participants

Four female participants—Ingrid, Carol, Fiona, and Aurora (pseudonyms), all 22 years of age when they became teachers—were supervised as fourth-year students in the teaching practicum of a BA program for ESOL teacher education at a normal university in Beijing. In my interaction with them, I discovered that they held very strong, positive beliefs about the teaching profession, with much imagination invested in their futures as ESOL teachers. For instance, in her imagined community, Ingrid had a *language expert* identity: that an English teacher should first and foremost be a language expert. Carol, who had been greatly influenced by her English teacher in junior high school, identified herself in the imagined community as a teacher who helped students consolidate what they have learned. Fiona saw one of her imagined identities as the students' *spiritual guide*, which derived from an example set by a math teacher speaking at a seminar at the university. Aurora described her ideal teacher as the students' *learning facilitator*. According to the conceptual framework, Ingrid's and Aurora's imagined identities were cue based, whereas Carol's and Fiona's were more exemplar based.

Upon graduation, Ingrid, Carol, Fiona, and Aurora became ESOL teachers in four different schools in Beijing. Ingrid joined the faculty of a junior high school, but left during the third year. Carol, Fiona, and Aurora joined the faculty of a senior high school, an elementary school, and a junior high school, respectively, and are still teaching today.

Data Collection

From the participants' last year in the teacher education program¹ through the first 3 years of their teaching, I conducted two individual interviews ranging from 40 minutes to 2 hours each semester with each participant, one approximately in the middle of the semester and the other at the end or during vacations, for a total of 64 interviews.²

¹ Although this study focused on the novice stage, data obtained from this preservice year helped reveal the participants' imagined identities, which persisted into the initial novice stage and served as a baseline for inquiries about their transformation into practiced identities.

² All data were collected in Chinese.

In these nonstructured interviews, I asked each participant about her experiences in the past few months and noted how she understood and commented on them. All interview sessions were recorded with permission and then transcribed and proofread. Participants were encouraged to keep journals recording their feelings about and reflections on their teaching and life as novice ESOL teachers. Ultimately, I obtained a total of 217 journal entries (55 from Ingrid, 40 from Carol, 63 from Fiona, and 59 from Aurora) ranging from 75 to 891 Chinese characters. I also occasionally went to their schools to observe their classroom teaching and took observation notes. Out of 26 observation sessions (6 of Ingrid, 5 of Carol, 8 of Fiona, and 7 of Aurora), 16 were invited observations (0 of Ingrid, 3 of Carol, 8 of Fiona, and 5 of Aurora) in which participants expected me to offer comments on their teaching.

Data Analysis

I followed the qualitative analysis strategy proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). I administered three rounds of data analysis. In the first round, I carefully read and reread all data and entered a code when a piece of data illustrated, showed, or implied a unit of meaning related to the participants' professional identities or possible explanations of the transformation of such identities. Local terminology by the participants was preferred in naming the codes, and memos were added where necessary.

In the second round, existing codes were more rigorously studied. I analyzed relationships between codes through repeated comparisons that formed the basis of tentative categorization of these codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The tentative categories³ and subcategories⁴ were as follows:

- *imagined identities*: language expert, learning facilitator, spiritual guide
- *practiced identities*: language attrition sufferer, routine performer, problem analyzer
- *external factors that contributed to the transformation of identities*: institutional factors, social factors
- *internal factors that contributed to the transformation of identities*: personal experience, educational background

³ Among the tentative categories, *imagined identities* and *practiced identities* were major categories, and others were minor.

⁴ There were a few cases in which a code stood out alone as a subcategory.

The third round of data analysis led to the reorganization of the tentative categorization by which the final conceptual framework was constructed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines how the four participants' imagined identities transformed into practiced identities in the novice stage, with a discussion following the findings.

Ingrid: Good Language Doesn't Matter Much

Ingrid's imagined identity of *language expert* started to vacillate when another ESOL teacher whose linguistic competence was deficient (in Ingrid's judgment) was named Best Teacher of the Year at the end of her first teaching year in the school:

Today, I suddenly realized that good language doesn't matter much. . . . I felt indignant. Certainly it was not about the award. I didn't covet the award. That didn't matter at all. Not at all! But it was unfair. Everyone in the ESOL section speaks better English than she. Then why she? If I were the principal, she would be the last to be awarded. (Year 1, Journal Entry)

In my last interview with Ingrid, I mentioned this incident. I asked her to comment on that, now that 2 years had passed and she had already left teaching. She said:

Well, I'm not that furious, now. . . . I understand now that awarding is a matter of balance. The school wouldn't have you awarded all the time even though you were the best all the time. Award is just a matter of making everybody happy in turn. . . . There're so many things that are far more important than a teacher's real teaching competence. . . . Your language was not important in the eyes of the leadership. . . . My language, you know, deteriorated all the time. But it's really ironic that later they started to award me, too, regardless of my deteriorating language. . . . If you really want to preserve your good language, then quit and find any other job than teaching, like me. (Year 3, Interview)

The cue-based identity of *language expert* in the imagined community, under the influence of the popular *balance* culture in China's schools, had become transformed into a schema-based practiced identity that Ingrid was an ESOL teacher in an institution where "many things . . . are far more important than a teacher's real teaching competence." Such a

cognitive schema, as the core of this negative practiced identity of Ingrid's, could be easily activated in almost all similar situations, repeatedly reinforcing her negative general cognition of the teaching profession. Finally, one day, when she found it intolerable, she quit.

Carol: I'm Catching Up With the Schedule

Carol's imagined identity as a teacher who helped students consolidate what they had learned, like her own teacher had in junior high school, did not last long once she realized that she would be unable to finish the teaching tasks assigned by the Education Commission of the district:⁵

I've made a big mistake this semester. I was too slow. I've spent too much time on the consolidation. . . . When others⁶ had already started the second module, I was still struggling with the reviewing somewhere in the middle of the first module. . . . If I really want to finish the assigned tasks, I'm afraid I'll have to give up the consolidation. There's no other solution. You know, I've got no choice but to go over all the dialogs, reading texts, culture tips, writing practice, exercises, and so on and on and on. . . . I'm very busy catching up with the schedule now. (Year 1, Interview)

It seemed that the institutionally assigned teaching tasks gave Carol no alternative but to give up her previously valued consolidation of what the students had learned, thus transforming her imagined identity into a practiced identity of novice ESOL teacher as a person "busy catching up with the schedule." When I observed her classroom teaching later, I found that she was rather inclined to go over all the contents in the textbook, thus leaving little or no time for the consolidation of what she had covered in the previous teaching session. In sum, Carol's imagined identity, which was exemplar based, had become transformed into a more rule-based practiced identity, which seemed to result in principle from the institutional teaching tasks prescribed by the governmental education authority.

Fiona: A Routine Performer Can't Forever Live in Imagination

The idea Fiona had cherished about teaching was to be the students' spiritual guide, but she came to realize that this was an unreachable ambition in an elementary school like the one at which she worked:

⁵ In each district of Beijing, there is an Education Commission, a governmental education authority.

⁶ "Others" refers to ESOL teachers who taught the classes in the same grade as Carol.

I'm becoming more and more disillusioned. . . . I can't live in my imagination forever. . . . Before I become the spiritual guide . . . I need someone to guide my spirit now. . . . I feel I'm like a routine performer . . . pure and simple. (Year 1, Interview)

My life is a routine mess. It's routine because everything I need to do is stipulated by the school; it's a mess because everything I do requires me to be in a hurry, in a mechanical hurry. . . . Every morning, I rush into the classroom at 7:20, supervising the pupils doing the morning reading. Then I rush back to the office to prepare my lessons. I need to write at least five pages of instructional design for each lesson, because the director in charge of pedagogy will review them every month (she actually only counts the number of pages, because she doesn't understand a single English word). The pupils' homework books will then pile up as a small mountain on my desk. . . . After every class, I have to draft a piece of reflection, which will be reviewed, too, by the director. Every week, there're at least three meetings to attend. Every month, I have to read a book and write a reflection essay to submit to the school. Every semester, I have to prepare an open lesson, participate in a teaching contest in the district, write an action research paper, deliver a speech to all pupils (we take turns to do this). . . . I feel I'm just a worker working on a machine like Charlie Chaplin in the funny movie. (Year 2, Journal Entry)

Fiona felt incompetent in keeping to her previous pursuit of being a spiritual guide. Under the institutional pressures, the exemplar-based imagined identity of spiritual guide had become transformed into a practiced identity of routine performer, which was clearly rule based.

Aurora: It Takes Both Practice and Courage to Become Wise

Aurora seemed to have encountered similar institutional constraints in her professional pursuit of becoming a learning facilitator. However, instead of yielding to the institutional pressures, she adhered to her imagined identity with perseverance and agency:

To be honest, I feel my job is very stressful every day, as many of my colleagues do . . . but I don't believe that's a reasonable excuse for being irresponsible to the students. . . . To be responsible, it's not enough to only do what the school is requiring you to do. . . . The school is not an educator, the teacher is. (Year 2, Interview)

My students don't write well in English. . . . I've been asking them to practice more and giving them more and more writing assignments,

which might not really help them in a concrete manner. . . . Today, when I gave them feedback on last week's writing assignment, I showed them the copy I had written myself. They looked amazed. I told them how I had planned, how I had drafted, how I had revised. . . . The students better comprehended the thinking process of writing, since I set up a more comprehensible model for them. . . . Maybe, in other situations, the teacher can also be a good model to follow. I think I can try this as well in the speaking class. (Year 2, Journal Entry)

Facilitating students' learning shouldn't be a slogan only. I need to take real action and carry it out. But the difficulty . . . lies in "how." . . . I think we need wisdom more in education than we need knowledge. But there seems to be a lack of link between what I'm doing and the wisdom I'm pursuing now. I think the link is the real attempts to make changes, and the courage to initiate such attempts. . . . When new problems arise and new challenges emerge, it takes both practice and courage to become wise. (Year 3, Journal Entry)

These journal entries reveal that Aurora's previous learning facilitator identity had been concretized and contextualized, especially as was shown in the writing class episode. It was no longer a conceived principle; it was a carried-out practice. In such context-specific practices, Aurora's cue-based identity of learning facilitator had become transformed into the more schema-based identity of educator, via an insightful philosophy of "practice and courage."

DISCUSSION

So far I have examined how the four participants' imagined identities became practiced identities. Their professional identities underwent notable transformations in the novice stage. Specifically, the cue-based or exemplar-based imagined identities transformed into the more rule-based or schema-based practiced identities. A strong driving force behind such transformation came from the institutional pressures of school rules and regulations, thus leading to rule-based identities, as in Carol's and Fiona's cases. On the other hand, the dynamic educational contexts with which the novice teachers interacted helped them draw cognitive schemas about who they were in a schema-based manner, as in the negative case of Ingrid and the positive case of Aurora.

It was also interesting to notice that the imagined community fell apart in all cases except Aurora's. In other words, Ingrid's, Carol's, and Fiona's imagined identities seemed to be replaced by new practiced identities, whereas Aurora's learning facilitator evolved to be educator, which was of more maturity and clarity. The evolution was a kind of

concretizing and transcending of the imagined identity. Despite similar institutional constraints, Aurora displayed high perseverance in keeping to her ideal self (Dörnyei, 2009). She also attached importance to the initiative and courage to take action to improve. All these revealed her strong agency (Gao, 2010) in her professional development. The others gave up in one way or another; Aurora did not. This might precisely constitute part of the wisdom she was pursuing, an integration of perseverance and agency, which was in this sense beyond knowledge, competence, and even identity in its own right.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, some implications may be discerned. First, ESOL teacher educators may need to attend more consciously to the formation of imagined identities so that preservice teachers who will become novice teachers can be more aware of and critical about their imagined communities. Second, perseverance and agency should be further emphasized by teacher educators and administrators in novice teachers' development so that the direction of the transformation of their professional identities can be more effectively and positively guided.

This article examined the transformation of four novice ESOL teachers' professional identities in the first years of teaching. The findings suggest that (a) novice teachers' cue-based or exemplar-based imagined identities may transform into rule-based or schema-based practiced identities as mediated by the mixed influences of the institutional contexts of school and dynamic educational contexts and (b) the institutional pressures seem to cause the imagined community to collapse and the imagined identities to be negatively replaced, but a teacher's perseverance and agency in keeping to his or her imagined identity may ultimately determine the positive evolution of that identity.

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Feedback From the Field: What Novice PreK–12 ESL Teachers Want to Tell TESOL Teacher Educators

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■ Programs in the United States that certify PreK–12 teachers in English as a second language (ESL) must meet high and consistent standards in their preservice preparation. However, there is little empirical evidence