Being Intercultural: Examination of
An Expatriate EFL Teacher's Experiences through Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

In an era of globalization, the global mobility of language teachers has been a growing trend. An intercultural dimension, as an element of professional learning, has a crucial part in conceptualizing the identity learning of foreign language teachers. This paper, based on life history interview, presents a narrative study of an Australian English teacher working in Thailand. Premised on perspectives of post-structuralism and interculturality, this article aims to explore the construction of intercultural identity, how cultural identity is negotiated in the international setting, and how cultural issues are approached in the multicultural classroom. The findings illustrate the necessity of repositioning cultural identity and reconstructing pedagogical practice, which paves the way for becoming an interculturally competent teacher.

Keywords: *Expatriate teachers, intercultural identity, narrative inquiry*

Introduction

With the advent of neoliberal globalization, the English language teaching (ELT) industry has continued to prosper as English becomes "a way of securing economic advancement, elevated status and trans-national mobility" (Singh et al., , 2002, pp. 53–54). Many teachers opt to relocate themselves to linguistically and culturally diverse regions. Consequently, an exponential growth in the number of foreign English teachers has been witnessed. There is a relative consensus that foreign language teachers play a crucial role in the intercultural dimension of language teaching (Bryam, 1997; Corbett, 2003), as many professionals, who expected to have "multilingual and interculturally savvy" (Sparrow, 2000, p. 750), could bring multifaceted insights to language learning.

Previous studies also recognize that when migrated to a new context, a teacher's identity undergoes a shift via interactions with significant others, whose beliefs and behaviors appear conflicting (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Martel & Wang, 2015). The trajectory of foreign teacher socialization is, thus, far from a linear process. A great deal of challenges lie ahead, due to linguistic, gendered, sexual, and ethnic backgrounds, pose a barrier to the construction of legitimate teacher status (Pavlenko, 2003). However, a wide range of these issues, have been discovered to address the marginalization experienced by non-native English teachers, such as hiring and teaching practices in western contexts (Clark & Paran, 2007). Comparatively, cross-national experiences of native English teachers, who arguably possess cultural knowledge and norms towards the target language, have not been sufficiently researched in Asian settings.

This article provides an empirical narrative study that examines intercultural identity construction through a male Australian EFL teacher in a Thai university. In this paper, we employed life history interviews to elicit the participant's critical episodes throughout his years of teaching in Thailand. Drawing on perspectives of post-structuralist identity and interculturality, we delved into possible processes that were related to the development of intercultural identity, the negotiation with multiple identities, and its impact on cultural repositioning of teacher identity.

Language Teacher Identity

The past two decades has seen a growing interest in research on language teacher identity, with the purpose of understanding the nature of teaching and teacher development (Kramsch, 2014). A major strand within this field has been devoted to the sociopolitical dimension of teaching, which

highlights socially peripheral groups, such as nonnative English teachers (Golombek & Jordan, 2005; Jenkins, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2008) and teachers of diverse genders, races, and sexuality (Motha, 2006; Pavlenko, 2003). This line of research, in the context of global situatedness rife with inequalities, reveals the increasing complexity of becoming and being a language teacher. In contrast, little attention has been paid to investigating (inter)cultural identity.

Borne out of studies on intercultural communication, intercultural identity makes its debut as a key construct for conceptualizing competent language teachers (Byram, 1997; Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005; Kramsch, 1993; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Rationally, an intercultural approach is infiltrated into the EFL/ESL classroom. It requires language teachers to not only make adjustments in teaching practices, such as classroom activities and teaching contents (Loo et al., 2017), but also to improve their own intercultural sensitivity and competence (Byram, 1997). Equipped with intercultural knowledge, attitudes and skills, teachers can help learners develop intercultural communicative competence and prepare them for being intercultural speakers (Byram, 1997; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

As an integral part in language teaching, the intercultural dimension is explicitly manifested in Morgan's (2004, p. 172) notion of "identity as pedagogy", where teachers' own cultural identity and intercultural experiences influence the way they approach culture-teaching practice, and vice versa (Lin et al., 2018; Menard-Warwick, 2008; Yang, 2017). For instance, Ruby, one of the participants in Menard-Warwick's study (2008), attributed her assumption embedded in cultural behavior to her intercultural marriage; Paloma, another participant in the same study, oriented her teaching towards the exploration of culture change according to her own transnational experiences. This pedagogy, however, may be restricted by teachers' lack of background knowledge (Harklau, 1999) and cultural disparities (Johnson, 2003). Harklau (1999), through the investigation into culture representation in writing class, found that experienced ESL instructors failed to explicitly cope with cultural appropriation and conflicts confronted by four female immigrant students. Similarly, in Johnson's (2003) self-reflection of being a mentor teacher, she was surprised to observe that her non-native student "Ali" paired his learners based on their religion for the sake of comfortability. Not only did this incident enabled the author to re-examine her own teaching philosophy about the significance of culture sharing among learners, but it also dawned on her that "it is a challenge for the mentor teacher to not lose sight of the whole person that is the student teacher, and to respect their values as equal to our own" (Johnson, 2003, p. 795).

Additionally, contextual factors such as institutional practice, classroom culture, and curriculum materials also play an integral part in teachers' intercultural growth. For example, some native English teachers in Canh's (2013) inquiry of professional identity construction felt isolated, as their workplace was unable to create an environment where effective collaboration among teachers was facilitated. As a result, this posed a challenge to expatriate teachers when it came to socialization into the local teacher community in Vietnam. The divide between the expatriate and the local is furthered widened because of the language barrier and cultural differences. Shifting our attention to Japan, Duff and Uchida (1997) provided us with a scenario that portrayed teachers' reconciliations with western-oriented cultural teaching materials. None of the participants in the study conformed to explicit approaches of teaching culture contents. Instead, attempts were made to engage learners via integrating current and localised themes into group discussions. Likewise, one participant from Stanley's (2013) study voiced how a localized teaching method was implemented in a typical Chinese university classroom, and how speaking a local language in class facilitates intercultural socialization in the course of interacting with local learners.

As far as Thailand is concerned, research into intercultural aspects of English language teaching has been focused on teachers' perceptions of intercultural communication competence (Cheewasukthaworn & Suwanarak, 2017), principles of teaching English as an international language (Kumaravadivelu, 2012), and implementation of intercultural education (Loo et al., 2019). Few studies have been conducted to probe how teachers' intercultural identity is negotiated and constructed in tertiary education. Thus, in this paper, we aim to explore how an expatriate teacher is blended into

the Thai multicultural setting, and how lived experiences have an impact on being an interculturally competent educator.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The design and implementation of our paper is premised in the ontological position of post-structuralist notions of identity and the analytical concept of interculturality. As for the former aspect, poststructuralist scholars tend to characterize identity as fluid, dynamic, and relational, which sharply contrasts with the humanist perspective of recognizing an essence as the core of individuals (Baxter, 2016; Dervin, 2012). One distinctive feature of poststructuralist identity lies in its subjection to a range of discursive practices, within or across which, individuals are shaped through actions and words (Baxter, 2016).

In the latter aspect, interculturality is commonly used as a synonym of intercultural (Jin, 2016). It could be described as an "open-ended, adaptive and transformative self-other orientation" (Kim, 2008, p. 364), involving individuals relating to themselves and others. But in this paper, we treat interculturality as an umbrella term that embraces a plethora of paradigms towards the positioning of culture and identity. It particularly focuses on the processual dimension of an encounter that involves interactants who possess different cultural backgrounds (Lavanchy et al., 2011). In this process, one's sensitivity, awareness and understanding will be acquired at the result of their identity negotiation (Dervin, 2011; Jin, 2016). Furthermore, the suffix '-ality' gives interculturality 'a more flexible, unstable and critical meaning' (Risager & Dervin, 2015, p. 10).

Anchored in post-structuralist identity with interculturality, we are allowed to approach one's cultural identity as being non-monolithic and open to change through interaction with diverse cultural subjects (Barker, 2004), but also blurs the "us and others" divide that contradicts with today's increasingly unified world (Tian & Lowe, 2013). To some extent, this is well exemplified by our participant who navigates from the homely Oceania to the unknown Southeast Asia, and may welcome possibilities for personal and professional transformation.

Methods

The exploration of the participant's intercultural identity construction was conducted through a narrative lens. Fundamentally speaking, the product of narrative research is 'a story or a collection of stories' (Murray, 2009, p. 46) which, in Bruner's (1986) view, are regarded as 'the most universal means of organizing and articulating experience' (p. 15). By storytelling, it allows us to search for fragmented debris and weave them together to make sense of our past lives. As Polkinghorne (1998) notes, 'we achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of narrative configuration (p. 150)'. It suggests that a narrative can help discover who you were / are, as well as come to understand the relationship between the past and the present. Therefore, a narrative lens is conducive to documenting our participant's changes and challenges in teaching, and in the process of being and becoming an intercultural subject.

Participant and Data Collection

The research participant, whose pseudonym was Oliver, is an Australian, male, in-service English teacher with a TEFL certificate. At the time of data collection, he was teaching in a private university. In order to capture the details of his intercultural experience, we adopted a life history interview to elicit Oliver's lived stories. As the name indicates, life history interview is essentially an in-depth, unstructured interview that documents people's lives or an aspect of them that has developed across the life course (Atkinson, 1998; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Meanwhile, we are aware that the non-directive feature of unstructured interviews may lead to irrelevant data. Thus, we created open-ended questions and invited Oliver to tell his stories. Based on Goodson's (1992) sources of life history data, our investigated areas included Oliver's biographical information, educational journey, and career stages before and after Thailand, together with English language teaching. Follow-up questions were created to obtain a deeper understanding of his story. All the four interviews, whose range was about

60 minutes respectively, were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The interval of each interview depended on the convenience and availability of the participant.

Data Analysis

To explore Oliver's intercultural teaching experience, we adopted thematic narrative analysis (Riessmen, 2008) to look at his data. From the outset, we immersed ourselves in the transcripts to make initial sense of his story. While reading and re-reading it, we started to make notes of interesting points. Then we coded the narratives manually, using Huberman and Miles' (2002) open and axial coding processes. Yet, we also know that researcher bias in data inquiry would emerge (Creswell, 2012). Thus, Oliver's narratives were separately coded by the three authors, and then the three sets of codes were compared. In this way, a dozen unanimous open codes were generated, such as inspiration, sense of himself, and strategy, which were sorted into different broader themes. In what follows, aligned with our research purposes, we developed three storied episodes (*speak-up in class, being a sensitive teacher, and accent adaptation)* to trace Oliver's intercultural identity construction. A storyline, coupled with our interpretation, was accordingly plugged into each episode on the basis of our conceptual understanding towards interculturality.

Results

'Speak-up' in Class

Reflecting on his teaching experience, Oliver told us that his teaching style was '*try to get my students to talk as much as possible'*, though his teaching subject is mainly focused on English academic writing. As the story unfolded, we got to know that this teaching approach had a close relationship with his schooling. He said,

> '*In my education growing up, we're always encouraged to speak up in class. There's always an interaction. Students can speak in class. At first, I don't know if it's the same in all Asian countries. In my experience, some countries or cultures are more reluctant to speak up in class. So that's always been something that I try to do. Have students speak, answer, and produce. Just for anything, because I wanna know if they understand what is supposed to happen.'*

As seen in his narrative, speak-up could be traced back to his cultural grassroots. Raised in an environment that encourages speaking, Oliver thought that interactive communication exerted a subtle influence on his teaching philosophy, which was subconsciously deemed as part of his own cultural learning identity. Initially, Oliver was unaware of cultural diversity in his classes. With the accumulation of teaching experience, he realised that there was a difference in speaking participation among countries. However, faced with relatively silent learners, Oliver opted to hold on to his cultural identity, and employed a speak-up approach to get his students producing, which, in his view, demonstrated their understanding of learning materials. In the meantime, Oliver depicted the speak-up application as 'challenging' in his class. As he narrated,

> '*Sometimes it can be a bit challenging to get them to speak. Maybe they haven't spoken a lot previously of English. I know it also depends on individuals and depends on that individual's personality. In my class, I have mixed students like Vietnamese, Indian, Afghanistan (sic) and Thai. If I have particular weak students, if they need to produce work, I always get them to work in pairs. Also, I don't wanna put people on the spot. You don't wanna make people feel embarrassed. I just want them to try to do something. If somebody is shy, I won't make that person speak first.'*

From his narration, Oliver showed us how he adapted himself to his learners, according to his awareness of cultural influences on communication. Based on his experience, students' reluctance to speak can be attributed to personal identities and lack of English exposure. Having recognized these two factors, Oliver did not require his students to adjust right away, so as to fit the way he was culturally approached. Instead, he made the most of students' diverse cultural backgrounds and divided them into mixed pairs. In this way, it increased the opportunities for 'weak students' to

exchange their opinions in English. What Oliver attempted to do was to create an interculturally safe classroom atmosphere by being flexible and providing accommodations. As a result, his students might not 'feel embarrassed' about who they were while being challenged to speak up.

Being a 'Sensitive' Teacher

For Oliver, culture plays a role in language learning and teaching. As far as he could recall, his teacher at school used a variety of ways to engage students. Not only did this learning experience construct his concept of a 'cool' teacher, but it also enabled him to recognize the relationship between language and culture. Since Oliver embarked on a journey to teach English, he has been employing this method. As he put it,

> 'Back to high school, My French teacher was cool. She didn't talk much about grammar. She introduced us some local festivals. We watched french movies and sang french songs together. So I think culture always has something to do with language learning. It also influences the way I teach English at the moment.'

However, Oliver told us that there were limitations in terms of broaching cultural issues in his English lessons. He explained,

> 'Some cultures are conservative, like students from Iran and Afghanistan, so I don't do issues such as same-sex marriage, politics, or religion. I don't wanna make people uncomfortable in class. I don't wanna create a debate among students. To some extent, I think a teacher needs to be sensitive.'

From his explanation, we can see that Oliver crafted a frame of a culturally-sensitive teacher identity. His sense of cultural awareness directed him to appreciate different values and cultures among his students. On account of 'conservative' forces that existed, it made him think critically of the potential risks that could emerge through the inclusion of sensitive topics. In other words, realizing the diversity in his class, Oliver had to tackle culturally-related topics with caution, as a comfortable learning environment was what he desired to offer. In retrospect, he added that he sometimes did feel the need to include certain topics for inclusiveness, because he noticed some socially disadvantaged students, such as students from LGBT groups. But, all things considered, he failed to do so. He said,

> 'I had quite a few ladyboys in class, because in my university we have gender study. I never treat them differently because of their difference. I just try to treat them normally. Treat them the same, because I don't wanna bring their attention to the differences in class. I don't want them to feel self-conscious or something. That is why I didn't bring up relevant topics.

Through his narrative, Oliver showcased his understanding towards non-normative gendered students. Considering that this group of learners were socioculturally marginalized, he, as an embodied male teacher, consciously built a gender-friendly setting. Consequently, Oliver did not engage his class on the topics of gendered-related issues, for fear that it might accentuate their differences caused by 'self-conscious' (sic). As the plot progressed, we learnt that what Oliver actually did in class was deal with general topics like '*teenage pregnancy*' or '*climate change*'. In order to offer students arguments for an essay or reasons for an opinion, he produced Australian-based examples in a neutral stance, as he stated, *'I just wanna give an example from Australia and logical sequence. I don't wanna say what is right or wrong'.*

Accent Adaptation

Being a native speaker, in Oliver's view, did not privilege him with being a good communicator. To his recollection, at the initial stage of his teaching career, he seemed to have encountered some linguistic issues. He reflected,

> 'Before I became an English teacher, I nerve thought my accent could be problem in class.'

As illustrated by his telling, gaining a foothold in language teacher education, Oliver enabled himself to discover what he was linguistically unaware of. It was unexpected to know that his own Australian accent, within the EFL classroom, posed a barrier to his classroom interaction. He further reminisced that it was sometimes a struggle for students to understand him. In particular, '*when I spoke at normal speed*'. Later on, we were told that students' unfamiliarity with an Australian accent was the contributing factor to the cause of this issue. He elaborated,

> *'It doesn't mean my accent is bad or something. I think it's because some students like Thais are more familiar with American accent. Nowadays, it's easy for them to access American movies and TV shows. I think because of the spread of American English, it might influence the way they understand other accents.'*

Clearly, accent for Oliver functioned as a cultural marker, which had an impact on people's perceptions. His experiences revealed that Thai students, due to the prevalence of American English, were apt to understand an American accent. As Jindapitak (2015) noted, an Australian accent among Thai students was less favourable than American and British equivalents. However, this miscommunication between him and his students was not a self-denial of his own linguistic roots, but rather an avowal to appreciate cultural divergence brought by accents. Being aware of it, Oliver felt the need to make visible adaptations. He said,

> *"I definitely speak more clearly. I try to speak more slowly. I don't speak a strong Australian accent. If they still don't understand, I will repeat some words or write on the board. Although I teach lots of writing, as we get along, I try to help correct their pronunciation, stress, and how they should say words. For example, Thai speakers have some pronunciation challenges like the word 'computer'. I would spend a couple of minutes stressing it."*

In his narration, Oliver presented himself as an accommodating role that showed his readiness to negotiate his linguistic identity. Reified in his clear articulation, slow utterance, and slight accent, this assigned identity could help improve his intelligibility in a multicultural classroom. Meanwhile, it appears that Oliver was conscious of students' pronunciation, though his writing class did not afford enough space to speaking. This awareness was likely to be attained via his own accent encounter, which enabled him to identify with his teaching pedagogy.

Discussion

Through three critical episodes of Oliver's teaching experiences in a culturally distinctive environment, we can see that classroom discourse parallels Kramsch's (1993) concept of 'a third place', where, we postulate, intercultural learning occurs as a co-constructed process that involves negotiating cultural issues with diverse others (Yang, 2017). Also, it denotes an in-between relationship that constantly deconstructs and reconstructs one's identity as the consequence of negotiated positioning. In this process, teachers as active agents are granted opportunities to not only reflect and rediscover what has been culturally formulated, but also embrace identity transformation for interculturally sustainable development. Individuals' intercultural awareness can be treated as the product of this complicated networking. In the case of Oliver, entering the discursive practice in classroom teaching, he attempted to enact self-possessed linguistic identity, presumably because he was devoid of intercultural experiences. With the passage of time, he learnt to perform a desirable identity. In a similar vein, his speak-up method embodied himself as a cultural messenger, which does not suggest that acculturation arises when cultural mobility comes in (Kim, 1992). Whereas this approach failed to resonate with his learners' backgrounds, it was this displacement that drove him to explore a pedagogic sense of becoming an intercultural teacher.

It is worth noting that accent also plays an integral part in one's intercultural socialization. With the spread of English across the globe, the custodians of this language are not merely confined to native speakers (Kirkpatrick, 2008). As a result, it poses a challenge to native English teachers' accents in EFL classrooms, which is evidenced in Oliver's narratives. Conventionally, when miscommunication occurs, it seems unquestionable to assume that non-native speakers are duty bearers (Jenkins, 2007).

Whereas there is some truth to it resulting from insufficient proficiency, we contend that the native speaker is not always the best manifestation of intelligibility. Among native-speaker varieties of English, there exist many diverse forms that are influenced by geographical factors and social stratification. In other words, not all native individuals have the same speech patterns such as GA (General American) and RP (Received Pronunciation). Moreover, these two reference accents, due to cultural imperialism, have been overemphasized as norms by EFL learners (Jenkins, 2007; Jindapitak, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2008). Hence, this well exemplifies why Olive's Australian accent or pronunciation initially collides with learners' cognition. For the sake of teaching effectiveness, Oliver made a corresponding adjustment and constructed himself as an intelligible self in class.

In a multicultural classroom, how cultural issues are approached has been a subject of scholarly concern over the past decade. The traditional belief of associating cultural teaching with facts and folklores falls into the category of an essentialist perspective, which is problematized as uncritical (Crozet, 2017). From what Oliver recounted, we think that it is imperative for language educators to factor global issues into EFL classrooms. As Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) argue, language teachers bear the social responsibility for cultivating EFL learners to be world citizens. This global mindset equips students with the knowledge, values, attitudes and skills to live responsibly in an increasingly interdependent world. To a great degree, broaching the topic "teenage pregnancy" also corresponds to the intercultural perspective in teachers' classroom practice. Particularly, in a multicultural context, this ethical engagement contributes to an enhanced understanding of societal issues.

Nevertheless, within language teacher education, there is a rough agreement that cultural aspects of language teaching should be premised on critical intercultural perspectives (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). It implies that practitioners would take an overtly political stance to incorporate sensitive topics in language classroom such as gender, race, and sexuality (Crozet, 2017; Kramsch, 2014), but Oliver's narratives did not give expression to such a point of view. Does it mean that Oliver lacks intercultural sensitivity? In our view, intercultural sensitivity, as an integral part of language teaching, should be fostered in a way that language teachers appreciate and respect learners' social-cultural baggage (Doğançay-Aktuna, 2005). Otherwise, a lack of consideration of intercultural appropriateness in teaching contents would be an impediment to students' learning environment. In this sense, Oliver did have intercultural sensitivity that enabled him to skirt controversial issues for a successful class, as well as approach marginalized individuals in a normalizing way.

Implications

Pedagogically speaking, we think that there is a need for expatriate EFL teachers to shift their teaching approach from a native speaker model to a lingua franca approach (Kirkpatrick, 2008). This would be beneficial to both teachers and students. For one thing, it helps learners realise what linguistic feature of their speech could be a barrier to their intelligibility. While pursuing a native speaker model is to some extent a matter of learner's choice, from the perspective of foreign language acquisition, it is almost infeasible to accomplish this unattainable goal. Meanwhile, in today's world, much English communication occurs among non-native speakers. For another, the implementation of this approach could be of use to steer clear of the miscommunication between teachers and students in class. A great many opportunities are given to expatriate teachers who attempt to explore communicative strategies and cultural boundaries for intercultural adaptations.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how an expatriate language teacher developed his intercultural identity at workplace, particularly in a multicultural EFL classroom. Navigating his lived experience, the participant was able to re-examine his own cultural identity and reconstruct it in a global setting. While the process took on a non-smooth trajectory, it demonstrated that teachers' intercultural identity as a dynamic mechanism involves personal and discursive dimensions, in which ongoing negotiation is engendered by both changing contexts and subjects. Notably, there are a couple of limitations in the present study. First of all, the findings are just based on one single participant's story. What was found,

thus, would not be the full picture of expatriate teachers in Thailand, though narrative methodology does not place an emphasis on generalization. We believe that if more participants with different social backgrounds are involved, the findings will be more informative. Also, we acknowledge that the approach to probing the intercultural self is diversified. Future scholarship may explore this strand of research from a quantitative or mixed method lens. All in all, this inquiry hopes to provide insight into the intercultural dimension of being an expatriate teacher, whose lived experiences will add to our understanding of this thriving community.

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