

Understanding the Role of Transformative Learning in Western Teachers' Identity Formation and Professional Confidence Development: A Case Study in Transnational Higher Education of China

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Since early 2000, collaborating with western universities to establish transnational education is becoming a key feature of internationalizing higher education in China (Lin, 2016). Many native English-speaking teachers have been recruited to work in Chinese higher education. Although native English-speaking teachers have no barrier to transport messages in an English-speaking working environment (Creese & Blackledge, 2015), their teaching experiences often present many difficulties due to the clash of different habits of minds with the local student. Native English-speaking teachers must overcome related cultural challenges and effectively teach the local students. Most of these foreign teachers came to China without prior working or living experience, and many of their native cultures have little similarity with Chinese culture. Though they can participate in cross-cultural and offshore teaching training programs, many of these training programs are either rudimentary or too general (Gribble & Ziguras, 2003). Yet, some native English-speaking teachers find ways to improve their competence in dealing with culturally related professional challenges and eventually excel in their careers in this unfamiliar culture.

This study seeks to explore native English-speaking teachers' working experience in Chinese transnational higher education. In particular, the study is interested in native English-speaking teachers' professional identity formation and confidence development as they address workplace challenges in a new culture setting. The study wants to find out: (1) To what extent professional identity negotiation can enhance or diminish native English-speaking teachers' professional confidence in a new cultural setting? (2) In what ways does transformative learning, particularly reflective practice, contribute to this process?

Identity development is a dynamic process. When individuals gain greater clarity on who they are (Cunliffe, 2002), they become more confident under their skin. Research shows that cultural newcomers who can change their previous reference frames can adapt better to the new environment and improve their abilities faster to deal with challenges caused by cultural diversity (Mezirow, 1998). By acknowledging and questioning the original reference frame, they

learn to handle complex situations (Bulman et al., 2014) and manage unpredicted incidents. The unusual pressures in life foster are nurturing ground for potential self-development and motive for action. Those impacts could be more potent than planned events (Merriam, 2005). The experiences of unsettledness offer opportunities for adults to search for the connection between experience and knowledge; therefore, provide a way to transform through learning (Bulman et al., 2014). Transformative learning is a process of changing perspectives and habits of mind that ultimately results in behavior changes (Mezirow, 2003). The perspective shift can be achieved through a deeper understanding of oneself, which leads to a fundamental change in mindset, worldview, and frame of reference. In the transformative learning process, reflective practice is a critical component. The process promotes self-directed learning and can change an individual's future behaviors, potentially leading to improved workplace performance and emotional well-being (Mezirow, 2003). The transformative learning theory underlines how one realizes their existence and builds relations with others. Such interaction, in turn, supports one's identity development (Bennetts, 2003).

This study uses the Biographical, Narrative, Interpretive Method (BNIM) to guide data collection and analysis (Wengraf, 2001). BNIM focuses on the individual experience and analyzes the communicative interactions to answer the main research questions (Wengraf, 2001). Each interview is carried out in two sessions. The first interview session begins with a very open question and encourages participants to share their personal teaching experiences in China. In the second session, the researcher guides participants to recall critical incidents and narrate how these incidents have influenced insights into their identity formation. The conversations explore the role of the transformative learning experience by discussing their disorienting dilemmas, reflections for new insights, and decisions on new actions generated after that. The study conducts iterative interviews with five native English-speaking teachers in a transnational higher education setting and analyzes data coding to "lived life" and "told story" (Wengraf, 2001). The "lived life" is based on Biographical Data Chronology and Biographical Data Analysis. The "told story" explores how the interviewees present their lives in the interviews based on the "test structure sequinization" and "thematic field analysis" (Wengraf, 2001).

Research data reveals the interconnectedness of personal experience, identity formation, and professional confidence. Interestingly, the data shows that the teachers with extensive working experience do not doubt their professional identity. When they face problems, they usually dive into finding solutions. They are willing to explore alternatives. This process enhances their problem-solving capability and adaption to the new cultural setting. It also reinforces their teacher identity. However, when novice teachers face challenges in teaching, it casts doubts about whether they can be teachers. As they persistently seek solutions, they reflect expansively on the challenges they face and improve their performances. Such a process becomes a vehicle for novice teachers to grow their sense of identity as a teacher. The solution is a searching journey that integrates a transformative learning experience. They reflect and self-directed their understanding to explore, identify, and test possible improvements to be better immersed into the new culture and be more effective in teaching local students.

The research discovers that experienced and novice teachers do not reflect as soon as they meet challenges. They rarely question why challenges have occurred. Instead, they look for a solution—similar to "putting out a fire." They have a sense of urgency to address the issue first.

Afterward, when the teaching completes, teachers look back at their experience and begin to reflect. Hence, the data suggest that reflective practice is not a tool for solving problems; instead, it is a good source for teachers to develop internal understanding about themselves to be better prepared to handle the teaching task in the future. As teachers become more skillful in problem-solving and are sure of their own teacher identity, they admit that they then become more confident in their professions.

The research draws on the transformative learning lens to support teachers' career development for native English-speaking teachers and contributes to the discussion of teacher identity and teacher development. The case demonstrates that reflective practice is a stimulus to both novice and experienced teachers' professional confidence development, and the transformative learning process facilitates identity formation for novice teachers. The identity construction helps novice teachers better understand their personal and socio-cultural conditions, which improves their capabilities to handle workplace challenges in a new cultural setting. Existing literature argues that change of mind helps with changing in action. This research data reveals that changes in action can facilitate cognitive development and shift understanding about oneself. Insights gained from this research offer practical guidance to applications of transformative learning in higher education professional development.

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