

A Hybrid Approach Toward Teacher Identity Research in the Transnational Nexus¹

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My Current Take on Decoloniality

My decolonial stance lies in Knowledge decolonization – Knowledge is power in the modern era, and coloniality has transformed from hard power to soft power domination through education, knowledge, and research. Couze Venn (2000) critically characterized what constituted modernity through the lens of the Western Canon in his seminal work *Occidentalism: Modernity and Subjectivity*. As English language teachers/researchers, we are all controlled by the normalizing power, from public language policies to institutional policies, such as the “hidden” curricula imposed on schools by Ministries of Education as well as the syllabi and materials guided by the hegemonic Common European Framework, which all reproduces the dominant ideology carried from Eurocentric modernity.

My doctoral research centered around transnational teachers’ identities. Language Teacher Identity Research (LTI) is a cross-disciplinary area involving Philosophy, Sociology, Education, etc. My learning, teaching, and research trajectory has taken me to different parts of the world in the past 20 years. I realized that the canon of these academic disciplines had been dominated by prevailing theories and ideas proposed by European and American philosophers, sociologists, and educators. There are various ways we are subjected to power in an academic context, for example, the imposition of a “colonized curricula” with fundamentally Western truth or fact, which seems to have a universal application regardless of location and culture. Learning about the decolonial turn on the concept of identity in the colonial heritage Global South invited me to embark

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on a journey of epistemological reflexivity (Vasilachis, 2009) by revisiting my roots and reflecting upon epistemological and ontological positionings in my research practice, which leads me to reject universal truth and knowledge colonization by adopting a hybrid approach that links oriental epistemology, western theoretical grounds, and decolonial thinking.

My Interpretation of the Decolonial Approach

My decolonial take focuses on breaking stable relationships and assumptions. De Fina (2013) points out that Language and Identity research has always focused on the stable process until recently. The stable and fixed concepts of place and national identity are stirred up and fragmented by mobility and globalization. In Language Teacher Identity (LTI) research, the big story autobiographical account of stories has always been the dominant and conventional method, in which narratives are elicited through formal research interviews where the researcher plays a dominant role in eliciting information from the participant, who is assigned the submissive role of providing the requested information to contribute to the researcher's work. Hence, the methodology chapter of my doctoral research attempts to shift the paradigm from the big story narrative approach to the small story narrative approach with collaborative, participatory knowledge construction through the active exchange of voices and experiences via daily social communication instruments. The decolonial turn in research implies not being confined by the normative approach; to outgrowing the methodological impositions by exploring the alternative methods and incorporating the excluded subaltern knowledge.

Introduction

If epistemology is the soul of one's research, then every researcher must embark on a soul-searching journey. The experience of studying and teaching in English-speaking countries (England and Australia) and South America (Colombia) has been enriching, adding multiple layers to my teacher identities and expanding my horizons. On the other hand, adjusting to different socially-culturally situated educational contexts also entailed rethinking and reevaluating many cultural logics and modes of teaching and learning natively from my home country. The teacher identity reconstruction process also made me realize that Chinese and Confucian educational philosophies were deeply embedded inside me, which formed the core of my teacher identity. Hence, I decided to be a "feel-thinking" (Fals Borda, 1981) to connect my thinking and feelings with the reasoning in research. Even though I am fully aware of the fact that it will be a lot easier to walk on the beaten path or just go with the flow, the spirit of being a researcher

is to face the challenges and uncertainties and be able to contribute new findings and add more valid arguments to the “customized” truth (Wallerstein, 2005 as cited in Castañeda-Peña, 2020). In this chapter, I will attempt to take the hybrid approach to research by deploying Chinese philosophy and Confucian epistemology of knowledge and action as conceptual apparatuses and then linking it to decolonial turn with under-explored data collection methods to expand the parameters of language teacher research.

The Locus Enunciation of My Research

A marked difference in education traditions and cultural doing results in identity reconstruction and beliefs reassessment, which is difficult to handle but an asset for intercultural dialogue in transitional teaching. I realized that every opportunity of teaching abroad is a process of self-discovery, transformation, and hybridization of teacher identity. Teaching across cultures is not total harmony without conflicts. However, being out of one’s element in an unfamiliar foreign teaching context has made me see more clearly who I am as a teacher. As an educator, the decolonial turn implies not imposing educational traditions and culturally loaded values on learners from another linguistic and cultural background. Teaching abroad, the encounter with the “otherness,” and conflicting educational policies, ideologies, and beliefs presented in different teaching abroad contexts have forced me to re-examine the traditions, core values, and beliefs that formed the foundation of my professional identities. Motivated by my own experience, my research looks into how transnational teachers’ identities have been questioned, challenged, rejected, extended, and hybridized through interactions with the locals when teaching across geographical and cultural boundaries.

Many academics acknowledge that the prevailing canon from the global North is more important and superior without critically questioning its universal application. Grosfoguel (2011) draws a poignant critique of current knowledge production that gives privilege predominantly to Western thinkers (canon) and epistemology and urges the need for anti-systemic politics beyond identity politics, as well as the recognition of the production of alternative knowledge that promotes “diversity” to decolonize Euro-centered modernity, leading to “transmodernity.” The unique quality and contribution I can bring to the doctorate program methodology-wise is linking/fusing my oriental educational tradition with Western and South perspectives on knowledge construction to counter intellectual colonialism. Transnational teacher-researchers are boundary crossers who cross not only the tangible geographical boundaries but also the intangible epistemological ones. Researching the hybridization of teacher identity also drives me to think about researcher identity. Are researchers confined to monolithic

epistemology? Can we connect the dichotomous North versus South and West versus East ontological and epistemological distinctions raised by paradigmatic purists? Can we take the plural perspectives or a more hybrid research approach?

The discourses in TESOL in Latin America seem centered around decolonial and postcolonial perspectives. Even though the decolonial movement is being embraced and advocated in research, colonial traits such as imposition, oppression, injustice, discrimination, power inequalities, exclusion, and silence seem to have been deeply rooted in EFL teaching practices and programs (López-Calvo, 2016, as cited in Castañeda-Trujillo, 2020). In connection to my study, even though Colombian regulations and public language policies seem to be quite foreign-friendly, transnational teachers confront the local subjectivities of “otherness” and work under the dominant social ideologies and group-based power of the host country, their voices/experiences in this country are unknown and opaque. Studies about how transitional teachers’ native identities interact with local students and academic cultures are scarce or nearly non-existent. I cannot help but wonder if foreign teachers have become passive receivers of regulations and ideologies established by national and local educational institutes.

“Transnational teacher’s linguistic, cultural, and social diversities are often viewed as deficits rather than benefits for education in the host country” (Walsh *et al.*, 2013, cited in Soong, 2018, p. 405). For transnational teachers, understanding the normalizing power that shapes the local educational customs, also the social structures that affect students learning behaviors/attitudes, is crucial for their subsequent adaptation. In most outer and expanding circle countries where English is taught as a second/foreign language, foreign teachers are the minority working under the dominant power of national academic culture and local customs in an educational setting. Are their voices, experiences, and cultural logic excluded from the dominant local learning modes, teaching behavior, and beliefs? Ovodova (2020) argues that the discourse of postcolonial turn is represented in the researchers’ attention to marginal practitioners and peripheral identities. My research aims To make transnational teachers’ legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 2001) “visible” through their multiple discourses at work regarding their teacher identity reconstitution through their narratives.

Reinterpreting Confucian Learning Acts in Connection with Transformative Intellectuals

The Classical Chinese philosophy views knowledge (Zhi) and action (xing) as a unity of proximity, “Knowledge (Zhi) was thus seen as a valuable factor, necessarily and inextricably linked to human activities and the implementation of

social practice (*xing*)” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2018). Therefore, one’s knowledge is built upon active involvement and relationship with their social practices, which explains why Confucianism seeks participatory and performative knowledge. In this regard, teaching and research are participatory and performative ways of seeking knowledge. In *the Doctrine of the Mean* (chapter 20), Confucius states that the Noble Man reviews the old and learns the new, thickening his character through the valorization of property. It implies careful retrospective and prospective practices. A scholar should cherish his old knowledge while acquiring new through continuous learning and reflection. As Tsai (2014) interprets, “While in what he has not reflected on or anything in what he has reflected on which he has not discriminated, or his discrimination is not clear, he will not intermit his labor” (p. 1479). This notion coincides with the teaching acts brought up by Kumaravadivelu (2003), in which he highlighted the importance of how passive technicians can become transformative intellectuals through continual self-reflection and self-renewal.

In addition, Elliott and Tsai (2008) recite an important doctrine of Confucius “The superior person honors his virtuous nature, and maintains constant inquiry and learning, seeking to carry it out to its breadth and greatness” (p. 573). This view on “virtue,” “constant inquiry and learning,” and “greatness” corresponds to Kumaravadivelu’s (2003) transformative intellectuals, whose multiple roles include teachers, learners, experts, and community activists. Confucius and Kumaravadivelu emphasized the importance of reflexivity in learning and knowledge acquisition. The creation of knowledge is shaped by constant reflexivity on the contexts and relationships between the researcher and the researched. The Confucian ideology of education is “to cultivate people’s virtue and moral character, to give new life to the people, and to do well on ultimate perfection as stated in The Great Learning” (Tsai, 2014, p. 1479).

Furthermore, Confucius said, “If the ruler wishes to transform the people and perfect the customs, he must in deeded rely on education” (Xueji I). His teaching implies that a virtuous ruler does not aim at obtaining fame, money, and power. Instead, he sets a role model that exemplifies moral behaviors and desires moral transformation by encouraging self-cultivation through education to make people internalize and demonstrate exemplary moral behaviors. Scholars and researchers are the knowledge providers and rulers in education. It does not matter how knowledgeable and high a political position a scholar has reached; self-collection is a never-ending vital task until his/her ethical values are internalized in self-realization.

One of the significant features of Confucianism is to “infuse politics with morality through the cultivation of the self since learning and morality are the

two axes of Confucius's doctrines. Tan's (2017) interpretation of Confucianism highlights the perspective of the action-orientation of knowledge, where self-cultivation is pivotal in a way that "each individual must consciously cultivate oneself to transform oneself and collectively realize the Way" (p. 4). According to Kumaravadivelu (2003), teachers as transformative intellectuals "strive not only for educational advancement but also personal transformation" (p. 14). In this sense, Confucius's doctrine parallels Kumaravadivelu's view that transformative intellectuals are socio-politically conscious and act upon it assertively. Cheng (2003) explains that in Chinese philosophy, the proximity between knowledge and action is seen as the proximity between an individual and the world because the action is a means for his/her self-transformation and the transformation of the world in the world. And from the Neo-Confucian perspective, "merely abstract knowledge was useless unless conjoined with ethical self-reflection and cultivation that eventuated in proper moral behavior and social praxis" (Internet Encyclopedia of Philology, 1995). I wonder if Kumaravadivelu ever drew inspiration from Neo-Confucianism. His "conceptualizing teaching acts" seems to have provided the best modern-day interpretation of Confucian education philosophy.

The Relationship is between the Knower and the Known

In Chinese epistemology, the word "know" (Zhi) does not only refer to intellectual awareness but also signifies the importance of knowing the way (dao) - the correct path. The same concept can be applied to carrying out research. Research should be conducted with ethics as the primary concern, not purely extracting information from the participants regardless of moral awareness and the correct path - to act with virtue. Tan (2017) points out that from a Confucian perspective, "learning is a moral endeavor" (p. 4) in which "virtue" is always placed above "knowledge," which affirms that the relationship between knowledge and action is not an instrumental one. In research, virtuous action can be interpreted as not treating the participants as an object of study. Confucius suggested how a man should conduct himself so he can be appreciated everywhere: "Let his words be sincere and truthful, and his actions honorable and careful" (The Analects, Book XVII, Wei-ling-Kung, chapter 5 as cited in Tsai, 2014), which can be employed as code of conduct in research. In a formal research interview, the researcher normally takes the dominant role of asking and eliciting information, whereas the participant is treated as merely the provider of information whose thoughts and knowledge were treated as material objects to benefit the researcher's work.

In addition, the "Confucian view of self is never abstracted from society but always lives in a dynamic relationship to others" (Bary, cited in Tan, 2017, p. 7). This self-other balance encompasses being responsive to the sharable values and

symbolic resources of one's community (Tu, cited in Tan, 2017, p.7). However, being in the shared social and educational context does not mean searching for "commonly shared experience." On the other hand, it is often to acknowledge the differences. As a researcher with a decolonial take, I am fully aware not to essentialize or universalize when interpreting stories my transnational peers tell, as we are unique individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Thus, my current research is not looking for commonalities. Instead, it seeks to explore the different stories of identity conflicts, tensions, and transformation experiences of transnational teachers in Colombia.

"*Sān rén xíng, zé bì yǒu wǒ shī*" is a well-known Confucius saying from the Analects (Lun Yu) about learning. The literal translation is, "I see three people walking down the road; each has something to teach me." It might be a simple phrase, but it has profound wisdom. Initially, it was an implicit piece of advice for governors: rulers should listen to their ministers, even and especially if their views differed from his own. Sometimes, it can be a painful scrutinizing task to take in diverse or contradictory views and try to make sense of them. The implication for research is that researchers should avoid interpreting reality from their angle. No matter how different or opposing the participants' reality might be, researchers need to be impartial learners and reflect upon it carefully before taking a certain course of action. Decolonial thinking is also not imposing one's values and perspectives on the other. One must be humble, observe, and learn from your peers in an organization, community, or nation. Confucius in ancient China used to exchange ideas and dialogue with his disciples, "good teachers often put their students in the role of teacher, allowing them to present their ideas and teach other students, and also the teacher, in the classroom" (Field, 2015, para. 6). Putting it in a research context, good researchers should put their participants in the role of researchers/investigators, which opens a pace that allows dialogue and exchange of ideas for a more inclusive interaction.

In my review, research is also a social practice in a shared community or context; hence, data must be co-constructed. No matter whether the interpretation of the reality experienced by the acting agents (people involved) is similar or different. Sometimes, reality is multifaceted, and it takes different voices to reveal the hidden dimensions. Methodologies such as collaborative autoethnography or narrative analysis (small story) approach emphasize co-tellership. Through the lens of "otherness," the different worldviews, concepts, and attitudes toward education have helped me better understand who I am as a teaching professional. Hence, I would like to adopt this Confucian ontology of self-other balance and relatedness to interpret how or if my fellow transnational teachers of this study go through an identity hybridization process through interacting and relating to

the “otherness” and balancing the self-otherness relation in our shared academic community and social-cultural context.

In research, this Confucian concept of the “dual” cultivation of self and others can be interpreted as the co-construction of the narrative and co-tellership. It goes hand in hand with Watson’s (2007) exploration of the narrative construction of identity. She clearly defines the engagement in “co-construction” of the narrative does not necessarily imply shared meanings “It is often in the acknowledgment of differences, the gap between ourselves and our participants, that analysis gains a purchase” (p. 6). Also, the gaps, differences, and inconsistencies might suggest counter-narratives that can provide alternative findings to the analysis and interpretation. The so-called academic cultural and education system seems to vary a great deal from cultural to cultural and socio-context to socio-context, which also enhances the complexity and challenges of being a teacher-researcher in a transnational zone, where commonly shared values and beliefs about education do not always exist or are not established. I need to be fully aware that my fellow teacher participants are transitional teachers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds; thus, we might not find similar experiences working and interacting with local educational customs in Colombia. On the other hand, having a shared status and identity with my fellow transnational teacher participants will enhance the rapport and trust between me as the researcher and the participants. Also, sharing common ground as an “in-group” member of foreign teachers will minimize my fellow teachers’ pressure to describe conflicts of interest and differential power, thus reducing tensions as they trust me sufficiently to recount their experiences.

Going Beyond the Narrative Convention to a New Narrative Turn

Vásquez (2011) argues that narrative research in TESOL remains very much in its infancy, lagging behind other social science disciplines such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, etc. Johnson and Golombek (2011) state that narratives have been used extensively to “engage teachers sense-making processes in their learning and teaching experiences” (p. 487). However, they also point out that extraordinarily little has been done to document how engagement in narrative activities fosters teacher development. This is the gap I am looking to fill in. I want to deploy the perspective of sociolinguistic narrative studies, where the narrative is considered a social practice with an analytic focus on “the contexts in which narratives take place, what they consist of, their performances” (Vásquez, 2011, p. 165). This view also coincides with Confucius’ ideology that knowledge is participatory and performative, drawing upon shared cultural resources for

more inclusive interaction. From this perspective, this new narrative turn is ideal for investigating the transformation of transitional language teachers' identities caused by the changes and shifts in their sociocultural teaching contexts.

Vásquez (2011) emphasized that the predominant approach used to conduct qualitative research has demonstrated the privilege of big autobiographical stories, significantly contributing to the collective understanding of language teaching and learning. On the other hand, she urges the TESOL field to recognize the potential contribution that small sociolinguistic story narrative analysis can make to studying situated social identities of language teachers and learners. In contrast to narrative inquiry (big story approach) with autobiographies, life histories, memoirs, and the big retrospectives elicited from formal research interviews, narrative analysis with stories told in everyday conversational contexts remains rare in the TESOL field (Vásquez, 2011). Ochs and Capps (2009) contend that most of the day-to-day business we communicate with our family, colleagues, and friends look much different from the narratives gathered in a research context. Watson (2007) defines small stories as narratives that emerge from everyday, mundane contexts, which constitute the performance of identities conceived through self-construction and identification. Georgakopoulou (2007) adds that in contrast to the Labovian criteria of personal, past experience stories of non-shared events, small stories can be "telling of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, share (known) events" (p. 146).

As we spend most of our time telling daily realities rather than interviewed life, the small story approach can reflect more truthful sides of "who we are" as language teachers in comparison to coherent and polished accounts of who we are in our teaching career, emerged from the big story approach (Watson, 2007; Vásquez, 2011). Vásquez affirms that because identity is both "contingent" and "relational"; therefore, small stories illuminate "how identity gets negotiated and reconstructed in and through social interaction" (p. 539). Complement this view. I argue that language teachers' identities are not constructed solely by the teachers on their own. Their identities are co-constructed through the interactions with their students, fellow teachers/researchers, the national and institutional language policies, academic cultures, local educational values and beliefs, and many other factors that result in the development, positioning, and negotiation of teacher identity. Because all these factors at stake can change or vary from context to context, uncertainty prompts the dynamic nature of identity. As a result, teachers' identities are not fixed; they can be transformed, reshaped, or repositioned by these variables that come into play.

Shifting From Construction to Co-Construction in Narratives

In our research community, participants are conventionally treated as “objects” from the information is extracted. The researcher is the “knower,” the decision maker, and the interpreter, who leads the data collection, analysis, and interpretation scheme. Georgakopoulou (2007) traced identity research back to recent decades. Her findings showed that narrative inquiry in identity focused on the construction and co-construction of identities came to the foreground at the beginning of the 21st century. Barkhuizen (2011) states narrative inquiry brings storytelling and research together. In the meaning-making and experience-shaping process, which he terms “narrative knowledge,” the researcher and participants listen, live, and construct stories, participating as characters and narrators in narrative research activities. Vásquez (2011) complements his view by commenting on the growing awareness of many narrative genres, where the emphasis on narrative practices and performances is shifting from the construction to the co-construction of identities.

The co-construction and co-tellership concept corresponds with Vasilachis’ (2009) view that new knowledge is being built through the active exchange of voices, experiences, subjectivities, and epistemologies between the researcher and the subjects being researched. She further points out that in participatory co-tellership, participants are the “known subjects” with whom we can learn something and continue to shape our practices as teacher researchers. This dual lens approach enables dialogic engagement with someone encountering similar yet different experiences in a shared social/cultural context. It helps to make sense of the complexities of transnational language teachers’ identity conflicts, negotiation, and reconstruction from an insider’s perspective. Richards’ (1999) study on ESL teachers’ narratives in a professional setting outside the classroom used data that emerged from teachers’ casual chats during work breaks. His study showed that teachers’ shared experiences and concerns reinforced personal and professional relationships, which created a collaborative culture through joint storytelling. He encourages further research to explore the roles and functions of “day-to-day professional stories” (p. 170). Bamberg (2006) argues that the small story is a dialogical and discursive grounded approach that can radically reposition the big story approaches; thus, it enriches traditional narrative inquiry theoretically and methodologically. Therefore, there will be no data collection in my inquiry, but data co-construction; my fellow teachers and I will be co-constructing data on new forms of teacher identity through a more inclusive interaction, exchanging teaching experiences, and sharing different ways of being and belonging in the transitional nexus. This perspective also goes hand in hand with

the Confucian concept of the Way (Dao), which entails the “dual” cultivation of self and others to situate oneself and self-cultivation within a social context and human-relatedness.

Conclusion

In this Methodology chapter, I provided ontological, epistemological and methodological reflections epistemological, theoretical, and methodological reflections concerning my current research, which aims to understand transnational teachers’ identity reconstruction and their process of finding a new sense of belonging in the transitional nexus. To explore this underexplored area in teacher identity research, I intend to employ a hybrid approach that is the dominant system and out of subjection by connecting Chinese philosophy and Confucian epistemology with an emphasis on data co-construction research approaches to justify knowledge claims. It is also in line with the decolonial and postcolonial turns, as Ovodova (2020) points out that “the identities comprehended within the postcolonial approach fix mixture of values and behavior models of their and others’ cultures” (p. 30).

Methodologically speaking, my doctorate research aims to eliminate habitual research optics by adopting narrative knowledge with a narrative analysis (small story) approach. Through small multi-party storytelling and day-to-day naturally occurring informal interactions to examine transnational teachers’ identity inclusion and exclusion in their foreign context in Colombia. This underexplored methodological paradigm breaks away from the canonical framework of TESOL’s big story narrative tradition. It enhances dialogical/discursive co-tellership as well as the multitude of qualitative research on narratives.

In short, this chapter takes on the challenges of uncertainties in ELT research through the decolonial optics by charting out an unconventional path via ontological, epistemological, and methodological reflexivity, endeavoring to shed new light on Language Teacher Identity research with a different perspective and develop new understanding in the field of ELT.

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