

## Exploring language teacher identity and agency through discussion group tasks: An exploratory qualitative study of English language teachers at a university in southern China

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This study explores language teacher identity and factors influencing the agency three English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers were afforded at a university in Southern China. Discussion group tasks (DGTs) were found to be an innovative and useful method for exploring teacher identity from a sociocultural perspective where teacher identities are constructed within specific contexts. This study further established DGTs as being useful for qualitative/exploratory research into teacher identity and provided insightful findings related to agency EFL teachers were afforded. Freedom was found to be a key factor that the participants related to agency and their ideal teacher identities.

### Introduction

Teacher identity and agency are inextricably linked yet are also dynamic and multifaceted in nature individually. There is a complex and dynamic process involved in the construction of teacher identities and the agency necessary in becoming and being a teacher (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, 2011; Day et al., 2006; Varghese et al., 2005). Previous studies have explored language teacher identities specifically in relation to agency from this dynamic definition, finding many factors to be involved in the co-construction of both identity and agency (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018). Discourse is just one of the important factors related to identity construction and has been studied with a focus on agency in the past too. (Sing & Richards, 2006; Trent, 2013, 2016, 2020). Central to a concept related to discourse and identity construction is the notion of discursively constructed identities within specific contexts, or communities of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2001). Viewing both identity and agency through discourse, as this study shows, arguably requires a sociocultural perspective to learning and identity construction (Vygotsky 1978) in which both identity and agency are mediated by social, cultural, and historical factors (Ahearn, 2001).

This study recognises the importance of discourse in relation to the ongoing process of identity construction within specific contexts. While adopting the CoP model as an analytical

tool for exploring teacher identity and factors relating to agency as the previous studies that have been mentioned, this study uses an innovative method for gathering data. This method focuses on discussion group tasks (DGTs), which will be explained in more detail. This study will explore factors influencing achieving, or realising, preferred, or ideal teacher identities, which has previously been explored through reflection (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010). A better understanding of factors relating to agency that have an inextricable link to language teacher identities may offer some insight for teacher education (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Day et al., 2006; Singh & Richards, 2006; Tao & Gao, 2017; Trent, 2013) and a better understanding of how institutions may help teachers achieve/realise preferred/ideal teacher identities.

### Research questions

This study seeks to explore the usefulness of DGTs as a method for gathering data. Agency has been highlighted as a critical factor for exploring teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) so will be directly explored in this study.

1. What aspects of agency are involved in teachers achieving an ideal identity at a university in Southern China?

2. How useful are discussion group tasks for exploring teacher identity?

### Literature review

#### **Sociocultural theory and communities of practice**

Learning is a socially constructed process through mediation and negotiation that includes past experiences as well as social norms and expectations on what to do with that knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). This same process relates to learning to teach or becoming a teacher, as well as actually being a teacher in practice. The pivotal impact of context, and the discourse which occurs within different social contexts, means learning is an ongoing process (Singh & Richards, 2006). From this perspective, it is possible to observe the construction of teacher identities within situated educational contexts. As Johnson (2009, p.13) highlights, “learning to teach, from a sociocultural perspective, is based on the assumption that knowing, thinking, and understanding come from participating in the social practices of learning and teaching in specific classroom and school situations”. Therefore, SCT has become a widely used perspective for understanding the construction of professional identities, such as teacher identities, within and beyond specific contexts.

SCT has huge significance for this study and the influence of classroom practice on the construction of teacher identities is crucial. However, Varghese et al. (2005) highlight the connection between *identity in practice* and *identity in discourse* and how both processes have significant impacts on identity construction. The CoP model sees discourse and most importantly mutual engagement as being central not only to situated learning but also the construction of identity within specific communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2001). From this perspective a teacher’s identity is shaped and reshaped in interaction with others in a professional context (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Previous studies on language teacher identity have used this same theoretical perspective and analytical tool by focusing more on teacher education (Clarke, 2008; Singh & Richards, 2006; Trent, 2013). Trent’s (2013, p. 428) study found that “the possibility of struggle and contestation implies that identity is seen not only as a product of individuals being positioned within discourses, but also as a dynamic process”. Acknowledging the dynamic nature of the construction of teacher identity as a discursive process (Clarke, 2008) enables for a truly open-minded perspective when analysing discourse

within context. However, many of these studies fail to truly gather data based on a discursive process between agents within a CoP. This study aims to rectify this gap in research by gathering data through the DGTs.

#### **Identity and agency: Achieving ideal teacher identities**

Identity is a difficult concept to explore. “Indeed it appears that a clear definition of identity is not easily reached, but that there is general acknowledgement of its multi-faceted and dynamic nature” (Beauchamp & Thomas 2009, p. 177). Therefore, exploring identity requires a great degree of interpretation and recognition of the interrelation of many factors. While acknowledging the difficulty of defining identity, its complex and dynamic nature is widely agreed upon. Hiver and Whitehead (2018, p. 72) explain how:

identity is composed of an interrelated matrix that features agency and experience, practice and discourse, along with many individual (e.g., self-referential cognitions and emotions) and relational elements (e.g., intergroup processes and role dynamics).

Agency, an integral factor related to identity construction, is also “a complex notion, with different approaches to agency founded on different assumptions” (Feryok 2012, p. 97). As a result of this, “agency is always mediated by the interaction between the individual (attributes and inclinations), and the tools and structures of a social setting” (Lasky, 2005, p. 900). Therefore, it is possible to view agency through social interaction and discourse like that produced from the DGTs. Agency may also be viewed as freewill and individuals often associate freedom with agency as enabling the ability to complete actions for themselves. Certainly, any relation between freewill and agency must consider the sociocultural impact of other agents within any context (Ahearn, 2001).

By using models such as the CoP model as an analytical tool it is possible to explore such a complex process as teacher identity in relation to agency in a methodical way. Studies by Trent (2013, 2016) and Singh & Richards (2006) both adopted the CoP model in order to view the ways identity construction occurs within specific contexts through processes of belonging: *engagement*, *modality*, *evaluation*, *imagination*, *legitimation*, and *alignment*. While all these processes are viewed as being pivotal for forming an identity and acting as an agent within a CoP

(Wenger, 1998) it is the notion of discursively constructed and produced identities through *engagement* that is of particular interest in this study.

A key aspect of teacher identity is the interrelation between the professional and personal self. This intricate relationship between a personal and professional self for teachers, “who am I?” and “who am I as a teacher?”, yet again makes exploring and articulating identity development exceedingly difficult (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). This is certainly a factor considered in the analysis of this research, especially in relation to preferred/ideal identities which has also been previously studied (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010).

Finally, it is necessary to highlight a significant criticism related to the exploration of teacher identity and agency within this study. This criticism relates to the CoP model which has been described as lacking the ability to acknowledge power relations involved in social and professional interactions occurring within a CoP that are pivotal to identity construction. As Trent (2016, p. 315) argues, “A focus on power relations is crucial to understanding the constraints and enablements individuals confront as they take on, contest, or reject different identities”. In response to this it is hoped that by recording and exploring actual discourse between agents within a CoP, through the DGTs, some insight may be given into power relations. However, this is unlikely over such a short period of time.

### Research design

As the method of gathering data through DGTs is viewed as an innovative aspect of this study the design and process of this research will be explained to guide future studies that wish to adopt the same or similar method.

### Discussion group tasks (DGTs)

Discussion group tasks (DGTs) are systematically designed tasks for participants, in this case teachers, to collaboratively complete to produce guided discourse which can be used as data for analysis. The tasks used for DGTs may include handouts with systematically chosen questions for the participants to answer, or tasks aimed at focussing participants on specific discourse related to the research questions, in this case teacher identity and agency. Examples of the DGT handouts used for this study are provided in Appendices 1, 2, and 3 and more detail regarding the research process will be

provided in the *Research process* section. DGTs should be of particular interest to researchers using a sociocultural perspective in which social interactions, including discourse, are crucial for understanding certain processes, such as identity construction. This process of data gathering is intended to help researchers explore answering specific research questions.

### Context

Context has already been established as an integral aspect of identity construction (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) and often dictates many of the factors related to agency teachers have/act out in educational situations (Clarke, 2008). Although many factors can be associated with context which may all be dynamically entangled with identity and agency (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018), just some of the most important factors for giving some insight into the research are given. The study took place at a university in southern China. Three participants, identified with pseudonyms for this study, took part: Brenda (Grenadian Afro-Caribbean female, 26), Adam (American Caucasian male, 60+), and Steven (Canadian/Lebanese Mediterranean Caucasian male, 60+). All participants are English language instructors working under the School of Foreign Languages. The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic which disrupted teaching in many ways. Many other English language instructors at the university were teaching online at the time (as they were unable to return to China) while the participants were completing their first semester back in the classroom since the pandemic began.

### Methodology

A sociocultural perspective to discourse analysis was used for this study which “...differs from linguistic discourse analysis in being less focused on language itself and more on its functions for the pursuit of joint intellectual activity” (Mercer, 2004, p. 141). In this case the joint intellectual activity involves the participants completing the DGTs which produced discourse to be analysed based on a chosen methodology which will now be explained.

Adopting the CoP model as an analytical tool usually involves an exploration of the processes of belonging which were highlighted in the literature review. Certainly, focussing on all these processes would give an in-depth insight into exploring teacher identity and agency. However, the scope of this study limits the exploration of these processes to *engagement* as this relates most

significantly to the process of completing the DGTs. By completing the DGTs the participants are engaging in a joint enterprise, interacting, negotiating meanings, and formulating discourse that gives an insight into their teacher identities (Trent, 2012, 2013, 2016; Wenger, 1998). Essentially, the DGTs themselves are a type of analytical tool and the *research questions* that dictate the design of the DGTs help provide the data which is analysed and interpreted. Crucial to this methodology is that “Categories [or themes] used are often generated through the analysis: they are outcomes, not prior assumptions brought in to sort the data” (Mercer, 2004, p. 142). Therefore, the most salient themes that are analysed and discussed in this study were because of the discourse itself rather than previous expectations which has the potential to produce truly insightful findings.

### **Research process**

The process of gathering data was completed through the DGTs, which were completed on the campus where the participants were working together at the time in a prearranged meeting room. Figure 1 presents the research process through a flow chart which provides a systematic method of reproducing this research in the future. The adaptability of the research process and design of the DGTs is one of its greatest strengths as a method for gathering data and exploring research questions. Of particular significance is the opportunity to change or adapt DGTs while completing the research process. For example, following DGT 2 and an initial analysis and interpretation, it was decided that DGT 3 required some changes to help produce more insightful discourse related to the research questions. By adding *teaching scenarios*, which can be seen in Appendix 3, it is believed the participants produced discourse more focussed on teacher identity and agency.

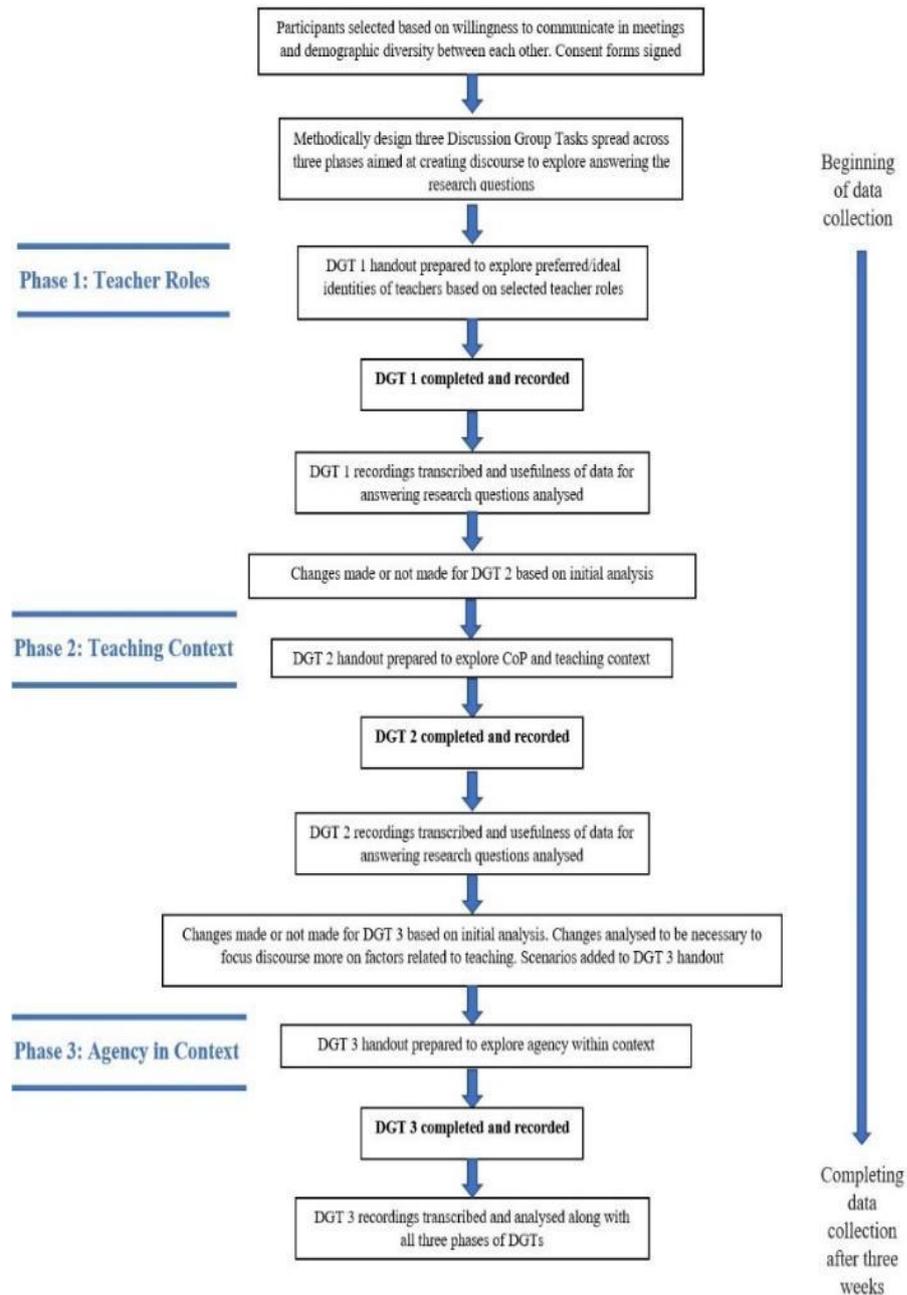


Figure 1. Research process flow chart

**DGT design**

Each DGT was designed to focus on topics for guiding the discourse produced in order to help answer the research questions. DGT 1 was designed to develop an understanding of the teacher roles the participants most relate to, the institution would describe teachers as, students prefer, and finally which they believe to be the most/least professional roles. The teacher roles were adopted from Singh and Richard’s (2006) study. DGT 2 was designed to explore the CoP and context further in relation to the participants’ teacher identities. Finally, DGT 3 was designed

to explore the factors related to agency that the participants produced in the discourse through their engagement completing the DGT. While each DGT had their own rationales in their design all DGTs are intended to work together to help answer the research questions.

**Findings**

The analysis of selected excerpts will highlight key interpretations made by the researcher. Each excerpt will be provided with the question/task command the discourse came from for each

DGT. From a total of over 10,000 words of transcribed data, thirteen excerpts have been selected from across all three DGTs for the analysis of this article. These excerpts were selected as they show one of the most salient themes that was interpreted across all the DGTs, relating to the freedom or freewill the participants expressed throughout their discourse.

**Most salient themes**

While there were many salient themes interpreted from the discourse produced throughout all three DGTs, ‘freedom’ has been judged as the most salient theme relating to the research questions for this study. Freedom afforded within this context can be split into three aspects:

1. Freedom to choose and put into practice any ideal roles as a teacher.
2. Freedom to settle and develop a teacher identity in a potentially difficult new teaching context.
3. Freedom to teach how the participants ideally want to teach.

**DGT 1: Freedom to choose teacher roles**

1. Choose a teacher role that you personally relate to the most. Each participant should explain why they chose this particular teacher role

00:53 – 05:07

1 Steven: I would say number one without looking at any of the others (laughs)

2 Brenda: I was thinking number one for me too (laughs) I think my job is to entertain Ok let’s look at the others though

3 [Steven continues to read out the different teacher roles]

4 Brenda: Can I choose one?

5 Steven: Yeah actually we can choose more than one I guess

6 Brenda: But it says a (pause) a teacher role so I guess one

7 Steven: sorry?

8 Brenda: It says a teacher role so I guess one

9 Steven: Yeah (pause) ah ok (long pause) but I don’t think we should we should do whatever we want

10 Brenda: (laughs)

11 Steven: Really (pause) what do you think Adam?

12 Adam: I think the rules are pretty wide open here

13 Steven: yeah (long pause) ok yeah (long pause)

14 Brenda: I think (pause) I think maybe I will umm (long pause) actually for me it’s more umm (pause) an interlocking of teacher as entertainer, story teller, and friend (pause) and also motivator and socialiser (everyone laughs) you see I do so many things (laughs) it depends on the day it depends on what we are talking about

15 Steven: mmhmm (agreeing) I would say teacher as entertainer (pause)

16 Brenda: you entertain them? How do you do that? I would love to know

17 Steven: yeah but it’s (seems to ignore the question) (long pause) cross-cultural expert (pause) sometimes yeah (pause) and story teller yeah....

18 Adam: ....I would say I’m more of a vendor selling a product the product is English

19 Brenda: ah (sounds interested) (long pause)

20 Adam: and getting them to buy (laughs)

21 Brenda: fall in love with the product

22 Adam: well at least take it home (laughs)

23 Brenda: (laughs) at least that (everyone laughs) at least that (pause) umm I think maybe I will stick with (pause) I think (pause) maybe I will actually stick with (pause) stick with friend I will stick with friend (pause) and I will tell you why that is what we are supposed to do umm I think it’s partly because (pause) my students and I are about the same age I’m hitting 26 but umm they feel the same age as me not the freshmen but especially the second years

24 Steven: yes mmhmm (agreeing)

25 Brenda: and umm (pause) part of a friend you know a friend does so many things a friend can be your entertainer when you need they can tell you a story they can tell you your different experiences that you had they can motivate you they can also discipline you you know especially a friend who has known you

for a while they can tell you when you are doing the wrong thing when you're not making smart decisions they can pull you up on it and because you have had this relationship with them this trust between each other then they really open up a lot to you and it's something that I realise that my students in fact I am surprised how much personal things they share with me but umm.....

(Excerpt 1)

06:42 – 07:34

1 Adam: well you know I'm going to stay with a vendor selling a product umm I think that encompasses everything that you were saying I mean there's times there are times I hear very personal things umm you know I have gone through three weeks where I have had people asking me how to get a boyfriend (Brenda laughs) umm (long pause) you know everything in here you have to do at some point

2 Steven: yeah (agrees)

3 Adam: right? Umm the disciplinarian there are times you have to be that guy but you know a vendor selling his product you got to do whatever it takes to get the product out right?

4 Brenda: (laughs) yeah

5 Adam: so sometimes that's being friends sometimes that's being a disciplinarian sometimes that's being a motivator umm (long pause) that's about it (long pause) Steven?

(Excerpt 2)

2. Which teacher role best describes how the institution would define the teachers in your context? Try to choose one role you all agree on.

1 Adam: I don't think the school would think that we should be entertainers

2 Steven: yeah

3 Brenda: But umm I mean.....

4 Steven: ....actually they don't think (pause) but they expect (laughs)

5 Brenda: but not officially that's the thing

6 Steven: yeah

7 Brenda: but umm

8 Steven: yeah unofficially (pause)

9 Brenda: I think maybe my first school more than this one In the first one I actually asked umm the person who interviewed me he from the school you know how should I dress? For the first day...

10 Steven: ....yep

11 Brenda: because you know in the contract we had a page we need to be modest and that kind of thing I mean I got that under control but I didn't know and he just said try something beautiful you know the students like looking at beautiful at beauty

12 Steven: mmhmm

13 Brenda: The students just want to see something beautiful they just want to talk with something beautiful (laughs) I was like oh ok (laughs) but umm here I think this school is a little but more umm (pauses trying to think) I don't just want to say formal but like a little bit more like they take our roles a bit more seriously than my previous experiences I should say so umm teacher as entertainer makes it sound like we are just supposed to sing and dance like clowns but that's not really it

14 Steven: but *unofficially* they don't want us to do that but

15 Adam: I think there is a difference between official and unofficial here officially they want us to be (pause) you know the disciplinarian the in-charge teacher like the Chinese teachers are known to be

16 Brenda: really? You got that vibe? I never got that vibe from here....

17 Steven: ...they want us actually....

18 Adam: ....no not the students *institutionally* that's how they would...

19 Steven: ...yeah (agreeing)

20 Adam: but what you get when you talk to individuals is much more relaxed

21 Steven: yeah (agreeing) they want us to play games more games and umm even the games don't mean anything you know umm....

22 Brenda: ....keep them happy.....

23 Steven: ....language acquisition or anything

24 Brenda: (laughs) oh well that's a nightmare (laughs)

(Excerpt 3)

3. Which teacher role do you think students prefer? Try to choose one role you all agree on.

14:35 – 15:03

1 Adam: three which teacher role do you think students prefer? (Brenda laughs) Teacher as entertainer (laughs with certainty of answer)

2 Steven: yeah (agreeing)

3 Brenda: yeah choose entertainer I think

4 Adam: try to choose one role you all agree on teacher as entertainer (laughs with certainty of answer)

5 Steven: yeah me too

6 Brenda: you don't think they want a friend? (pause) no they want to be entertained more than anything actually

7 Adam: they got friends (laughs)

8 Brenda: yeah yeah (agreeing)

9 Steven: friend entertainer

10 Brenda: yes someone to eat lunch with who you can have pictures with also

11 Steven: yeah

12 Brenda: (laughs) entertainer yes

13 Steven: ok

(Excerpt 4)

4. Choose 3 teacher roles that you believe define a professional language teacher and 3 that define the least professional language teacher. Try to agree on your answers.

15:21 – 17:22

1 Brenda: ok so let's start the first one that defines a professional ok umm (pause) things like cross-cultural expert (pause) expert and then

2 Steven: and language expert (pause)

3 Brenda: planner not so much here

4 Adam: assessor motivator

5 Brenda: yeah motivator yeah

6 Adam: curriculum planner

7 Brenda: needs assessor (Steven quietly reads question out again)

8 Steven: so we know our least teacher [as entertainer

9 Brenda: [as entertainer for sure (laughs) and the least ones juggler

10 Steven: yes juggler

11 Brenda: nobody wants that

12 Steven: socialiser

13 Brenda: yeah it also has a negative connotation (pause)

14 Steven: what else?

15 Brenda: we have two look at the third one

16 Steven: we did the least professional and we have three actually

17 Brenda: oh ok

18 Steven: we have juggler umm (pause)

19 Brenda: socialiser

20 Steven: socialiser yes and teacher as umm [entertainer

21 Adam: [entertainer yeah

(Excerpt 5)

**Interpretation: DGT 1**

Firstly, the participants each chose teacher roles that they personally related to. Both Steven and Brenda strongly agreed that *teacher as entertainer* is a role they relate to. In line 1, Excerpt 1, Steven instantly chose this role saying, "I would say number one without looking at any others" (number one referring to *teacher as entertainer* on the roles list). Brenda agreed with this role in line 2, Excerpt 1, saying "I was thinking number one for me too". Brenda also later relates herself with several other roles in line 14, Excerpt 1, eventually highlighting how the role of a *friend* can incorporate many different roles when necessary, in line 25, Excerpt 1. In line 1, Excerpt 2, Adam explains his choice of a *vendor* role in similar ways to Brenda's role as a *friend*, saying "I think that encompasses everything". Excerpt 3 shows discourse where participants are negotiating the role the institution would use to describe the

teachers. There was an issue on whether the institution would describe their roles as *teacher as entertainer*. Eventually they agreed that the institution would not “officially” describe the teachers as entertainers, but “unofficially” that’s what individuals within the institution “expect”. This negotiation is evident through Excerpt 3. In Excerpt 4 the participants choose a role they think the students prefer. Once again *teacher as entertainer* is strongly agreed upon, despite Brenda briefly suggesting the role she previously related to as a *friend* in line 6.

Perhaps the most interesting finding from the excerpts analysed from DGT 1 was that the participants all agreed that *teacher as entertainer* is a role they either personally relate to or the institution would unofficially describe their role as. Yet they all agreed it is also one of the least professional roles as a teacher. This draws many questions about what kind of teacher identity the participants have constructed within this context and whether it is preferred/ideal for them. Certainly, they are describing a potentially unprofessional teacher identity. Furthermore, the participants show how they can freely choose any role for themselves and actually adopt different roles at different times throughout their teaching practice. This is a clear example of the freedom participants have within this context which is closely related to agency (Ahearn, 2001). Teachers often take on multiple identities (Trent, 2020) and this could be viewed as a positive aspect of this context for teachers to enact agency to potentially achieve/realise a preferred/ideal identity. Both Adam and Brenda appear to have constructed an identity they prefer as a *vendor* and *friend*, respectively.

**DGT 2: Freedom in context and engaging with other teachers**

1. What advice would you give to new teachers in order to settle into life at your institution? Try to focus more on the actual school as opposed to social life outside of the school.

01:55 – 03:06

1 Steven: I think also we can umm talk about getting to know the umm IECO people

2 Brenda: mmhmm (agreeing)

3 Steven: umm...

4 Adam: ...yeah even just getting to know the other teachers

5 Brenda: yeah (agreeing)

6 Adam: because you know it’s not easy

7 Steven: yeah I know I know....

8 Brenda: ...our schedules are different...

9 Adam: ...ah well and we start right away too right so if you are program B you know you come to the welcome meeting on Friday and start teaching on [Monday

10 Steven: [Monday yeah

11 Brenda: mmhmm (agreeing)

12 Adam: so....

13 Brenda: ...but the good thing for new teachers is that remember we have that three weeks since new teachers only teach freshmen

14 Steven: yeah (agreeing)

15 Adam: not when I came here I went right into program B

16 Brenda: oh they just graduated you in...

17 Adam: ...they didn’t even tell me before I came here if I was program A or B so in the meeting they said you could be the program A or program B

18 Steven: yeah (agreeing)

19 Adam: and at the meeting I found out that I was in program B (Brenda laughs)

20 Steven: yeah (pause) that year was a you know because there were so many changes they needed we went from 10 or 8 teachers in program B to 15

21 Brenda: oh that’s a big change

22 Steven: so we had a bigger number of umm students and we didn’t have enough teachers so

(Excerpt 6)

2. Explain your individual processes of settling into life at your institution. Try to focus more on the actual school as opposed to your social life outside of the school.

12:58 – 13:53

1 Steven: as we mentioned before you know we need to talk to the teachers that are already here

2 Brenda: mmhmm (agreeing)

3 Steven: you know learn from [them because that's the only way we can learn nobody is umm IECO (administration for helping foreign teachers) is not very helpful unfortunately and umm SFL (School of Foreign Languages) they are not very

4 Brenda: [yeah (agreeing)

5 Adam: yeah

6 Brenda: maybe other priorities they have (referring to SFL)

7 Adam: you really have to do a lot of it on your own even just like getting around the campus...

8 Steven: [yeah (agreeing)

9 Brenda: ...because it's pretty big (sounds surprised)

10 Adam: yeah and there is many different ways to go to the same place I mean some of them are shorter than others you know

11 Steven: yeah (agreeing)

12 Adam: umm (pause) you know it took a while for me you know (pause) the stairway that used to be over there by building [four just knowing how to negotiate all that nobody really shows you that

13 Steven: [yeah

(Excerpt 7)

3. What aspects of your teaching and yourself as a teacher suit your context?

29:06 – 29:25

1 Brenda: this is a very refreshing

2 Steven: yeah yeah (agreeing)

3 Brenda: you know almost enviable actually...

4 Adam: ...and also actually for new teachers coming into China it's a nice way to ease into China

5 Steven: mmhmm (agreeing)

6 Brenda: you need the time to actually sort your life out

7 Adam: well also it gives you time to do [beyond the teaching

8 Steven: [right (agreeing) that's the long holidays

(Excerpt 8)

30:22 – 32:11

1 Adam: it fits in nicely with my context (referring to the school)

2 Brenda: yeah with the umm business man

3 Adam: well with the time I had to do business but also because I hadn't taught before

4 Steven: mmhmm (agreeing)

5 Adam: you know it allowed me to get my feet under [me while I learned

6 Brenda: [yes (agreeing) how to navigate..

7 Adam: ...how to do classroom teaching which I hadn't really done before (pause) despite the 120 hour TEFL (joking tone)

8 Steven: mmhmm document (everyone laughs)

9 Brenda: the students here are actually also it's very easy to teach them cause they are [shy they don't give you any trouble sometimes I had experiences when I was in the high school back home they would confront because you know depending what happens in their house who are you who are you to be telling me what to do I don't listen to my mother I'm not going to listen to you (imitating her past students) you know or the boys you know they want to puff up to you so it's different here

10 Steven: [yeah (strongly agreeing)

11 Steven: in the last seven and a half years I have only had trouble with one student oh maybe two in my first year they insisted on using their smart phone you know *all the time* (emphasis) they were using it all the time and I had to (pause) tell them to move to another class but that's it

12 Adam: yeah (agreeing)

13 Steven: usually they are very polite they listen and umm

14 Adam: and it's cultural though you know

15 Steven: yeah (agreeing)

16 Adam: you know parents are respected

(Excerpt 9)

**Interpretation: DGT 2**

The discourse from DGT 2 has been interpreted as giving great insight into how this context provides a lot of freedom to the participants, which seems to satisfy their desires as teachers. Excerpts 6 and 7 both show how participants believe engaging with other teachers is the best way for new teachers to learn in their institution. In line 4, Excerpt 6, Adam suggests “getting to know the other teachers” as good advice for new teachers settling into their institution. Then in line 3, Excerpt 7, Steven goes further saying “you know learn from them because that’s the only way we can learn”. It appears participants are suggesting a lack of institutional involvement for helping teachers. Essentially leaving teachers to find their own feet, which Adam suggests is a positive aspect of this context in line 5, Excerpt 9, saying “you know it allowed me to get my feet under me while I learned”. Adam is referring to the freedom he was afforded at this institution. Adam even states that “it fits in nicely with my context”, interestingly referring to the school fitting in with his own separate context as a businessman. Brenda’s discourse constructs an incredibly positive relationship between herself and this context. In line 1 and 2, respectively, of Excerpt 9, she states how “this is a very refreshing” “you know almost enviable actually” context to work in. Certainly, this suggests Brenda is constructing or has constructed a preferred/ideal teacher identity by speaking so highly of the benefits freedom has afforded her in this context. However, in line 13, Excerpt 6, Brenda does refer to the three weeks induction that new teachers receive and how this was beneficial for her, thus suggesting some institutional involvement can also be beneficial for teachers.

The reference to Adam’s potentially primary context, in terms of personal reasons, as a businessman in China is great testament to his choice of a *vendor* role as a teacher. It is possible Adam has constructed a preferred/ideal teacher identity that is based on his past/current experiences working in business and that this context enables him to achieve/realise a role as a *vendor* that helped him settle as a new teacher with no previous teaching experience. The relationship between past experiences and identity construction is widely recognised (Trent, 2013) and is actually viewed as a positive part of the process of identity construction (Singh & Richards, 2006). Engaging with other teachers implies some form of discursive identity construction as a process of belonging to the CoP

(Wenger, 1998). However, this engagement is described as “not easy” by the participants in Excerpt 6. Certainly, the overriding interpretation is that the participants view the freedom they are afforded to construct a preferred/ideal teacher identity, in relation to their personal goals living in China, as a positive aspect of this context. Structure is understood as a potentially enabling, but also a preventative factor for providing teachers with agency within educational contexts (Day et al., 2006). The three-week induction for new teachers may or may not be beneficial for other teachers, for example. Finding a balance between providing teachers with freedom and institutional involvement, for training and other purposes, depends significantly on the goals of the teachers. These goals are inextricably linked to teacher identity and agency (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, 2010).

**DGT 3: Freedom is key**

1. Which teaching context from the scenarios you read appears the most ideal? Explain your answers.

00:19 – 02:52

1 Brenda: the most ideal for who for me as a teacher or the institution of teaching (pause)

2 Adam: well I would say for *me* (emphasis) scenario one is (pause)

3 Brenda: is ideal

4 Adam: is most ideal (pause) you have got the ability to (pause) be pretty free in what you want to how you want to teach

5 Brenda: [mmhmm (agreeing)

6 Steven: [mmhmm (agreeing)

7 Adam: you are not being umm (pause) micromanaged

8 Brenda: yes I appreciate that a lot (long pause) yeah definitely not scenario 2 because ah ah ain’t nobody got time for that um umm so are we finished with one (referring to question 1) oh we must explain (pause) yes I like having the (pause) the flexibility to (pause) umm tailor my lessons based on the needs of the students the vibe of the students which is important and umm (pause) I don’t know I think (pause) maybe I guess other institutions are more focussed on the quality assurance part of it but here in China not really at least

not at this level I know for like the senior high schools because of the gaokao (referring to college entrance exam in China) the exam it will really kind of suggest if your teaching your teaching style and method is working or not but here hmm (seems to be suggesting this is not the case in her teaching context)

9 Adam: it's true that the university the university relaxed (pause) umm atmosphere is supposed to be the reward for high school (gaokao is notoriously difficult and stressful for students)

10 Brenda: yes (agreeing) so

11 Adam: umm (pause) and while we can all take our job seriously (pause) it does mean that we are given a lot freedom

12 Brenda: yes (pause) but you know as foreigners we are kind of used to freedom so we you know we grasp it and embrace it with open arms (pause)

13 Adam: actually in America now because of the common core stuff they are going the other way they are losing a lot of freedom in the way they want to teach

14 Brenda: oh (seems surprised)

15 Adam: they are moving towards that teach to test

16 Steven: oh really (seems surprised)

(Excerpt 10)

2. Which scenario best reflects your own teaching context? Explain your answers.

04:15 – 06:09

1 Brenda: well our context is that yes as foreign teachers we are given the freedom (pause) to you are given the book you can use it as a guide or you can follow it to the tee but it's up to you (pause) so that is what we are allowed to do here anyway (pause) and no one really checks perse (pause) was it umm (refers to director in English language department) that asked for volunteers to umm volunteer to come to their class do you did you volunteer to accept her

2 Steven: to do what?

3 Adam: no she is usually supposed to evaluate everybody in the classroom

4 Brenda: [yeah yeah (agreeing)

5 Steven: [yeah (agreeing)

6 Adam: but she didn't evaluate me or (refers to other teachers) or you right?

7 Brenda: me either

8 Adam: ok so four of us but everybody else she did (pause)

(Excerpt 11)

06:30 – 07:07

1 Adam: and I do think again you know number two (referring to question number) that we are given a lot of latitude to do what we want to do

2 Steven: mmhmm (agreeing)

3 Adam: I do constantly reuse plans but change them

4 Steven: [mmhmm (agreeing)

5 Brenda: [mmhmm (agreeing)

6 Adam: multiple reasons one I know what works in that plan what didn't

7 Steven: [mmhmm (agreeing)

8 Brenda: [yes yes (agreeing)

9 Adam: and I don't want to get bored

10 Steven: yeah (agreeing)

11 Brenda: that's really it too (pause) because by the time the good thing with like this semester I had umm the middle days of the week off so I had the Tuesday and my next class is on the Thursday so I am not *that* bored but umm like sometimes I choose different activities for different classes even within the same [lesson (pause) you know to keep the old cranker moving

12 Steven: [mmhmm (agreeing)

13 Adam: yep (agreeing)

(Excerpt 12)

3. If you were given the opportunity to make changes in your context what would they be? What is preventing these changes from happening now?

11:04 – 12:41

1 Brenda: more technology in the classroom (pause) but it doesn't particularly change the context just the tools

2 Adam: yeah (agreeing)

3 Brenda: umm (long pause)

4 Adam: yeah I guess I umm (pause) I don't mind teaching the way I teach

5 Brenda: me me me either

6 Adam: and right (pause) maybe some different tools but not

7 Brenda: yeah not anything yeah it works it works for the most part (pause) umm (pause)

8 Steven: I think if we can have the students' (pause) level more balanced (pause)

9 Adam: yeah (agreeing)

10 Steven: and I in every class I have this I have maybe two or three or *five* that can't even say one word of English...

11 Brenda: ...yes (agreeing) (laughs) there is a few of them

12 Steven: even read

13 Brenda: yeah yeah a few of them yeah (agreeing) especially the boys

14 Steven: yeah (agreeing) I have actually a couple of [girls also that they (pause) [nothing nothing (pause)

15 Brenda: girls also mmhmm (agreeing) [nada (nothing)

16 Adam: I would even....

17 Brenda: ...so even oh (stops to let Adam speak)

18 Adam: I had one class who is way ahead of anyone else....

19 Brenda: ...I also have that too

20 Adam: and he he is just...

21 Brenda: ....bored

22 Adam: so frustrated

23 Brenda: yeah (agreeing)

24 Steven: yeah (agreeing)

25 Brenda: I have that in a few classes also...

26 Steven: ...if he is bored...

27 Brenda: ...yeah I try to engage him a lot more but at the same I still can't leave those at the bottom or in the middle

28 Adam: no (agreeing)

29 Brenda: so I know he is bored out of his mind

30 Adam: yeah some kind of levelling would be (implying this would be a beneficial change in the context)

(Excerpt 13)

**Interpretation: DGT 3**

Freedom was highlighted as one of the most salient themes from this study and this is most apparent in DGT 3. "Freedom" is referred to directly or indirectly seven times across Excerpts 10, 11, 12, and 13. In line 4, Excerpt 10, Adam refers to a particular scenario from the DGT handout that is most ideal to him, saying "you have got the ability to be pretty free in what you want to how you want to teach". Brenda agrees freedom is important in line 8, saying "yes I like having flexibility to umm tailor my lessons". The participants relate freedom mostly to foreign teachers within this context. In line 1, Excerpt 11, Brenda says "well our context is that yes as foreign teachers we are given the freedom". All three participants also agree on the lack of micromanagement and even quality assurance as a measure of freedom, referring to this in a positive way. In Excerpt 11, participants refer to the fact that directors would not evaluate all teachers and would even ask for volunteers for quality assurance observations. Certainly the participants construct discourse that relates their freedom to positive teaching practice. In Excerpt 12, Adam and Brenda provide examples of how they can change lesson plans by considering what works and does not work. This also prevents themselves from getting bored as Adam mentions in line 9. Steven constantly agrees throughout the discourse. Participants do refer to some changes they would like to make to improve their context in Excerpt 13. Such as 'levelling the students' and 'more technology in the classroom'. However, their discourse suggests no evidence of agency to make these changes.

Interesting from the interpreted DGT 3 Excerpts is how the participants related their ideal scenarios not just to their own personal factors, but also the students. This correlates with previous studies looking into ideal identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010). The level of

freedom the participants refer to may reduce the potential of a discursive struggle (Trent, 2013) while constructing a preferred/ideal teacher identity in this context. However, this degree of freedom does not seem to diminish a sense of professionalism and may actually increase the necessity for professionalism with little structural guidance. Adam highlights that “while we can all take our job seriously it does mean we are given a lot of freedom” when referring to university context for teaching in line 11, Excerpt 10. This link between freedom and professional identity, constructed from the DGT discourse, is an interesting one that will be discussed further.

### Discussion

There are many issues when conceptualising agency as freedom or freewill. For one it does not fully consider the social nature of agency and how this influences human intentions, beliefs, and actions (Ahearn, 2001). However, the freedom the participants so regularly referred to and value so much within their context can not be discredited in terms of its relationship to agency and realising/achieving their preferred/ideal teacher identities. Hiver and Whitehead (2018, p 71) propose that “teacher agency is less something teachers can be said to *have* or not have, and more something that teachers *do*”. In terms of teaching how they want to teach the participants certainly relate the freedom they are afforded to being able to *do* what they want to *do* in the classroom. Therefore, if the emergence of agency is a way of externalising a preferred/ideal teacher identity, it appears freedom within this context is central to not just the construction of their current teacher identities but also the ongoing shaping of an identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010).

So, freedom could be viewed as an important element of helping teachers realise/achieve their preferred/ideal teacher identities within educational contexts. However, this does not mean that institutions do not have a role to play in this process too. While the participants gain agency through the freedom they are afforded, they also lose agency because of lacking institutional/structural involvement. The participants lacked the ability to make changes to their contexts in terms of policies related to levelling the students and access to technology in the classroom. Perhaps greater involvement of the institution through communication may help resolve these issues. After all, teachers are still able to exercise agency within institutional constraints if they are still able to act as agents

(Day et al., 2006; Feryok, 2012). Furthermore, the workshops that were referred to offer a platform for continued identity construction work that requires some institutional involvement. Essentially some form of balance between allowing teachers freedom to teach how they want, thus externalising a preferred/ideal identity, and institutional involvement to help teachers make changes to their context, as well as guide identity construction is key to any educational context.

### Significance

Continued identity work guided by the institution through workshops could help teachers achieve/realise preferred/ideal teacher identities. This is particularly significant when identity is viewed as dynamic (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Hiver & Whitehead, 2018) as constructed identities are likely to change for better or worse. This may be done by reflecting on ideal identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010) as a group with other teachers, thus providing a platform for engagement and discursively constructing teacher identities (Trent, 2020). Ultimately, teachers that feel they are achieving/realising their preferred/ideal identities are more likely to be happy teachers. After all, “there are also consequences to teachers’ professional well-being when their agency is limited” (Tao & Gao, 2017, p. 347). Workshops may be a platform for hearing teachers’ voices and potentially helping them make changes to their context, thus providing further agency.

### Limitations

The use of the CoP model has resulted in some limitations to this study. Engagement, among other processes, is viewed as integral to the formation of identities within a CoP (Wenger, 1998). While the DGTs themselves offered an example of engagement there did not appear to be much evidence of other forms of regular engagement between teachers to say that they may profoundly influence each other’s identity construction through discourse. However, this does not mean to say that no identity has occurred. In fact, the freedom the participants value within this context appears to be central to their construction of preferred/ideal identities. Therefore, the usefulness of the CoP model for explaining the relationship between agency and identity within this context is flawed.

### Conclusion

Overall this study has found that freedom is an important aspect of agency for teachers to

achieve an ideal teacher identity within this specific context. The DGTs once again proved very useful for exploring teacher identity, especially when viewed from a sociocultural perspective. Moving forward complex dynamic systems theory may prove to be a more useful tool for analysing data from the DGTs. This is a theory that is growing in significance and has been used in previous studies on teacher identity and agency (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018). Through this theory, it will be possible to consider the multifaceted nature of identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) and the interrelation of factors besides those found within the institutional context. The DGTs can be improved to focus more on the goals teachers have in order to gain a greater insight into their preferred/ideal identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010). The use of metaphors is another potential way to explore teacher identity in the future. Focusing more on discursively constructed metaphors through the DGTs could be potentially enlightening and builds on previous studies (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). Yet again this has been a truly insightful study that has enabled the researcher to learn a lot about a specific context and what teachers value in terms of identity construction and how inextricably linked agency is to this process.

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### **About the author**

**Robert Wood:** I have been teaching English as a Foreign Language for over 8 years in Asia. Most of this time was spent in South Korea, teaching young learners in a busy private school context. After completing an MATESOL course at the University of Nottingham I developed an interest in researching teacher identity and the factors that influence this. This interest was largely based on personal experiences of the dynamic nature of teaching and living in a foreign context. In China I began working at the university level where I am currently teaching English for Academic Purposes for students at Jinan-University of Birmingham Joint Institute. The university level of teaching offered me more time to pursue research within my working context, which continues to be a great passion of mine.

## Appendix 1: Discussion Group Task 1 Handout

### Teacher Roles

Below you will see a selection of different teacher roles. Answer the questions in order based on the teacher roles provided.

### Questions

1. Choose a teacher role that you personally relate to the most. Each participant should explain why they chose this particular teacher role.
2. Which teacher role best describes how the institution would define the teachers in your context? Try to choose one role you all agree on.
3. Which teacher role do you think students prefer? Try to choose one role you all agree on.
4. Choose 3 teacher roles that you believe define a professional language teacher and 3 that define the least professional language teacher. Try to agree on your answers.

teacher as entertainer, cross-cultural expert, oral interviewer, language expert, language model, disciplinarian, counsellor, curriculum planner, curriculum evaluator, reflective practitioner, storyteller, team builder, material developer, friend, interaction manager, needs assessor, socializer, motivator, collaborator, juggler, care provider, vendor (selling a product), learner, and presenter.

## Appendix 2: Discussion Group Task 2 Handout

### Teaching in Our Contexts

\*Collaboratively answer the questions below **in order**

1. What advice would you give to new teachers in order to settle into life at your institution? Try to focus more on the actual school as opposed to social life outside of the school.
2. What should/must a teacher do/not do in order to be successful at your institution?
3. Explain your individual processes of settling into life at your institution. Try to focus more on the actual school as opposed to your social life outside of the school.
4. Define the ideal teacher for your institution (nationality, age, ethnicity, qualifications, gender, etc.)
5. What aspects of your teaching and yourself as a teacher suit your context?

## Appendix 3: Discussion Group Task 3 Handout

### Teachers in Context

\*Collaboratively answer the questions below **in order**

1. Which teaching context from the scenarios you read appears the most ideal? Explain your answers.
2. Which scenario best reflects your own teaching context? Explain your answers.
3. How does your own teaching context enable you to be the teacher you want to be?
4. If you were given the opportunity to make changes in your context what would they be? What is preventing these changes from happening now?

### Scenario 1

Lesley is an English language teacher who has been teaching at the same university for 6 years now. She has worked with all different level students, including English majors. Most of her past experiences teaching were with primary school students in the U.S. Her priority was always to let the students have fun and she would proactively create lessons to enable this.

Each semester Lesley adapts her previous lesson plans in ways that she believes will benefit the learning outcomes of her university students. Although she must follow a particular syllabus there is no prescribed way of teaching and her classes are rarely observed for quality assurance. Most of the other teachers in her context prefer to use the textbooks that the school provides, and many have encouraged her to do the same,

“it makes life easier” they say. Lesley understands their meaning, but she never felt satisfied doing the same things over and over again. Lesley is happy to stay at her current job because she can do what she wants to do with no interruption. As long as they stay out her business, she is happy.

### **Scenario 2**

Tom has a PhD in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics and has spent most of his 20 years working career teaching at the university level. He is currently halfway through the first academic year at his new university job.

After the first semester Tom was worried that he had too many classes and was not able to focus on creating student-centred lesson plans for each class, classes that were hugely different in levels. Tom decided to first approach his fellow teachers about this issue and was told that they had raised this issue many times in the past and nothing has changed. Most of these teachers had only spent 2-3 years working at the university and were not as qualified as Tom. However, when Tom approached the administration and school leaders with the issue, they appeared very concerned. The following semester classes were reduced for all teachers and Tom felt he was given the time to create personalised lesson plans for each of his classes.

### **Scenario 3**

Tina is an English language teacher from the UK. She just completed her 120 hour TEFL certificate and was excited about teaching abroad. She had volunteered to teach refugees through her church in the past and felt like a change in her life.

The university Tina began her work abroad at introduced every semester with teacher workshops that focussed a lot on guiding the teachers to set goals for each academic year. Tina’s goal was to create an enthusiastic environment for learning with her high energy teaching, she really wanted her students to improve their confidence more than anything. The director of the English language department provided her with a spacious room that did not have as much technology for teaching but gave her enough space for all the activities Tina had shared her desires to try out. Tina felt she achieved her goals and was eager to sign another contract.