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Professional Survival in a Neoliberal Age: A Case Study of an EFL Teacher in China

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This study explored the negotiation of a Chinese EFL teacher's teaching identity in light of recent critique of neoliberalism. Ms. Q, our focal participant, worked in a private English school that commodified English, and her main teaching responsibility was to prepare students for the IELTS test. We adopted an agency-centered approach to explore how Ms. Q's professional identity was negotiated in relation to the exercise and investment of her professional agency. In particular, Haneda and Sherman's (2016) job-crafting perspective on teacher agency was adopted to illustrate how Ms. Q was able to go beyond the prescribed teaching role assigned by the school. This move, in turn, contributed to her teacher identity development because she was able to exercise agency within the affordances and constraints of the given work context. Our data include classroom observation, interviews with Ms. Q and her students, Ms. Q's teaching materials and her posts in a Chinese social network (Wechat). Our findings revealed that Ms. Q's investment in constructing the desired teacher identity, that is, to be a good educator, supported her to transcend the prescribed space for teaching practice and make agentic decisions in the classroom that were in accordance with her teaching beliefs.

Keywords: teacher agency, job-crafting, neoliberalism

What I was told most from the high authority is 'I don't care what and how you teach; you just need to give me nice scores.' I think education should mean more than just boosting students' test scores, as the old Chinese saying goes, 'a teacher should impart knowledge, and educate people'. I try to educate my students, let them know what they can do to empower themselves and live their dreams.

I don't see myself doing this teaching job for the rest of my life. I do not see possibilities for professional development, nor the profession helping me to become a more fulfilled person. There is not enough space in this field for teachers' self-empowerment.

Introduction

The privatization of English language education has commodified English and made it a clear manifestation of neoliberalism (De Costa & Norton, 2016), which creates new challenges for English language teachers (Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012). Block et al. (2012) aptly observe that the purpose of

education in the age of neoliberalism is to produce "workers with the skills and the dispositions necessary to compete in the global economy" (p. 120). These neoliberal demands present challenges for teachers at two levels: (1) the micro-classroom level, where students are assessed by different high stakes standardized tests that often become the primary measure of teacher efficacy (Bernstein, Hellmich, Katznelson, Shin, & Vinall, 2015); and (2) the meso-school level, where school administrators put great emphasis on teacher accountability, leading to the commoditization of teachers' subject knowledge and pedagogical practices (De Costa & Norton, 2017). Inevitably, the effects of such neoliberal demands are felt by English teachers, such as Ms. Q, our focal participant, whose disenfranchisement is instantiated in the excerpted epigraph to this paper which focuses on English language teacher identity in China's private language schools.

Teaching English in China in a Neoliberal Age

The private English as a foreign language (EFL) industry in China has grown exponentially in response to the demand for English (Hu & McKay, 2012; Nunan, 2003; Piller, Takahashi, & Watanabe, 2010). According to Gu (2010), since the Chinese government's adoption of the Open-Door Policy in the mid-1970s and its shift towards a market economy, China has witnessed a surge of English language learning and teaching, with current estimates ranging from 200 to 350 million EFL learners. Ms. Q, who worked at a private English school in China, experienced first-hand how English teaching has become commodified in her teaching context. As seen in the two epigraphic excerpts, Ms. Q's main teaching responsibility was to prepare her students for standardized English language tests regardless of how and what she taught. Nevertheless, she viewed teaching as being more than just boosting students' test scores. To her, being a teacher entailed bearing the moral responsibility of educating students so that they would become independent and take responsibility of their own lives. Unfortunately, the school where she was employed failed to provide enough space and support for Ms. Q to operationalize her imagined teacher identity (Xu, 2012) in a way that reflected her teaching beliefs. Consequently, Ms. Q indicated that she might leave teaching in the future, as she saw little room for professional improvement. By telling Ms. Q's story of being an English teacher, our study contributes to a larger ongoing conversation on how English teachers achieve their agency and construct their professional identity in empowering ways. In addition, by underscoring Ms. Q's concerns about the English teaching profession, we aim to call attention to the issue of teaching sustainability within the global EFL industry.

Teacher Identity and Teacher Agency

Recent ~~years~~ studies on teacher identity have proliferated in the field of EFL teaching (e.g. De Costa & Norton, 2016; Tsui, 2007; Xu, 2012). One common key finding from these studies is that language teacher identity (LTI) construction emerges from the interaction of various factors at different levels (e.g., micro classroom practice, meso administration authority, and macro societal ideology), a perspective that is much in line with the Douglas Fir Group's (2016) proposed transdisciplinary framework. This framework examines identity development from mainly three levels: cultural values and ideologies (macro level), institutional practices (meso level) and individual's actions in varied classroom contexts (micro level). However, much of the focus in language teacher identity has been at the macro and meso level, which frame teacher identity formation as being mediated by both immediate teaching contexts and wider sociocultural conditions (e.g., Gu, 2011; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Xu, 2012). Missing from the LTI landscape, however, is the role teacher agency plays in shaping and reshaping teachers' identities, and how teachers' identities are often manifested in and through their agentic actions.

When defining the construct of teacher identity, researchers (e.g., Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Lasky, 2005) have proposed investigating how teachers develop as professional agents over the course of their career as they construct their identity based on their past experiences of learning and teaching, current views of the profession, and the ways they envision the future. That said, few empirical studies,

however, have investigated teacher identity through the perspective of teacher agency (see Tao & Gao, 2017; Vähäsantanen, 2015 for exceptions) even though teacher agency and teacher identity are mutually constitutive. According to Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, and Paloniemi (2013), teacher agency refers to individual teacher engagement in agentic actions for the purpose of exerting influence and transforming their work contexts, while recognizing that their actions are often enabled or impeded by the affordances or constraints they encounter in the very same contexts. When articulating the relationship between teacher agency and teacher identity, Vähäsantanen (2015) and Eteläpelto et al. (2013) suggested that the exercise of professional agency cannot be separated from one's professional identity. Admittedly, one's professional identity representing specific beliefs and ideas regarding teaching and learning can motivate and guide the exercise of one's agency; on the other hand, by enacting one's agency at work, a teacher's identity can be negotiated in accordance with his or her goals and interests (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Building on this crucial teacher identity-teacher agency connection, our study employed an agency-centered approach to examine how our focal teacher, Ms. Q's desired teacher identity (1) pushed her to go beyond the teacher role imposed upon her, and (2) helped her interrogate her local school policy in ways that enhanced the learning outcomes of her students.

Teacher Agency from a Job-crafting Perspective

This study is guided by Haneda and Sherman's (2016) job-crafting perspective on teacher agency. Our rationale for adopting this perspective to examine teacher agency is two-fold: first, it employed an ecological framework, developed by Biesta and Tedder (2007), which recognizes the achievement of agency as "the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations" (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137). Thus, the exercise of teacher agency should be understood in terms of situated affordances or constraints. Biesta and Tedder (2007) also incorporated a temporal dimension (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) into their understanding of agency. According to them, teachers' *past* experiences (e.g., their personal history, their professional training, etc.), their engagement in the *present*, and how they envision the *future* are inextricably linked. Put simply, a teacher's agentic actions are informed by him or her past experiences, him or her future goals, and the resources available to him or her at present (Haneda & Sherman, 2016).

Second, by adding the notion of job crafting from organizational studies (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) to this framework, Haneda and Sherman provided a lens to interpret the exercise of teacher agency by viewing teachers as job crafters, who could actively evaluate a particular context and thus make agentic decisions of negotiating their prescribed role and modifying their assigned job duties accordingly. In other words, teachers, as noted by Haneda and Sherman (2016), have their prescribed and official "roles". Despite these ostensible restrictions, teachers are able to (1) exert their agency, (2) extend themselves beyond those roles, and (3) construct their own sense of work role and purpose. By doing these, they become job crafters, which refer to individuals who can:

> actively compose both what their job is physically, by changing a job's task boundaries, what their job is cognitively, by changing the way they think about the relationships among job tasks, and what their job is relationally, by changing the interactions and relationships they have with others at work. (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 180).

These aforementioned manifestations of agency, as exercised by job crafters at work, informed our study and afforded us a valuable heuristic for interpreting Ms. Q's agentic actions. Wrzesniewski and Dutton's job-crafting perspective thus allowed us to (1) understand Ms. Q's prescribed teacher role and job duties and how this assigned role limited the space for exercising teacher agency; (2) view the change of job boundaries through examining her relationship with the supervisor and students at work; and (3) explore her agentic actions (i.e., job-crafting) in relation to her envisioned work purpose and the

affordances and constraints of the local contexts.

To better understand Ms. Q's perception of her professional space and her agency, we drew on the insights gleaned from Oolbekkink-Marchand, Hadar, Smith, Helleve, and Ulvik (2017), who investigated 18 secondary school teachers' perceptions of how they exploited their teaching space and what drawbacks they experienced as a result of the exploitation of their space. Oolbekkink-Marchand et al. (2017) reported that it was their teacher participants' experience with classroom teaching practice, school contexts as well as their relations with the school management and personal pedagogical values and beliefs that helped them exploit the professional space they inhabited. By contrast, increased control from the institutional level, students' parents, a lack of recognition by school management, and conflicts with colleagues prevented them from exercising their agency. Importantly, Oolbekkink-Marchand et al.'s (2017) findings attuned us to the need to consider the affordances and constraints embedded within teachers' teaching contexts.

To summarize, this study investigated Ms. Q's negotiation of teacher identity by adopting the notion of job-crafting as put forward by Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) and Haneda and Sherman (2016). Acknowledging the complex relationship between teacher identity and teacher agency, we explored the following two research questions:

1. How did Ms. Q negotiate her teacher identity in relation to contextual affordances and constraints at her school?
2. How did Ms. Q's exercise of teacher agency affect the ways in which she negotiated her teacher identity?

Methodology

Focal Participant: Ms. Q

At the time of the study, Ms. Q worked as a full-time English teacher in a private English school in Nanchang, Jiangxi province, China. Graduating with a bachelor degree of English from a major university in Jiangxi province, she decided to further her education in Ireland. After obtaining a master's degree in tourism, she returned to China and started to teach English. Author 1 first met Ms. Q when she was applying for a teaching position at the school where Ms. Q was employed then. The school offered both Ms. Q and Author 1 jobs to conduct IELTS preparation courses. After half a year, Author 1 left to pursue her Master's Degree overseas, whereas Ms. Q stayed there and taught English-related courses for almost four years. We started collecting data for this study during the summer of 2016, when Ms. Q was helping three students with IELTS speaking test.

Data Sources

The study was conducted over six months (from June 2016 to November 2016). Ms. Q was teaching three students in the school's summer program (from June to July) which aimed to provide students with two months of intensive training preparation for the IELTS test. Since September 2016, Ms. Q has started teaching five students who were enrolled in the school's one-year foundation program. The data consisted of classroom observation, interviews with Ms. Q and two of her students, Ms. Q's teaching materials, as well as her posts on WeChat, a Chinese social media platform (see Table 1). Chinese was the language for communication and data collection, and the data were later translated into English.

TABLE 1
Data Sources

Methods	*Data*
Ms. Q's class observation (from June to July)	Audio recordings (10 hours)
Interview with Ms. Q (November)	Audio-taped interview (2 hours)
Interviews with two of Ms. Q's students (Kate and Sue) (from summer program)	Audio-taped interview (1 hour per students)
Teaching-related artifacts	Teaching materials (e.g., Powerpoint slides and handouts)
Ms. Q' posts social media posts over four years (February, 2012- November, 2016)	Posts on WeChat

Data Analysis

Following the six phases of thematic analysis identified by Braun and Clarke (2006), we first transcribed all the audio-recorded interviews. Codes were then assigned to parts of the texts in the transcripts with recurring patterns, such as Ms. Q's beliefs of English teaching and learning, her understanding of student-teacher relationship, the preferred teaching methods by administrators, and the power dynamics between the supervisor and other teachers, etc. Next, we focused on the classroom observation data, and tried to categorize different teaching events as well as find the connections between those events and the teaching philosophy that Ms. Q articulated in the interview. The two types of pedagogical events that appeared repeatedly in Ms. Q's teaching were: (1) activities that facilitated students' English communicative competences and critical thinking ability; and (2) exercises that were emphasized for specific test requirements. In the subsequent phase, a list of themes was summarized based on the codes in the interview and classroom observation data.

Guided by the job-crafting perspective (Haneda & Sherman, 2016), we prioritized our focus in four aspects: (1) Ms. Q's prescribed teacher role; (2) Ms. Q's relationship with the administrators and her students; (3) Ms. Q's sense of work purpose; and (4) Ms. Q's agentic actions that went beyond her job boundaries. Later, the existing themes were reviewed and refined to present the interrelationships between these four aspects. Finally, we identified three major themes (the role prescribed by Ms. Q's institution, her enactment of teacher agency to redefine her teacher identity across different teaching contexts, and her frustration with the teaching profession) that informed our understanding of how she negotiated her teacher identity in relation to the contextual affordances and constraints within her school, and how her agency influenced her teacher identity development. These three themes were then applied to other data sources such as teaching-related artifacts and interviews with students.

Findings and Discussion

As mentioned, Ms. Q's perception of being an English teacher entailed delivering knowledge to students in order to become employable and being an educator who is committed to helping students shape their outlook on the world and nurturing them to become good citizens. However, because of the prevalent business model at her school, Ms. Q's prescribed teacher role was primarily to be an English language test preparation teacher who would impart test-taking skills to students so that her students could make steady progress in their test scores. Our data revealed how Ms. Q negotiated her prescribed teacher identity as a test preparer while managing to exercise her agency in ways that enabled her to construct her own teacher identity within the bounds of institutional constraints.

Imposed Teacher Identity: Demarcating Job Boundaries

The private English school where Ms. Q was working during the data collection was established in 2011 with the instrumental purpose of preparing high school graduates for IELTS tests in order to fulfill the language requirement of university admission overseas. Through cooperation with one of the local universities, the school was able to use the university's classrooms and student resident halls for teaching and accommodation purposes. Due to the competitive business environment, the school administration was in a position to welcome every single new student regardless of their varied proficiency levels. This enrolment practice, however, made it difficult for teachers to take into consideration each individual student' needs. Moreover, situated in a university, the school also provided English language support to university students with varied needs of training other than IELTS. As a result, teachers working in the institution tended to have a full teaching schedule. According to Ms. Q, the institution was trying to turn teachers into "teaching machines". When asked about the difference between being an English teacher here compared to public schools, Ms. Q described herself as "a professional trainer who delivers testing skills" compared to "a normal English teacher who teach knowledge about English." She elaborated:

> Excerpt 1:
> We are different from the average English teachers who teach students knowledge about English. We are professional trainers who are expected to provide students with a "shortcut" and help them improve enormously in their test scores within a short period of time. We study those tests and help students with lower proficiency level to use strategies to achieve a desirable score.

Situated in a profit-driven EFL business, the English teaching profession is more susceptible to "customer needs" and market orientations (Block et al., 2012). As seen in the excerpts above, Ms. Q's teacher role has been re-defined by the institution (Haneda & Sherman, 2016), and thus has become different from the traditional English teacher role of imparting knowledge relevant to English learning. In the interview, Ms. Q used phrases like "teaching machine" and "testing skill trainer" to describe the de-professionalization she experienced with her job, thereby also illustrating how a neoliberal agenda had become entrenched in her school (Bernstein et al., 2015). Together with this de-professionalized role, Ms. Q's teaching job boundaries were further defined by her supervisor, Ms. Gao. Ms. Gao's main responsibilities were training and assessing novice teachers and designing teaching schedules and syllabi. In addition, Ms. Gao was also in charge of advertising the good teaching outcomes and presenting test scores to the public in order to attract more student clients. Not surprisingly, Ms. Gao's expectations of teachers and their teaching practice in the class conflicted somewhat with those of Ms. Q's.

> Excerpt 2:
> She [Ms. Gao] only cares about test results. I care more about the process of learning and teaching. She explicitly told us that she wants our teaching to be exam-oriented, because good results could be used for marketing purposes.

Ms. Gao's exam-oriented philosophy not only de-professionalized the English teachers' work at Ms. Q's school, but also constrained the possibilities for them to define their own work in a meaningful way. Ms. Q voiced her concerns in the interview that without a solid foundation of English knowledge (e.g., a sound vocabulary bank, a basic command of English grammatical knowledge, and basic communicative skills), the students would not improve their overall English competence. Ms. Q doubted the value of having these types of training because in her opinion, "learning English [is] for the purpose of taking tests", which would not benefit their students when studying abroad. However, her ideas of English learning were not valued by Ms. Gao, who put great emphasis on training her English teachers to be skilled English language test trainers. To achieve that goal, Ms. Gao made specific requirements (e.g., keeping a respectable distance from students, raising the volume of their voice, etc.) for novice teachers

with regard to how they should teach in the classroom. Furthermore, being a supervisor, she would sit in the classroom and listen to novice teachers' instruction and intervene with their classroom pedagogical decision making when she felt it was necessary. Such a top-down administration management style, as depicted through Ms. Gao's leadership, generally constrains teachers' ability to exercise their teacher agency in terms of making decisions that might benefit their students most (Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2017). However, as Varghese and Stritikus (2005) remind us, individuals are not merely "reproducers of a particular policy" but make decisions informed by their own historical experiences and their professional lives (p. 75). Hence, even though Ms. Q had an official role of providing training service to English test takers, she tried to go beyond this ascribed role and construct her own teacher identity by negotiating these contextual constraints. In the following section, we examine how Ms. Q managed to skillfully navigate her classroom and make practical decisions that she believed would benefit her students in varied teaching contexts.

Negotiating an Imposed Teacher Identity: Modifying Job Boundaries

As discussed earlier, adopting Haneda and Sherman's (2016) job-crafting perspective allowed us to examine the enactment of teacher agency through the following ways: modifying the job boundaries, developing their own sense of work purpose, and changing the relationship with the institutions and colleagues. In this section, we explore the negotiation of Ms. Q's teacher identity, which was reflected in how she achieved and exercised her teacher agency in the classroom teaching practice and through her interactions with Ms. Gao and her students.

Task for exam preparation vs. task for real-life communication

Having studied overseas for a year in Ireland, Ms. Q was aware of the role English plays in communicating one's thoughts and ideas when studying in English-speaking countries. As the majority of her students sought to pursue undergraduate studies overseas, she saw the significance of learning English for interaction and thus attempted to incorporate the idea of conversational English in her own classroom practice.

> Excerpt 3:
> Because when I was studying overseas, I saw so many Chinese students who were unable to express themselves because of lack of confidence in their English competence...I don't want them to learn English just for passing the test...I hope my students could communicate more with native speakers. Through communicating their thoughts with people from different cultural backgrounds, I hope they could learn to think critically and see things from different perspectives, to be more open-minded... I hope they could be more confident in expressing their opinions, because in Chinese classrooms, they are trained to keep quiet and not to express their ideas.

According to Eteläpelto et al. (2013), an individual's own experiences can mediate individual affordances and resources that support their enactment of professional agency at work. Taking this observation into account and applying it to Ms. Q's case, we argue that her experience of studying overseas gave Ms. Q first-hand knowledge about the possible challenges that students might encounter given their deficient language proficiency. In response to the challenges, Ms. Q elected to develop her students' communicative competence and made it one of her primary teaching objectives. Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2015) pointed out that the evaluations from teachers' past experience as well as their intentions and expectations account for a significant part of teachers' belief systems, which in turn have an impact on their exercise of teacher agency. For Ms. Q, teaching oral English should not be merely assisting students in preparing for the speaking part of IELTS test, which itself embodies neoliberal principles of standardized testing. Rather, she expected her students to learn English as a means to

exchange their thoughts and ideas with other people from culturally diverse backgrounds. This belief of learning English for communication, therefore, drove her to go beyond her prescribed job boundaries and initiate actions that aligned with her value and belief systems (Haneda & Sherman, 2016). Ms. Q incorporated the idea of English learning for everyday use into her class by requiring her students to interview international students in the campus.

> Excerpt 4:
> I gave them an assignment this semester. I asked them to do English interviews with international students on the campus, I want them to apply what they have learned in the class to real-life conversations...They can be well prepared for the tests, like memorizing sample sentences. But they may not be able to use those sentences for communication. For example, through conducting interviews, they could practice asking the interlocutor to repeat or clarify information. This communicative skill is also quite important when you are taking the test. You might need to ask the examiner for help.

As Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) stated, "individuals are agentive beings who are constantly in search of new social and linguistic resources which allow them to resist identities that position them in undesirable ways, produce new identities" (p. 27). For Ms. Q, first, the physical location of the institution allowed students to have access to communicate with international students on campus and made it possible for Ms. Q to incorporate communicative tasks in her class. Second, according to Ms. Q, students in the fall semester were enrolled in a one-year program and would not need to take the IELTS test until the end of their academic year. Therefore, Ms. Q was able to temporarily suspend her prescribed role as the test preparation trainer and enact what she thought was expected of a good English teacher. Thus, as suggested by Haneda and Sherman (2016), teachers' decision-making is often the result of a combined influence of their evaluation and judgment of a particular context and their future pedagogical orientations. Ms. Q, in this case, evaluated her options of teaching methods enabled by the societal and physical environments and acted in accordance with her teaching beliefs and future pedagogical tasks for her students. However, for students enrolled in the summer class, Ms. Q chose not to have them do the similar assignments. Students in the summer program (from June to July) had to undergo an intensive two-month training course as they needed to take the IELTS test soon after the training ended. For them, acquiring testing skills would have benefitted them more compared to practicing English with international students. Those findings demonstrated that teachers make decisions in response to constantly evolving situations (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). It is to Ms. Q's decision-making in the summer class that we turn next.

Class for knowledge memorization vs. class for knowledge construction

As stated, Ms. Q's main teaching duty was to prepare students for the IELTS speaking test. The speaking test consists of three parts. Part one, which is considered the easiest part, includes some basic questions like asking candidates about their hometown, hobbies, etc., The second part focuses on individual speech; for this segment candidates are given 1-minute of preparation time to deliver a speech on a given topic. Questions in the final section, which are somewhat abstract and require candidates to demonstrate their critical thinking and argumentative ability, are often considered the most difficult (Ma, Huang & He, 2014). Comparatively, the second part of the test is perceived as the most rewarding for students who are willing to do sufficient preparation work, given that the topics are often related to students' academic life and study. Therefore, as Ms. Q suggested in the interview, for students who seek improvement in the IELTS speaking test within a short period of time, teachers would give priority to the second part during test preparation. Similar strategies were observed to be used in Ms. Q's speaking class. In the class, rather than distributing "sample answers" and instructing them to memorize them, which was the preferred pedagogical practice by Ms. Gao, Ms. Q would first ask students to prepare their arguments

and do presentations of their 1-minute speech in the class. By preparing their arguments, Ms. Q expected her students to do some critical thinking on the topic and even do some research if they could. She reported: "instead of me imposing my thoughts on them, they should think about those topics themselves and be able to talk about their opinions with others. After all, this is what the IELTS speaking test is hoping test takers will do." In sum, Ms. Q actively changed the nature of her job as a test preparation trainer and went beyond what was expected from her in light of what she perceived to be helpful for her students (Haneda & Sherman, 2016).

The following classroom observation excerpt illustrated how Ms. Q attempted to cultivate students' personal opinions. The brief exchange presented below was part of a discussion on the topic "Why do some women want to get married?"

Excerpt 5:
Ms. Q: "XX (Student A's name), can you tell me why some women want to get married?"
Student A: "maybe they, they have peer pressure."
Ms. Q: "peer pressure. Could you please explain this for me?
Student A: "if a woman is 30 years old, some people around him, her, are all get married and have baby, they talk to about how beautiful the family are, give her pressure. They will ask her; why don't you get married."
Ms. Q: "what you just talked about, I mean, the peer pressure is a really good point. But I think it would be clearer if you could explain the concept a little bit, Okay?"
Student A: "Okay."
Ms. Q: "what you just said is a good point. When women turn 30, their friends all get married, then they feel like they are actually different. Being different sometimes can be seen as weird. If you don't want to be seen as a weird person, if you want to be seen as normal, you might just join them and get married.

As illustrated in the excerpt above, Ms. Q tried to encourage one of her students to voice her opinion on a topic. Not satisfied with the short answer supplied by the student A, she asked student A to elaborate on her idea. Positive feedback on Student A's answer was then given by Ms. Q, but meanwhile, Ms. Q also developed student A's idea of "peer pressure" by adding that it means "avoidance of being different from others". By asking students to reflect on assigned topics, Ms. Q created opportunities for students to think critically and have them practice formulating their arguments first. After the class discussion, she would introduce the arguments she prepared and summarized key vocabulary and expressions used in those arguments. The class often ended with Ms. Q providing some possible "sample speech" to her students. Although Ms. Q made a strong effort to encourage her students to develop and voice their ideas – in keeping with what she defined as one of her job responsibilities as an English teacher – Ms. Q devoted the bulk of her class time to preparing students for testing-related training. By combining test taking skills and critical thinking training in one class, Ms. Q thus demonstrated how she was able to craft her job boundaries and negotiate her desired teacher identity within the constraints of the imposed teacher role (Haneda & Sherman, 2016; Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2017).

Excerpt 6:
Students came for teachers' ready-to-use answers because their English competence is so limited, for those students, I have to concentrate on preparing them for the test, because they have to take the test next month. The most efficient way is to prepare them with sentences or expressions that they could directly use in the test, like how to start or end a speech/discussion, what to say when they need time to compose their thoughts, etc.

In Biesta and Tedder's (2007) model of teacher agency, teachers make decisions that aligned with their future objectives (both short-term and long-term). Although Ms. Q understood the importance of helping

students develop their English knowledge and scaffolding their communicative practices, she was also engaged in meeting the demands of her current situation. In that respect, she was thus able to evaluate her teaching context, partly actualize her ideal teacher identity within the contextual constraints, and also meet her students' need to prepare for their upcoming tests. Ms. Q, therefore, made strategic decisions of prioritizing students' test taking in her teaching arrangement. Being able to make practical decisions within contextual constraints is also an achievement of agency, according to Priestley et al. (2015). However, Ms. Q's persistence in having students communicate their thoughts on topics first in the class could also be seen as her being motivated by her own value systems on learning and teaching English, further evidencing her commitment to go beyond her prescribed job boundaries and re-define her own job responsibilities as an English teacher.

Superior to obey vs. superior to negotiate with

As explained, Ms. Q was able to realize her teacher agency by altering her official job duties and constructing meaningful work for herself. In addition, as Handea and Sherman (2016) observe, asserting one's agency can also be mediated through a job crafter's relationship with his/her institution and colleagues. When asked whether her teaching practice was appreciated by her school authorities, Ms. Q admitted that she often argued with Ms. Gao and had to convince her that doing those activities (e.g., having students discuss their arguments on different topics) would benefit her students when taking the speaking test. Hence, even though she knew the "preferred" way of teaching as expected by the school authorities, Ms. Q still decided to resist Ms. Gao's demands and sought to create a space for making her own pedagogical decisions. According to Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001), job-crafters can modify their job boundaries and construct their work identities through altering the relational boundaries with people whom they work with. Ms. Q described her relationship with Ms. Gao as *dou zhi dou yong* (a battle of wits and courage in English). The following excerpt, however, illustrated how Ms. Q strategically used the resources available to her to gain leverage over Ms. Gao, as she fought for control over her own classroom and the freedom to make pedagogical decisions.

Excerpt 7:
Her oral English ability is not good and she knows that my speaking ability is better than hers, so I guess she trusted me on what I teach. Also, when she asked teachers to do this and do that, I would confront her if I feel we shouldn't do it. Other teachers might just do whatever she told them to do because she is the boss. The reason I dare to speak out is because she knows the school cannot afford to lose me and I have been offered jobs elsewhere.

The excerpt above revealed the power dynamics between Ms. Q and Ms. Gao, which was different from that between Ms. Gao and the other teachers. Although Ms. Gao had the authority over all the teachers, Ms. Q's years of teaching experiences and expertise on teaching English speaking skills were valued highly by the school and served as her affordances that earned her space and the capital to enact agency and negotiate with Ms. Gao. As a result, Ms. Q was able to achieve agency and reject being positioned as a submissive employee who follows orders and does things in the best interest of the school. Her resistance to Ms. Gao reflected her commitment to the teacher identity that she was trying to construct. This commitment act, we maintain, emboldened Ms. Q's agentic actions that were in line with her long-term goal as an English teacher.

Students as 'customers' vs. students as 'students'

In addition to transforming the relational boundaries with her superior, Ms. Q also constructed her teacher identity by changing the relational boundaries with her students outside the classroom. Teachers in private English schools usually keep a social distance from students due to the nature of the brief

training period and quick turnover of students. More importantly, teachers at private English schools are usually paid hourly, which means, tutoring or providing feedback to students after class is not rewarded financially. While Ms. Q was also paid on an hourly basis of teaching, she developed an intimate relationship with her students. In her Wechat social network (the Chinese equivalent of Facebook), she posted many pictures of her students doing different activities. For Ms. Q, building rapport with them and providing guidance to alleviate confusion were key characteristics of being a qualified teacher.

> Excerpt 8:
> A good teacher...should build rapport with students. They should be able to trust you, not feel embarrassed in front of you. In addition to helping them acquire knowledge, you might need to guide them, how to be a good person; a teacher does more than convey knowledge. In my opinion, I think educating people is more important. They like to call me their spiritual guide. I ask them why they called me that, and they told me that they think what I said makes sense.

As evidenced from the excerpt above, to Ms. Q, being a teacher was more than imparting knowledge, as it also entailed being their mentor who should be able to provide her students with support and care. By interviewing one of her students Grace, we learned how Ms. Q altered the relational boundaries with her students by providing voluntary assistance to them in her spare time.

> Excerpt 9:
> Ms. Q is a really responsible teacher. I have never encountered a teacher like her before. 10 days before my IELTS test, she would give me one on one tutoring on the IELTS speaking every day and helping me prepare different topics using her own spare time.

Ms. Q's ideal teacher role, that is, to be a good teacher who provides guidance and help when is needed, led her to adjust the relational boundaries with students, which in turn also reshaped her job scope of being an English teacher. To summarize, Ms. Q was assigned with a prescribed role from the school administration, and was expected to pay more attention to delivering test-taking skills as an exam preparation teacher. However, she was also an active job-crafter (Haneda & Sherman, 2016), who altered the parameters of her job scope and (re)constructed the purpose of her profession in a meaningful way through actively changing the relational boundaries with her supervisor, Ms. Gao, and her students. Furthermore, Ms. Q was also able to negotiate her ideal teacher identity and fulfill her job duty as a test preparation trainer within the contextual constraints, in order to meet students' urgent test requirements. Nevertheless, Ms. Q also revealed that the disappointment and frustration she experienced over the past four years working in the private English school. She confided that the pervasive idea of "teaching for money" in many private English schools deeply worried her.

Elusive Desired Teacher Identity

Ms. Q stated her concerns about her own professional development in this field and felt that there were limits to her ability to further her teaching agenda at the school.

> Excerpt 10:
> After teaching all those years, I feel I am entering the stage of exhaustion. At the beginning, I would have a sense of satisfaction when students achieved their desirable results. But now, I feel, OK, they got the scores they want, then? Because what has been improved is their testing skills, not so much about their language competence. What I did was to improve their testing techniques and their testing scores.

Over the four years of her EFL teaching career, Ms. Q continually re-crafted her job scope. In the

beginning, her sense of teaching satisfaction came mainly from helping students achieve their desired results in standardized tests. Later, she realized that a better test result was not a good indication of their improved English competence. Although much effort was made to create initiatives for students to construct their knowledge of English beyond just learning test-taking skills, Ms. Q still felt "I couldn't make any real changes to their life other than helping them with their testing scores". Professional fatigue, and the emotional labor (Wolff & De Costa, 2017) that often accompanies it, not only stems from knowing how little she could do to help her students at her school, but also from the overarching neoliberal ideology that governs and prevails universally at many other private English schools. In short, even though Ms. Q was able to achieve some level of teacher agency through negotiating the constraints and acting in accordance with her English teaching and learning beliefs, the requisite professional space to enact transformative teacher agency was limited at the school level. Situated in a profit-driven environment, Ms. Q's case serves as a stark reminder that academics and teacher educators need to think about how to help teachers like Ms. Q address neoliberal demands placed upon them while also ensuring that they continue to grow as language teaching professionals.

Conclusion and Implications

This study investigated the active interplay between teacher identity and teacher agency of an EFL teacher, Ms. Q, who worked in a private English school. Adopting Haneda and Sherman's (2016) job-crafting perspective on teacher agency, we illustrated how she was able to actively evaluate the possibilities and risks in the situated contexts and exercise her teacher agency. More specifically, Ms. Q went beyond the prescribed teaching role assigned by the institution and constructed the teacher identity that aligned with her teaching beliefs, by re-defining her job boundaries. Such a reconfiguration included incorporating teaching and learning tasks that were not appreciated by the school and changing the relational boundaries with both school authorities and students. The findings indicated that Ms. Q envisioned herself to be an English teacher and also an educator who could help students construct their English knowledge over an extended period of time rather than just providing them with instant recipes for the sake of passing the tests.

However, the school did not provide her the desired support to develop her ideal teacher identity. Instead, the construction of her professional identity was always mediated by the ecological conditions in which she was situated. The "modern educational systems", according to Priestley, Edwards, Priestley and Miller (2012, p.192), allows little space for teachers to enact their agency, due to the influence of outcome-oriented curricula. In her study of how vocational teachers enacted their teacher agency in response to top-down educational reforms, Vähäsantanen (2015) argued that despite the little space for agency practice at the school administrative level, teachers have "ample opportunities" to exercise their professional agency on pedagogical issues (p. 5). However, this was not the case for Ms. Q, who found that her teaching duties were defined by her supervisor at both the meso (school) and the micro (classroom practice) levels. As Ms. Q soon realized, more effort would be needed if she wanted to transgress her job boundaries. The only viable solution in such a situation, as observed by Miller, Morgan, and Medina (2017), is to find strategic ways to manage local constraints (such as Ms. Gao in this study) while also creating a space that will allow teachers like Ms. Q to grow professionally.

In closing, by illuminating Ms. Q's teaching experience, our study underscores the important role agency plays in understanding teachers' professional development. More importantly, while Ms. Q was able to exploit the space and resources that were available to her and make agentic decisions that reflected her teaching philosophy, her disappointment with this profession and her frustrations with the private EFL industry in China resonate with a similar serious problem that other EFL teachers in the broader Asian context face. Kim (2004) and Gorsuch (2001), for example, report similar findings encountered by EFL teachers in Korea and Japan, respectively. In light of this solemn reality, we call for future LTI research to shed light on teacher retention, especially in a rapidly increasing EFL industry where neoliberalism has

pervaded every aspect of our profession.

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