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Examining Narratives of Conflict and Agency: Insights into Non-Local English Teacher Identity

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This study examines teacher identity through conflicts and agency emergent from the narratives of five non-local English teachers working in Bangkok, Thailand. The examination of conflict and agency to gauge one's identity is suitable as these constructs are interdependent. Using a sociocultural approach, the study examined meaning and word choices found in the participants' narratives. The findings indicated that participants encountered conflicts with different social entities such as their employers' expectations, circumstances of their students, and interference from other stakeholders. The ways in which these conflicts were addressed depended on the workplaces of the participants, wherein those whose workplace had stronger social suggestion resorted to a resolved acceptance of difference, while participants whose workplace had weaker social suggestion enacted agency by modifying pedagogy or teaching content, or opposing the school administration. It was found that these agentic actions were carried out based on the notion of inclusivity and social justice. From these findings, the multifaceted identity of non-local English teachers was not only determined by their culture or country of origin but also by their work context. This study calls for further examination of international school settings, as well as the professional growth of non-local English teachers in such contexts.

Keywords: teacher identity, conflict, agency, discourse analysis, non-local English teachers

Introduction

Teacher identity not only gives us a sense of who a teacher is or aspires to be, but it also "affects the teacher's positioning in relation to, and hence interactions with, students, colleagues, and the larger teaching profession." (Pennington, 2015, p. 17). Furthermore, the identity of a teacher is mediated by what he/she believes are good traits of a teacher, or how schooling should be done, or what it is for (Lasky, 2005). Teacher identity remains a crucial area in the study of English teacher professionalism, especially in today's world where the proliferation of English and the neoliberalisation of English language education have mobilized many teachers to relocate for work in regions that are linguistically and culturally different. When mobilized to a new setting, English teachers' identity may be

problematised by interactions with other social entities whose beliefs or practices may appear contradicting. To date, minimal studies have examined the identity of mobilized non-local English teachers, especially from the perspectives of conflict and agency.

While conflict is defined as a form of social antagonism, that is, the dissonance between social entities or with a context, agency, on the other hand, is a type of hegemonic intervention through an acceptance or accentuation of differences, or attempts in resolving or overcoming differences (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Conflicts have been accounted for in several studies, such as those that look at a mismatch between students' low language proficiency and motivation with curriculum mandates or reform that call for a communicative pedagogical approach (Hayes, 2010; Liu & Xu, 2011), or when teachers are faced with the dilemma of maintaining a personal conviction, which may be at odds with cultural norms or practical solutions (Johnston, 2003; Johnston & Buzzelli, 2002; Phan, 2008), or even when teachers perceive themselves as being less competent users of English, especially those who are second language users of English operating in contexts where English is the official language (Zacharias, 2010). At times, teachers may be able to resolve or mitigate a conflict by appropriating suitable agentic actions. Pennycook (2001) describes this as having 'resistance' which leads to a 'reconstitution', while Hayes (2009), in referring to non-native English speaking teachers, compares this to having 'native' teaching competencies, which involves modifying teaching practices or materials to suit the sociocultural and educational backgrounds of the students, and of the context.

Understanding conflicts that affect teachers, and how these conflicts are managed and mitigated through agency are important for the understanding of teacher identity. This is because these constructs reveal not only teachers' perception of self, but it also reveals relations with other entities within the professional setting. Therefore, the examination of teacher identity is only partial if no consideration is made for conflicts they encounter, as well as for the agentic actions they take to resolve them. With the aim of building a better understanding of the identity of non-local English teachers, this study utilizes a sociocultural approach to examine conflict and agency as revealed through the narratives of five non-local English teachers working in Bangkok, Thailand. A sociocultural analysis of teachers' narratives allows us a space where we can account for the positioning of a teacher and his/her intersubjectivities through his/her discourse repertoire (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Moreover, the sociocultural approach allows us to examine the lives of these five teachers individually, as conflicts experienced may be personal and context-specific, and agency is a multifaceted construct that is varied, temporal, and socially and individually induced (Vähäsantanen, 2015).

Conflict and Agency: Insights into Non-Local Teacher Identity

As mentioned, the proliferation of English and the subsequent expansion of the English language education market had offered mobility to English teachers. This mobility is not only confined to the diaspora of non-local English teachers to different parts of the world where English is not the primary language, but also the import of teaching and learning materials for English and the adaptation of western-based English language curricula, which have instigated conflicts for local English teachers. With incoming external influences, there is bound to be a clash between cultural norms and practices, making antagonism inevitable (Gay, 1981; Hayes, 2010; Liu & Xu, 2011). However, it is not just a matter of cultural differences. As stated by Pennycook (1989), these conflicts stem from the "disparity between, on the one hand, the dictates of 'experts' and teaching textbooks, and on the other, actual classroom practice" (Pennycook, 1989, p. 606), as well as the cultural norms. To understand this 'disparity', we must recognize that English language teaching, and the classroom where this process occurs, is not 'apolitical' (Johnston, 2003). Scholars have indicated how the ELT realm is driven by, and supporting the centre to gain global prominence (Holliday, 2009; Kubota & Lin, 2006). Kumaravadivelu (2006) states that "the mutually advantageous liaison between the project of globalization, the power of empire, and the politics of English is complex but clear" (p. 13). Clear, in the sense that, "hegemonic value judgements, material and symbolic investments, and ideologies that represent the interest only of those in power"

(Bhatt, 2005, p. 38) have been purposefully disseminated as 'rational' and 'common sense'. This may be seen in structures of education introduced by high-level stakeholders which are supposedly able to accommodate the multiplicity and transformation capacity of teacher professionalism. Nonetheless, these mandates may potentially expand teachers' obligations and actually prohibit any effort for professional development (Vähäsantanen, 2015), leading to a subsequent withdrawal from the profession (Lasky, 2005).

With conflicts being an expected part of a teacher's professional journey, it is only natural that teachers will respond with agentic choices and actions (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013). Thus, examining conflict sheds light on how teachers position themselves as agentic entities, and emphasizes that an individual teacher is responsible for his/her professional development (Musanti & Pence, 2010). Traditional sociological view defines agency as a goals-means-ends model, which postulates that an individual would know how to formulate and carry out procedural steps to achieve an aim, because of the power and authority vested in that individual. Nonetheless, this linear and structural view is challenged by Davies (1990), who proposes that agency involves the negotiation of discourse or actions made available through larger groups or communities of practice. This is also reflected by Pennycook (2001), who looks at agency as a reciprocal process between micro- and macro-structures. Agency, according to Pennycook, is a form of poststructuration, where "discourse and subjectivity reciprocally reproduce and change each other." This is based on the belief that changes instigated by an individual's agency are not 'dialectal'; instead, it is a "constant recycling of different forms of power through our everyday words and actions." (p. 120). Hence, agency is multifaceted and individually varied, temporal, socially and individually induced, and significant for the transformation or teaching beliefs and practices (Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012; Vähäsantanen, 2015). More than these, agency is also informed based on one's affiliation with certain communities of practice, or even suggestions from other teachers (Roberts & Graham, 2008). It is also dependent on the context in which a person finds him/herself. Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, Eteläpelto, Rasku-Puttonen, and Littleton (2008) forward this notion by distinguishing between stronger or weaker social suggestion organization, where the former is a context that would restrict teachers' sense of agency, and the latter, due to flexibility found in the management of an organization, would see teachers' agency regularly exercised. Whilst being in a social context, which may have a strong or weak social suggestion, agency may be opportunistic or self-initiated. While opportunistic agency refers to reflexive actions taken as a response to unplanned and unexpected incidents in the classroom, self-initiated agency refers to the deliberate actions taken that are perceived as helpful for the development of the class or for the professional self (Roberts & Graham, 2008). Agency may also be seen in the form of opposition. Vongalis-Macrow (2007) identified two types of agency as opposition. The first type is opposition to integration, where teachers practice what they know as being socioculturally appropriate and effective for their classroom. The second type is opposition to higher level school management or stakeholders, leading to detrimental effects on a teacher's professionalism. This opposition may be due to deeply held beliefs regarding pedagogical practices, which may not be in line with prescriptive forces. Aside from opposition, there could also be a resolute acceptance of the presence of conflict. As such, conflict will be normalized and expected (Fairclough, 2003).

What we can see here is the centrality of both conflict and agency in the understanding of teacher identity. The identity of a teacher can be traced through the 'recursive relationships' that the teacher has as an agentic actor with his/her situation, as well as through the effects of and the responses towards these actions (Edwards, 2015). This also parallels Tao and Gao's (2017) study, whereby agency is driven by the commitment a teacher has towards his/her profession, thus developing a sense of self, the identity of a 'teacher' and what it espouses will also inform agentic choices and actions. For example, in Canagarajah's (2012) autoethnographic study, he points out that throughout his career, conflicts have precipitated from various entities who cast doubt upon Canagarajah as a valid English educator and professional. This led to Canagarajah's agentic actions to further educate himself to be a researcher, which expanded his identity as an English teaching professional involved in research concerning the work and lives of non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs), and subsequently disseminating his studies

as an act to broker information and champion the cause of NNESTs. Other types of conflict and agency may come in the form of teachers maintaining 'care' amidst curriculum reform (Lasky, 2005), teachers showing vulnerability to develop effective teaching (Kelchtermans, 2005), or teachers' willingness social change agents to promote inclusivity (Pantić & Florian, 2015).

A Sociocultural Examination of Identity through Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry has established itself as a crucial research tool, especially for the study of teacher identity as it provides a "holistic approach to address issues of complexity, multiplicity of perspectives and human centredness" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 35). Hence, narrative inquiry is an appropriate tool to capture the fluid nature of conflict and agency (Roger & Wetzel, 2013) for the examination of non-local English teachers as they navigate their teaching journey in a socially and culturally different context. Another reason why narrative inquiry is useful is because it recognizes the value of teacher talk. Goodson (1991) argues that studies in teacher professionalism and development have focused primarily on practice, rendering a 'teacher' as a 'practice' in itself. What we should do instead is to create a space where we can listen to the subjectivities of the persons who are the central ingredient for teacher development, that is, the teacher him/herself (Davis, 1995).

In a narrative, there may be many fleeting images which reflect real world objects and relationships that represent a teacher's identity-in-practice and -in-discourse. While the former refers to a teacher's affiliation with other communities through the identification or non-identification of beliefs and practice, the latter refers to a teacher's representation of his/her identity through discursive acts in language socialization (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). These images present attributes that are assigned to self and other pertinent social entities in a discursive event, which is fluid and represents the positioning of self, or that of others, as being in a constant process of reinterpretation (Flores & Day, 2006). For teachers, this would open avenues for understanding how roles are appropriated, along with the professional relationship between those involved, and thus give a sense of the role of the self and others (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2014). Thus, the sensitivity and expansiveness of the narrative paradigm is suitable for this study's aim, which is to examine emergent conflicts with potential agentic actions taken to address them as a bridge to glean insights into the identity of the participants.

Research Context and Participants

In Thailand, policy reforms have attempted to implement a more communicative approach for language education. This can be seen in the Basic Core Curriculum (BEC). Introduced in 2008, BEC mandated that English would be a compulsory school subject. The formation of the ASEAN Economic Community also elevated the status of English in the Southeast Asian region (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Aside from changes in policy, there has also been an increase in the establishment of private English international schools in Thailand. Cuesta and Madrigal (2014) reported a proportionately larger spending by Thai families on private education. These private schools normally offer international English curricula from countries such as Singapore, the United Kingdom (UK), or the United States of America (USA), and are accredited by the Ministry of Education, or by external bodies such as the Western Association of School and Colleges (WASC) and the Council of International Schools (CIS) (Kaur, Young, & Kirkpatrick, 2016). There are two major types of private schools: full-fledged international schools where the medium of instruction and administration is English, with the exception of foreign language subjects, which includes Thai, and bilingual schools which have an English Program (EP) and an English Intensive Program (EIP). The EP is where students receive more exposure to English, as they take more types of English classes (segregated skills) and their math and science subjects are also taught in English. Typically, non-local teachers are hired to teach in this program. These teachers may introduce and implement pedagogical norms which are not typical to the Thai context (see Le, 2013 for examples from Vietnam; Trent, 2012

for examples from Hong Kong).

A group of 21 non-local English teachers were recruited for a larger study through referral sampling. The primary researcher initially contacted his peers, and they subsequently referred him to other English teachers. Out of the 21, only five non-local English teachers' narratives were used for this current study. Their narratives are deemed adequate as the value of narrative inquiry lies in the transferability of emotions and experiences found in the stories, instead of the number of stories relayed (Tracy, 2010). Of these five selected teachers, three taught at the secondary school level while the other two taught at the primary school level. The five teachers were considered to be representative of the diversity of the bigger sample, as they taught different types of English classes, had different teaching experiences and professional backgrounds, and came from the two types of schools mentioned previously: international and EP. These traits are some of the important criteria for the construction of teachers' professional identity (see Trent, 2012 for example).

Data Collection

For our study, narratives were collected through a semi-structured interview that focused on the participants' working lives in Thailand. We recognize that conflicts arise from the presence of dissonance between social entities; hence, the data collection tool was purposefully developed based on a framework of self and others. Moskowitz's (2005) framework, which addressed issues such as affiliation (the relationship of self with others), self-esteem (the benchmark in which one compares him/herself to as a means for validation) and epistemology of self and others (how self and others are identified), was used as a guide. Moskowitz's framework of self and others coincides with the tenets of narrative inquiry which engage teachers in not looking for "simple answers or quick solutions but theorize about their work as they organize, articulate and communicate what they have come to understand about themselves and the activity of teaching." What's more, the theorizing process is "not linear but, rather, reflects a dynamic interplay between description, reflection, dialogue with self and others [emphasis added]" (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 7). To maintain the veracity of the participants' responses, the semi-structured interview was kept broad, in that it did not ask questions that might preempt the participants to provide 'ideal' responses pertinent to our research interest. The general scope of the interview questions was as follows:

1. Their perception of English language teaching;
2. Their perception of themselves as English language teachers;
3. Their professional selves in light of their students, colleagues, supervisors/managers, community, and/or work context (to uncover potential conflicts based on social relations); and,
4. Their reaction(s) to the relations they have with social entities and/or work context (to see if there are agentic actions taken to maintain, build, or adjust these relations).

The semi-structured interview was carried out in English by one of the researchers at each participant's workplace. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes to an hour and was audio-recorded. The interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The process of narration would normally trigger memories of critical incidents where teachers were emotionally and cognitively vulnerable (Kelchtermans, 2005; Measor, 1985). Thus, we paid careful attention to discourse aspects such as lexical choices and meaning that reflected emotions such as powerlessness, frustration, or even positive emotions such as feeling proud. This is in line with Bucholtz and Hall's (2005; 2010) sociocultural approach in examining identity, where social entities are reflected by indexicality, represented by discourse meaning understood from word choices (Davis, 1995; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). These elements which characterized self, others and the relationship between these

entities, as well as the context were analysed iteratively between ourselves. This was to ensure the validity of meanings gleaned from the narratives through the resonance established between the researchers with the participants' stories (Tracy, 2010). While the narratives were read and analysed, there were no expectations for any similar conflict or subsequent agentic actions to emerge, as each narrative was treated as a discourse space with unique sets of attitudes and beliefs (Measor, 1985). Finally, since the purpose of qualitative study and narrative inquiry is not for generalizability of an objective truth, each participant's narrative was discussed and analysed individually.

Findings

In this section, we present extracts of conflict and agency which we believe gave insights into a participant's identity. The extracts are preceded by a short biography of each participant. The names of the participants have been replaced with pseudonyms. Let us first consider Todd's experience.

Todd

Todd is an American who had completed an English teaching certification program and is currently working as an upper secondary school English communications teacher for an EP in Bangkok. He is also the supervisor for other non-local English teachers. Although Todd had worked in an educational research office in the US before coming to Thailand, he did not have any teaching experience. The conflict experienced by Todd stems from the image he has of who he is as an English teacher, which may not be one that is shared by others. The social antagonism, hence, is between Todd's identity, designated by the institutional parameters, and the hegemonic notion of an 'English teacher.'

Almost all of us are new to teaching. Some of us, this is their career path since high school, but most of us, it's not. Teaching is also very new to us, and we do understand and we're lucky we have the support that understands that we're not teachers. We're communication teachers, we're just facilitating communication, and the only real reason why we have this job is because we're English speakers, that's it, not that we're teachers or that we really understand, you know, building the curriculum, or building the lesson plans to match one another. That is not in our training, and it's not in our background. We sometimes forget that.

As seen in his narrative, Todd identified himself as a 'communications' teacher, and not an 'English' teacher. Todd's primary responsibility was to create classroom situations where students could practice their English communicatively. This specific image that Todd has conflicts with the image of an English teacher that others typically may have. The conflict is evident through Todd's choice of words, "sometimes we forget that." 'That', according to Todd, are responsibilities that 'trained' English teachers would have gone through, such as organizing a curriculum, or making lesson plans which are coherent by 'matching' them - all of which do not pertain to Todd and his colleagues. The image of Todd (and his colleagues) as communications teacher is shaped by the expectations of their employer, who had employed them because they are native English speakers. Todd enacted agency through an openness and acceptance of how they are positioned, how they got their jobs as English teachers, and the support they receive despite their lack of professional abilities. This resolute openness enabled Todd to see how even though for many of them teaching was not their chosen career path, they are 'lucky' because their school provides a "support that understands that [they are] not teachers." What we can see here is how Todd's context is of a stronger social suggestion organization, where the expectations of the school are clearly spelled out for its teachers, which shapes the identity of non-local English teachers to be communications teachers. This type of setting with a stronger or more rigorous organizational structure may hinder agentic choices and actions of teachers (Vähäsantanen et al., 2008). A stronger social suggestion also indicates a

hierarchy of power. Without the privilege to make needed contextualized adjustments to the classroom setting, teachers' professionalism may be at stake, as the entity to which they are accountable is the curriculum or the school, instead of to the students, which in the case of education is the most crucial entity (Lasky, 2005).

Harry

Similar to Todd, Harry completed an English teaching certification and worked in a private Thai-bilingual school. Harry, a New Zealander, was previously an accountant. At his current workplace (EP), he taught upper secondary school English conversation and communication. At Harry's school, both communicative and intercultural objectives were integral to the English lessons. This can be seen through the mandatory ASEAN course that all students had to take. Despite the importance placed on learning about other ASEAN member states, Harry does not think that he or other English teachers have the responsibility to teach students about culture because this is not part of their 'job description.' What can be seen here is how the context of Harry's workplace did not coincide with what he thought was expected of them as English teachers.

First, Harry accentuated the difference between himself and Thai English teachers to mitigate the conflict. Harry mentioned that he thinks that the Thai teachers are more suitable for the instruction of culture, because *farang* (foreign) teachers are "supposed to be more neutral." This notion is reified by the statement that others think non-local teachers "don't have a culture." This sense of inclusivity - created by talking on behalf of other teachers, showed another enactment of agency, that is, through the bracketing of similarities (Fairclough, 2003).

I think maybe the Thai teachers have more to do with culture. I think we're supposed to be more neutral and well, I noticed that sometimes people just think we don't have a culture, like we're like, Oh farang don't like, don't have culture, that's why.

Even though Harry stated that Thai teachers would be more suitable for the teaching of culture, he readily accepts that there are instances when culture comes into the lesson through the syllabus. What we see here is a compromise that Harry has to make regarding his role as a teacher because his job description also calls for teachers to teach according to the syllabus, even though this conflicts with his belief that Thai teachers are better suited to talk about cultural matters.

Of course it's not really our job to teach (culture), in our job description we have a syllabus and so I would every now and then touch culture, but normally the culture of different countries, including sometimes my own and Thai.

What we could see here is an illustration of conflict resolution through teachers' agentic choice to recognize what is expected of them. For Harry, being an English teacher is to be neutral, to follow the syllabus as stated in his "job description", and to recognize that he is a foreigner and thus different (from other teachers). His agentic choice did not lead to any actions which may oppose the stipulations of his workplace. Moreover, we could also see how Harry's work context has stronger social suggestion, in that he and other non-local teachers know what they are expected to do. This is problematic as they may not feel validated because they do not have the space to enact agency (e.g. implementing teaching practices based on their pedagogical beliefs or needs of their students) (Ketelaar, Beijgaard, Boshuizen, & Dan Brok, 2012). This will further undermine their sense of competence and subsequently stunt professional development (Pantić & Florian, 2015).

Donald

Aside from conflicts arising from the job scope, it may also come from students, especially those who lack English language proficiency. Donald, a British man who used to work in sales and marketing, is teaching English at a primary level EP. Donald also completed an English teaching certification. Donald could not do as much as he wanted because his students were not of the expected proficiency level. To resolve this issue, an assistant teacher, whose main responsibility was to provide explanations in the students' L1 (Thai), was assigned to aid Donald.

The first year was difficult because at this level, as I said before we have a classroom assistant, but when I did the first year, the classroom assistant was very rarely there. [...] Whereas the second year I have a really good and reliable assistant that, aside being an assistant, we would work together. We're a team and we work with each other and, and she's very good at helping. Not translating but explaining the instructions (in Thai).

The initial classroom assistant was not quite helpful, and may have contributed to the severity of the conflict. Nonetheless, at the time of the research, a new classroom assistant was assigned to Donald, and there seemed to be no social antagonism between them, as he acknowledged his assistant as being "really good and reliable," and that they are a "team." Nevertheless, the underlying issue, which is Donald's students' lack of communicative skills and language proficiency, still remained a stumbling block for Donald's pedagogy. This inevitably limited the types of learning activities, which, in effect, presented itself as a resolution for the conflict, wherein activities were kept to simplistic ones that did not require students to produce in the target language. We can see these in the following excerpt:

... but at the moment like the level they're at, I don't think it (communicative activities) would work. It's because they're 10 years old and they're still learning, and they've still got lots of English to learn.

This has led to limited types of activities they could do in class, such as listening:

There's a CD that goes with it (syllabus) as well and that's using British voice-overs as well. But I tend not to use the CD because me being a native speaker. So I'll read any text, you know, I'll get the students to act out. There's parts of the story that students can act out the scenarios as well.

And also, focusing more on structure and form:

I teach things like English tenses, past, present, future, continuous, perfect, things like that, things like adjectives, prepositions.

Hence, due to the circumstances of his students, Donald may have attempted to resolve the conflict by only exposing his students to language use, which, in his class, includes the pronunciation and accent of a British speaker, and focusing on structure and form. Unlike Todd and Harry, Donald has the space to modify his teaching content and approach. This implies a weaker social suggestion, where teachers are freer to make modifications to an assigned syllabus. His agentic actions are also, at this point, pre-planned based on previous experience. Having space to enact agency and being able to self-initiate are crucial means for validation. Though typically validation may come in the form of aligning one's self with what other members from the same community of practice (CoP) (Trent, 2012; Vähäsantanen et al., 2008), validation may also come in the form of knowing what is practical and beneficial for students (e.g. Hayes, 2010; Liu & Xu, 2011) and knowing ways to transform pre-existing culture and structures to accommodate learning (Pantić & Florian, 2015).

Peter

Peter, who used to work in hospitality in the UK, is currently teaching secondary school students at an EP. The school is operating with a British curriculum, and teachers were given the liberty to modify the classroom material. Similar to Donald's case, Peter's students lacked English language proficiency. On top of that, his students' learning styles also posed a conflict. Peter mentioned that his students lacked critical thinking skills, "all following each other, follow the crowd," and they were not willing to take risks, "it's hard for them to accept when they're wrong...". This is a problem that Peter attributes to the students' culture.

It's critical thinking as well. I think they (students) lack critical thinking. All following each other, follow the crowd, and it's hard for them to accept when they're wrong about something, they would rather say nothing, and that's a cultural thing as well. They don't like to be shown up in front of their friends.

Peter had tried to coax his students into being more open about participating, and not to worry too much if a response was wrong. He was willing to have his students "just speak and be wrong." Agency, for Peter, seemed to be enacted through an attitudinal shift, where he found himself having to accept the circumstances of his students, and to be very patient with his students' attempt to respond.

I think once you can get across to the class, it's okay to be wrong, just give me an answer, and you know I won't say you're wrong. I'll just lead you in a different way, but I rather them just speak and be wrong than say nothing, you know.

I try to say to them, even if you're not sure of the word you're going to use, or if the sentence is in the wrong way around, the structure's wrong, an English-speaking person will still understand what you're trying to get across, so don't be afraid to say, to say what you think might be right because they'll still understand you.

What we could see through Peter's narrative is his desire for his students to speak up in class, regardless of whether or not their responses were correct as meaning may still be understood through incorrect form. This approach counters the local understanding of English proficiency, which is grounded heavily on the knowledge of form and structure (see Foley, 2005; de Segovia & Hardison, 2009). The openness that Peter intends for his students to have, as such that they may be vulnerable (by revealing their communication deficiency), indicates a commitment a teacher has towards his/her students. This commitment may translate into teachers' care for their students, which is a precursor for greater student participation (Lasky, 2005). It is also through "this inescapable vulnerability that ultimately constitutes the very possibility for teachers to 'educate' and to teach in a way that really makes a difference in students' lives." (Kelchtermans, 2005, p. 1005).

Laura

Laura, from the UK, was working for an international school with expatriate children. Of all the participants, Laura is perhaps the most experienced teacher. Her undergraduate and graduate degrees are in language teaching, and she has extensive teaching experiences in Thailand, Egypt, and the UK. Similar to Peter's workplace, Laura's school subscribed to a British curriculum.

Laura's narrative presented quite an interesting situation. Through Laura's narrative, we found that she and her colleagues were given almost full autonomy in planning their teaching. Laura mentioned that the teachers are free to select materials as long as they addressed and complemented the core objectives of the school's curriculum and prepared students for the standardized exams of the curriculum. There are certain

aspects, though, that the teachers must cover, and they are history and literary works pertinent to the UK. Though operating with an international curriculum, the school administrators were locals, and this may have brought about conflicts. Laura tells of one particular conflict which had occurred after acquiring reading materials for her teaching. Laura had ordered books on social issues to be kept in the library. However, to her dismay, some of the books were deemed 'inappropriate' by her supervisors, and were subsequently confiscated.

The library, they ordered a pack of books, all about different social issues, but the principal of the school didn't allow them to put the one on drugs into the library. I knew I'd ordered them, you know like, and I was looking for it one day and I said to the librarian where is that book on drugs, and she said, "Oh we weren't allowed to put that on the shelf, because the owner of the school thought it was inappropriate, he didn't think the parents would like the fact that the kids were learning about that."

Despite this, Laura enacted agency as seen through her persistence in presenting content which she felt was critical for the learning of her students, as there had been no complaints lodged against her.

So there are some subjects where you think, you know, would the, are the parents going to be, annoyed maybe, that I've actually like talked about this topic, if they haven't, if they're not going talk about it at home, you know, but, uhm, but I've had no complaints, yet.

Laura's persistence to retain materials which students' parents and the school might find inappropriate indicates agency in the form of opposition towards school management (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007). This persistence is also borne out of a sense of care that Laura had for her students. More than care, Laura's case also depicts an interest in inclusivity and social justice for her classroom, as well as a trust that her students are well-equipped to handle controversial topics or materials. A trusting relationship may encourage other agentic actions, leading to nurturing "appropriate professional relations with pupils and other actors" and opening up learning experiences that "respond adequately to students' diverse needs" (Pantić & Florian, 2015, p. 346).

Discussion

The identities of the participants were emergent from their narratives of conflicts instigated by disparity, antagonism, or vulnerability. Conflicts experienced by the participants came from various sources, such as their job scope or employer's expectations (Todd and Harry), how different self is perceived from others (Harry), the circumstances of their students (Donald and Peter), and through interference from other social entities or cultural context (Laura). Their identities are further extended through agentic actions that reconstitute instability or ambiguity. For some, this was done through actions, such as that seen in Peter and Donald, where teaching practices suitable to the students' level of proficiency were employed. This willingness to make changes to be more inclusive of students' varied level of proficiency blur professional boundaries as they enact a more caring approach to teaching. Lasky (2005) states "the willingness to blur the boundaries between the personal and professional with their students [is] a core component of [...] teacher identity, reflecting [...] fundamental beliefs about how to teach students effectively" (p. 908). Others, on the other hand, brought about a reframing of attitude or belief, such as that seen in the discourse of Todd, or an acceptance of the employers' expectations, as seen in Harry's case. This resembles a "weak, reserved, and maintainable" agency where less or no progressive actions are taken (Vähäsantanen, 2015). Different from the other participants, Laura, enacted opposing agency. Though this may be risky, Laura did not indicate that her job was in jeopardy. Her desire to impart what she believes is necessary shows how she positions herself as being inclusive of all her students, and who

values social justice through the inclusion of potentially controversial topics. Her actions of inclusivity may be seen being opposed to “creating an unhelpful hierarchy within diversity (Pantić & Florian, 2015, p. 342).

Through the agentic actions, we could also observe the teachers’ rationalization, which, in turn, reflected the legitimization of their identity as English teachers (Fairclough, 2003). While some of the participants, such as Todd and Harry, indicated that their practice was shaped by knowing what was expected of them, some of the other participants’ sense of legitimacy was driven by what they personally felt was situationally appropriate. We could see this in the discourse of Donald and Peter, where conflicts were managed within their classrooms, and not necessarily driven by vertical forces (their administrators or curriculum mandates). What we can see here are agentic actions achieved through “a reconciliation between their own actual sense of their professional selves, their working experiences, their expectations regarding their professional future” (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009, p. 29). While most of the agentic actions taken by the participants seem to be shaped by their personal experiences and their relationship with their students, teachers do need to be aware of the support system available to them (see Le, 2013). This may be achieved through collaborative efforts between school managers or administrators with teachers (Musanti & Pence, 2010; Priestley, 2011; Priestley et al., 2012). Collaboration would allow new social links to be formed, leading to opportunities where non-local English teachers could learn more about the social, cultural, or political systems of the local community. Moreover, being a part of a collaboration may encourage the externalization of struggles, leading to a shift in attitude or belief (Sannino, 2010). Being openly vulnerable is a crucial precursor to build a trusting rapport between social entities, as it grants a sense of satisfaction and brings the profession to a more humanistic level (Lasky, 2005). Being connected with the wider professional body will also help position teachers clearly within their CoP. This, in turn, will give teachers a benchmark from which they may evaluate their pedagogical beliefs and practices (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015).

From our study, several points for further discussion emerge. First, it would be interesting to investigate an international school setting in a culturally different environment. As seen in the participants’ narratives, the international contexts are a mix of stronger and weaker social suggestion organizations. These contexts, which operate with international curricula, would naturally be assumed to be weaker in its promotion of a more open-ended approach to learning, in accordance to western-based pedagogy. Nonetheless, there seems to be a contradiction, as seen in Laura’s context, wherein Laura and her colleagues still remain under the purview of the school administration even though they are granted liberty in deciding classroom materials. Another related issue worth examining is teachers’ professionalism with regards to their context. Vähäsantanen et al. (2008) postulate that a teacher’s identity is greatly affected by the context where he/she works. As seen in the cases of Todd and Harry, where explicit expectations were made known to them, opportunities for any agentic actions to take place remain minimal. Contexts that are too restrictive may be detrimental for a teacher’s professional development, as contexts which are too controlling of what teachers do may result in “backlash, low morale, large-scale resistance and crisis in the teaching profession” (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007, p. 430). On the other hand, though weak contexts which allow teachers more freedom may be beneficial for teacher development and empowerment, this may lead the questioning of teacher accountability (Laura). This phenomenon unfortunately is rampant among private or charter schools, where it is common for schools and teachers themselves to decide what is to be taught and learned, with minimal consideration for broader educational aspirations (Klees, 2008; Lipman, 2008). These recommendations may be carried out by conducting a more comprehensive and longitudinal study through an ethnographic approach that includes multiple social entities, which this study lacked as it relied mainly on the discourse of the participants.

Conclusion

The instances of conflict and agency reify the notion that the English language classroom, as well as the broader educational context, is not apolitical, and that the identities of these non-local teachers are multiple and dynamic, wherein “teachers are seen as alternatively *agents of socialization* as well as *change agents*, whose choices and actions variably reflect the implementation, interpretation, adaptation, alteration, substitution, subversion, and/or creation of the curriculum contexts in which they work” [emphasis added] (Campbell, 2012, p. 183). Being in a new environment, the hegemonic notions of an English teacher, especially those who are “boundary-crossing,” calls for the restructuring of dominant paradigms (Canagarajah, 2012, p. 276). A potential restructuring based on our study is the problematisation of privilege typically enjoyed by non-local English teachers, or in the case of our study, Caucasian teachers from inner circle countries. What we saw is how these teachers’ obligations, authority, or autonomy are called into question, seen through the conflicts they encountered (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007). When talking to the non-local English teachers about these issues, and the subsequent analysis of their discourse, we could not help but experience conflicting feelings as well. On the one hand, we empathize with their frustrations. Though we are working at the tertiary level, we have encountered similar instances to those mentioned by the participants, such as issues related to students’ language proficiency and prescriptive forces which shape the development and delivery of pedagogical approaches and content. On the other hand, we also feel a sense of relief and empowerment, especially when we take into account our roles as English teacher trainers and researchers. In a similar vein to Canagarajah’s (2012) study, we were able to broker some revealing information regarding non-local English teachers and were able to take away insights which we hope will assure local budding English teachers that they will not be displaced and will still have a crucial position to play in the ELT landscape.

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