Abstract

This thesis reports on a multiple case study of four EFL teachers’ long-term development of autonomy in a particular Chinese mainland university. Each teacher was selected as a holistic case because of their variations in dispositions, backgrounds, experiences, and trajectories of development. It addresses three major research questions: 1) How do the teachers control over the multiple aspects of their teacher work across time and contexts? 2) What are the major individual and contextual factors that facilitate and constrain the development of teacher autonomy? 3) How do teacher identities affect the development of teacher autonomy? The study adopted many narrative forms of data collection instruments, including (auto)biographies, interviews, casual conversations, questionnaire, complemented by classroom observations, staff meeting observations, and documents, in order to understand teacher autonomy from the lived experiences of the four teacher participants throughout their careers and lives.

By examining the concept of teacher autonomy through the lens of teacher identity, this study analyzed how four teacher participants exercised different degrees of autonomy at different stages of their teaching, research, and administrative roles. It provides a holistic picture of zigzagging pathways towards teacher autonomy across the whole course of their careers. It then discussed how the teachers’ autonomy was facilitated and constrained by contextual and individual factors across time.

Based on the findings, this study proposes a conceptual framework to illustrate the close relationship between teacher identity and teacher autonomy, and this relationship’s dynamic and unstable nature across time and contexts. It also suggests there is an urgent need for teacher autonomy scholarship to broaden its scope by moving beyond language teaching and learning to more crucial aspects of language teachers’ daily work and to explore the development of teacher autonomy in a long-term process.
Acknowledgements

I would like to give my sincere gratitude to my two supervisors, Professor Sandy Li and Dr. Jing Huang, who kindly monitored the progress of my PhD study. They provided insightful comments for my thesis and encouraged me to address difficulties and obstacles. I also thank Dr. Jan Connelly, my principal supervisor in the first two years of my PhD study. She was always encouraging and considerate for both my study and life. She also kindly helped proofread the final version of this thesis.

Thanks go to Professor William Littlewood from the Language Center of Hong Kong Baptist University, and Professor Vicky Tam, Professor Hing Keung Ma, Professor Atara Sivan, Dr. Lisa Deng, Dr. Kelly Ku, Dr. Tat Heung Choi, Dr. Dennis Chan, and Dr. Ricky Lam from the Department of Education Studies of Hong Kong Baptist University. They all offered me help in one way or another during my PhD study. I would also like to express my gratitude to Professor Icy Lee from the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Dr. Andy Gao from the University of Hong Kong for their detailed and insightful comments for my thesis revision.

I thank the administrative staff at the General Office of Department of Education Studies, especially Ms. Fanny Wong, Ms. Amy Tam, Ms. Michelle Lee, Ms. Yanas Wong, and Ms. Felicia Low, for their kind assistance. I also thank the research fellows in my office - Ms. Aihua Hu, Mr. Zhixing Xu, Mr. Edmund Chan, Mr. Henry Chung, and Ms. Olufolake Orekoya - and all my friends in the former office DLB 719 - Phoebe, Sara, Ava, Fiona, Kanny, Wing, and Stanley - for their encouragement.

I give my heartfelt thanks to all the teacher participants who shared their life stories with me and allowed me to gain access to their language classrooms. Thanks also go out to the Dean of School of Foreign Languages of my working institution who allowed me to conduct this investigation, and all my colleagues who kindly participated in the participant sampling process.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my dear parents for their unceasing love and support. Many thanks are given to my sisters, brother, and brother-in-laws for their care and love.
## Table of Contents

DECLARATION........................................................................................................i
Abstract ..................................................................................................................ii
Acknowledgements .............................................................................................. iii
Table of Contents ................................................................................................... iv
List of Tables ..........................................................................................................vii
Abbreviations ......................................................................................................... viii

Chapter 1 Introduction .......................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Identification of the research problem .................................................... 1
  1.2 Background to the study ............................................................................ 3
    1.2.1 English major programmes in China .............................................. 3
    1.2.2 Recruitment and appraisal of EM teachers in China ...................... 6
    1.2.3 EM teacher training and development in China ............................. 8
  1.3 The researcher’s experiences as an EM teacher ..................................... 10
  1.4 Research questions .................................................................................... 11
  1.5 Organization of the thesis .......................................................................... 12

Chapter 2 Literature review .................................................................................. 13
  2.1 The concept of teacher autonomy ............................................................ 13
    2.1.1 Conceptualizing teacher autonomy .............................................. 13
    2.1.2 The meaning of teacher autonomy in this study ......................... 17
      2.1.2.1 Understanding capacity .......................................................... 17
      2.1.2.2 Understanding control ............................................................ 20
      2.1.2.3 Understanding the multiplicity of teacher work ..................... 21
    2.1.3 Empirical studies on teacher autonomy ........................................ 21
      2.1.3.1 Teacher autonomy in language teacher education contexts .... 22
      2.1.3.2 Teacher autonomy in naturalistic contexts ............................ 24
  2.2 The concept of teacher identity ................................................................. 27
    2.2.1 Conceptualizing teacher identity .................................................... 28
    2.2.2 Empirical studies on teacher identity ............................................ 31
  2.3 The relationship between teacher autonomy and teacher identity .......... 34
  2.4 Chapter summary ....................................................................................... 37

Chapter 3 Research design .................................................................................. 38
  3.1 Research method ....................................................................................... 38
  3.2 Research context ........................................................................................ 40
    3.2.1 Institutional context ...................................................................... 40
    3.2.2 The context of School of Foreign Languages ............................... 46
  3.3 Teacher participant sampling ...................................................................... 49
  3.4 Researcher’s role and ethics ....................................................................... 53
  3.5 Data collection ............................................................................................ 55
    3.5.1 (Auto)biographies ....................................................................... 56
    3.5.2 Interviews and casual conversations ............................................. 57
    3.5.3 Observations of classroom teaching and staff meetings ............... 58
Chapter 7 Jacky’s story

7.1 Jacky’s teaching experiences
7.1.1 Entering the teaching profession

7.1.2 Renewed teaching after completing his MA study

7.2 Jacky’s research experiences

7.3 The impact of family on Jacky’s career development

3.5.4 Documents ........................................................................................................60
3.5.5 Research journal ..................................................................................................61
3.6 Data processing and analysis .................................................................................61
3.7 Trustworthiness of the study .................................................................................64
3.8 Chapter summary ..................................................................................................65

Chapter 6 Daisy’s story

6.1 Becoming a Christian ..........................................................................................111
6.2 Daisy’s teaching experiences ..............................................................................112
6.2.1 Early experiences as an EM teacher: I was incapable ..................................112
6.2.2 Ongoing development in teaching .................................................................114
6.2.3 Daisy’s changes in teaching after becoming a Christian ...............................119
6.3 Daisy’s research experiences ..............................................................................121
6.4 Daisy’s experiences of undertaking administrative work ..................................125
6.5 Daisy’s other aspects of work and life .................................................................127
6.6 Synopsis .............................................................................................................128

Chapter 5 Snow’s story

5.1 Snow’s teaching experiences ..............................................................................92
5.1.1 Teaching experiences before becoming an EM teacher ...............................92
5.1.2 Early experiences as an EM teacher ..............................................................94
5.1.3 Teaching experiences at the current working institution .........................96
5.2 Snow’s research experiences ..............................................................................101
5.2.1 Beginning years of doing research ..............................................................101
5.2.2 Research experiences during PhD study ......................................................102
5.2.3 Research experiences at current stage .........................................................104
5.3 Being a mother and career choices ....................................................................106
5.4 Snow’s other aspects of teacher work ...............................................................108
5.5 Synopsis ............................................................................................................109

Chapter 4 Philip’s story

4.1 Philip’s teaching experiences ............................................................................67
4.1.1 Early teaching experiences .........................................................................67
4.1.2 Adaptation and stagnation .........................................................................71
4.1.3 Awakening in teaching ..............................................................................74
4.2 Philip’s experiences of being the Associate Head/Dean ...................................78
4.2.1 Taking charge of students’ postgraduate entrance examination ...............79
4.2.2 Taking charge of English major programme reform ....................................82
4.3 Philip’s research experiences ..........................................................................86
4.4 Philip’s other aspects of teacher work ............................................................88
4.5 Synopsis ..........................................................................................................90

Chapter 3

3.5.4 Research journal ............................................................................................60
3.5.5 Documents .....................................................................................................60
3.6 Data processing and analysis ............................................................................61
3.7 Trustworthiness of the study ............................................................................64
3.8 Chapter summary ...............................................................................................65
7.4 Jacky’s other aspects of teacher work..........................................................140
7.5 Synopsis ........................................................................................................141
Chapter 8 Case analysis and discussion............................................................143
  8.1 Stages of autonomy development...............................................................144
    8.1.1 Stages of teaching ..................................................................................144
      8.1.1.1 The stage of inexperience ...............................................................144
      8.1.1.2 The stage of adaptation: slaves to routine vs. agents of change
                           ...............................................................................................147
      8.1.1.3 The stage of reform ......................................................................150
      8.1.1.4 Summary ......................................................................................155
    8.1.2 Stages of research ..................................................................................157
      8.1.2.1 The stage of active novice research ..............................................158
      8.1.2.2 The stage of stagnation vs. development ........................................160
      8.1.2.3 The stage of struggle ....................................................................163
      8.1.2.4 Summary ......................................................................................168
    8.1.3 Stages of administration: power vs. obedience ......................................169
    8.1.4 Characteristics of the long-term development of teacher autonomy 173
  8.2 Contextual and individual factors influencing teacher autonomy ..........174
    8.2.1 Teachers and the education and institution contexts .........................175
    8.2.2 Teachers and professional learning and development contexts ..........181
    8.2.3 Teachers and living contexts ..............................................................182
    8.2.4 Summary .............................................................................................183
  8.3 Teacher identity and teacher autonomy .....................................................184
    8.3.1 Teacher identity formation and autonomy as processes ....................184
    8.3.2 Multiple teacher identities and degrees of teacher autonomy ..........187
    8.3.3 The reciprocal relationship between teacher autonomy and teacher
         identity ....................................................................................................189
  8.4 Chapter summary .......................................................................................191
Chapter 9 Conclusions and implications..........................................................192
  9.1 Contributions of this study ........................................................................192
    9.1.1 Reconceptualizing teacher autonomy in second/foreign language
         education ..................................................................................................192
    9.1.2 Documenting the long-term development of teacher autonomy .....194
    9.1.3 Linking teacher autonomy with teacher identity ...............................194
  9.2 Limitations of this study .............................................................................196
  9.3 Implications for teachers, institutions, and future research .....................197
References ..........................................................................................................199
Appendix 1: Informed consent form .................................................................220
Appendix 2: The first-round interview questions .............................................221
Appendix 3: The second-round interview questions ..........................................223
Appendix 4: Questionnaire ................................................................................224