香港浸會大學
HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

HKBU Scholars

DOCTORAL THESIS

Teacher autonomy in a context of Chinese tertiary education: case studies of EFL teachers

Long, Nana

Date of Award:
2014

Link to publication

General rights
Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent URL assigned to the publication

Download date: 10 Dec, 2022

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

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 4 Philip's story 67
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 5 Snow's story 92
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 6 Daisy's story 111
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 7 Jacky's story 130
7.1 Jacky's teaching experiences 130
7.1.1 Entering the teaching profession 130
7.1.2 Renewed teaching after completing his MA study 132
7.2 Jacky's research experiences 135
7.3 The impact of family on Jacky's career development 139

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