

How Developing Shared Professional Identity Mitigates Cultural Differences in an EFL Research Setting

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Abstract

This study concerns the shared experiences of a foreign-born professor and the Korean teachers of English with whom he engaged during the course of a major research project. It seeks to demonstrate how focusing on shared professional identity (i.e. of educators) could mitigate the cultural differences between the two, as well as lessen the potential obstacles rooted in those differences. The inquiry was conducted within a TESOL certification program in which the professor taught the Korean teachers. It has implications for education researchers in any cross-cultural environments.

Keywords: cross-cultural research practice, identity, education, adult learners, Korea

Conducting research in a cross-cultural environment brings with it a series of additional, unique challenges. As a western-born researcher working in Korea, the most obvious of these are my foreignness and my lack of ability in the Korean language (and conversely, the challenges my research participants experience in English). Over the course of this study, other challenges became apparent: my age, my professional status, and potentially my pedagogy. This paper will illustrate how each of these challenges existed in the research context, and demonstrate how I as researcher employed an unwavering dedication to our shared professional

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identity to reduce the effects of those challenges, and therefore enable (and possibly enhance the efficacy of) a major research project.

Theoretical Context—the Ethos of the Project

Much has been written on the topic of teachers' professional identities, but it is certain specific perspectives which inform the current study. Freeman and Johnson, though writing in an academic journal, cite an excellent lay-language description of some of the base, fundamental components in the formation of professional identity: "teachers. . . enter teacher education programs with prior experiences, personal values, and beliefs that inform their knowledge about teaching and shape what they do in their classrooms." (1998: 401). Sachs offers a comparatively conservative—but nevertheless useful—definition of professional identity: "a set of attributes that are imposed upon the teaching profession either by outsiders or members of the teaching fraternity itself. . . that enable the differentiation of one group from another" (2001: 153). I sought to place myself on the participants' side of such differentiation. The attributes alluded to include teachers' "knowledge and beliefs, dispositions, interests, and orientation towards work and change" (Drake, Spillane, and Hufferd-Ackles 2001: 2). It is out of respect for participants' identities as described that I undertook this effort to rebalance the research relationship in the manner I did. Wenger suggests that "identity and practice [are] mirror images of each other," and it is that perspective which most closely informs this project: teachers' professional identity is a "negotiated experience. We define who we are by the ways we experience our selves through participation as well as by the ways we and others reify ourselves" (1998: 149). It is this negotiation that was the central dynamic of my efforts to redress imbalances, and its expression in our conversations was the primary source of data for the inquiry.

My own perspectives and motivations for undertaking the inquiry can be summed up as follows: I believe that "texts, any texts, are always partial and incomplete; socially, culturally, historically, racially, and sexually located, and can therefore never represent any truth except those truths that exhibit the same characteristics" (Lincoln, 2002, p. 333). Ontologically, I worked from the belief that reality is neither static nor fixable; but instead that it mutates and changes both on its own and as a reflection of those who experience its mutable layers. That being said, there was a critical substratum to my work. The construction of knowledge is, in my view, motivated by a desire for personal/social progress and/or emancipation from prevailing systems or idioms. In addition, the social construction of knowledge does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it takes place within a series of concentric social arenas, some of which are sociohistorical macro-realities over which the subject may have perceptive authority, but significantly less (if any) authorial control. For my project's adult learners, these arenas included their classroom, the province hosting their program, their nation (both physical and abstract), their

professions and professional communities, and their families. Rossman and Rallis would classify me as a critical phenomenologist, as I am most interested in giving program adult learners an opportunity to give voice to their experiences, and perhaps thereby find self-empowerment from within (1998). I therefore undertook research in the phenomenological tradition, but not at the expense or to the exclusion of other paradigms, which proved themselves illustrative at certain junctures in the research process. It was the aim of drawing together individual threads of understanding into narratives of meaning, both for individual adult learners and the TESOL group as a whole that drew to me to choose phenomenology as the guiding principle for the project.

Methodology—Setting and Participants

The physical setting for the inquiry was a small, private university in a rural city in South Korea. The TESOL program is a certification open to final-year students in Education or English, as well as in-service professionals. It is officially connected to TEFL International and to the M.A. TESOL at a mid-sized American university. I employed convenience sampling; the sample consisted of all those teachers who volunteered for the study, from a population pool of a single TESOL cohort. The participants were 7 women and 3 men. Their ages ranged from mid-20s to mid-40s, and their teaching careers from not yet begun to over twenty years. Two of the men were full-time students at the time of the inquiry (though one had volunteered as an English tutor while studying in the US), and one of the women self-identified as a housewife. The others were all practicing education professionals to some degree. The remaining male was the longest-serving teacher, with a 20-year career in the English department at an international language high school. Four of the women were working as teachers/tutors in private academies. One of the teachers ran a preschool English academy, and one was preparing to re-enter the workplace by opening an academy. One taught English in her church, and the other began (midway through the inquiry) a new posting, teaching English in a middle school. The last woman participant is a career school administrator with neither teaching experience, nor any intention of teaching in the future. She would follow up her TESOL training with an M.A. TESOL at an American university, but prior to the inquiry was one of two participants who had had no experience with English-language education overseas. Throughout this paper the participants are pseudonymous to ensure privacy and for ease and continuity of reading.

Key Concerns of the Inquiry

The obstacles to the cross-cultural inquiry are delineated as follows:

1. Age
2. Foreignness
3. Professional Status
4. Other Obstacles

Age

At the outset of the TESOL program, we instructors were introduced to the participating students by name, age, and rank, in that order. My introduction, therefore, sounded like this (paraphrased):

Please welcome Dr. Tommy Vorst. He's 41 years old, and is a Visiting Professor of English from New Zealand.

Notwithstanding being misidentified by nationality as well as by qualification, it is clear how this introduction erected two significant barriers between the students and myself: those of age and professional status. For the students' awareness of my age seemed a source of comfort, however, and soon after many of them took the opportunity to inform me that they were younger (or older) than myself, and by how much. This was in keeping with their experiences within the group. Said Sarah:

I and the other teachers made sure of each other's ages.

Nevertheless, I could not help but notice that this established a hierarchy to which several of them felt bound. Kyle spoke of the burden of responsibilities that came with being a senior member in the classroom, noting somewhat humorously those certain members of the TESOLT class:

are all my students, according to the age difference.

It would be naïve of me to think that such age-based perceptions (and strictures) were not extended to me. For better or worse, age was a factor in the classroom. The question of professional status I will address further along in this paper, but first I will outline the more obvious issue of my cultural outsider status.

Foreignness

There could of course be no disguising my status as a foreigner. I am a blue-eyed caucasian male with a blue metallic ring piercing my left nostril. Cross-cultural settings exact a greater sensitivity of the researcher than studying in one's home environment. Indeed, "Doing cross-cultural research necessitates the acquisition of cultural knowledge of the social group that researchers wish to learn from" (Liamputtong 2008, 4). In part, I had already fulfilled that necessity by making South Korea my adopted home prior to the inquiry. For 4 years between 2001 and 2007, I lived and attempted to learn the language there, eventually marrying into the culture in 2005. These personal steps engaged me with the host culture. Living in semi-rural settings taught me the heightened attention to interpersonal communicative formality Korean country life demands. Communicating with

my new extended family and others on my self-propelled travels through the country meant I had become relatively comfortable in the Korean language. All of these interactions necessitated my understanding, recognition, acceptance, and participation in Korean cultural idioms.

The very foreignness of the English-only TESOL program itself—exported from a US university—led Deanna to say:

The TESOL program is for foreigners.

Indeed Brandy had never had extensive contact with a non-Korean before:

I have studied so many years during my middle school, high school, university. During that time, I can read in textbooks, but I have no opportunity to speak out with foreigner teachers.

By contrast, Kyle rooted his perception of the inherent difficulties of cross-cultural research in his many years of experience working together with foreigners.

You and I are different culturally in many ways....Especially about cultural things...we cannot get to 100% understanding....When we talk about cultural things it's difficult to get some agreement between Korean teachers and foreign teachers.

That difficulty of understanding was illustrated to me in another aspect of the program. During the extra-curricular events, Sarah sought me out specifically on the basis of my foreignness. She enjoyed engaging me in discussions of culture, and 'grilling' me about the changes to Korean culture she saw going on around her, which she attributed to outside influences. Based on our verbal jousting, I believe she saw me as a representative of a western culture whose encroachment on modern-day Korea is not always a good thing.

Professional Status

The most unavoidable, unnatural obstacle erected between the students and myself was the one inherent in our professional relationship:

Deanna called it

The difference of my position

Kyle called it

Position differences

Most simply put, a professor in front of a room of students establishes a power hierarchy, a dynamic mostly dissected in Western contexts (Biesta 2006; Ranciere

2010; De Lissovoy 2014). In research, that hierarchy is in my opinion anathema to effective inquiry of any kind. At the outset of the project, it was this obstacle that I was most interested in dismantling. Some of this positional distance manifested itself as performance stress for the students:

When I speak English, I have a lot of grammatical errors, and pronunciation, and proper vocabulary. So when I make a mistake, the teacher/professor may think me lower than me. So, because of this feel, I want not to talk to them a lot.

The least likely participant to self-identify as a teacher was Serge, who was the youngest member of the cohort. He was only one of two who had never taught/ worked in education prior to enrolment. Yet on a shared bus ride from the campus one day near the conclusion of the program, I asked him if finishing TESOL felt any different from finishing his other courses. He said yes, and followed that by saying that the TESOL students:

may have more in common, like we are all teachers or something.

Indeed, in the end only one participant did not unequivocally describe himself as a teacher. Nevertheless, even he was using the program as a springboard to a term position: teaching theatre stage management to drama students in Nepal.

Other Obstacles

In addition to the very common practice of apologizing for one's lack of English ability, some mentions of linguistic obstacles did occur during the study. Kyle in particular observed that in addition to his own concerns:

I have some language barrier, English barrier,

he had also been privy to the conversations of his peers on the matter. When I asked him if there was a risk that the English-only environment could be burdensome, or that other people are experiencing that feeling, he said:

In a sense. Some students, some co-members are worried about that.

I have shown the four categories of difficulty that presented themselves to me during the course of the research. In the second part of this paper, I will outline how I sought to overcome these obstacles in order to successfully operate in a cross-cultural research EFL environment. I will examine how I overcame the obstacles in the same order I introduced them:

1. Age

2. Foreignness
3. Professional Status
4. Other Obstacles

Overcoming Obstacles of Age

As I have mentioned, my age was foregrounded at the outset of the program, and the participants all placed themselves on an age continuum relative to me and to their fellow students. However, it should be noted that while I was relatively powerless in combating this cultural tradition, some aspects of age were mitigated during the inquiry. Shauna observed that:

In our group there are so many differences between the ages of people, so TESOL was quite helpful for me to understand each other.

That mutual understanding led to age being less important. As the oldest participant in the inquiry, it could be argued Kyle had the most to lose from an abdication of age-based status. Yet he said:

We are all the same: colleagues, students. [We are] just friends.

It is entirely possible that the mere fact of studying in the TESOL certification program, therefore, led to the lessening of age-influence.

In one case, age also help ease the path toward shared identity. Kyle and I were effectively equals in terms of age and academic status. As he noted above, the major difference between us was that of my place of birth. By asserting our professional commonality, I believe I opened the door to what became camaraderie. In addition to sitting and singing together at dinners, Kyle and I were able to effortlessly shift our discussions from our careers and our jobs to our languages, our families, sports, culture, and world issues. We played sweat-soaked table tennis matches against one another as easily as we settled into a silent, brainy game of Hive (a modern abstract game similar to Go or Chess). In these ways the collegial atmosphere created by the students and the subsequent endorsement of my research model were key factors in mitigating the age barrier.

Overcoming the Obstacle of Foreignness

As a visible minority in Korea, my foreignness was an inescapable fact. There was no way to transcend or eliminate it, but mitigating its influence was something I felt was possible, or even probable. As the most personal attribute to be overcome, it was my personal relationships with individual members of the group that minimized this obstacle. Above, we saw how Sarah was able, on the basis of the equality I'd fostered, to use my foreignness to engage in a less formal, less academic relationship with me. I believe others did this, as well.

Shauna had been an expatriate herself, living in Ireland for a year prior to enrolling in the TESOL program. Remarkably, she referred to herself while living in Ireland as:

The real me.

Shauna saw herself as having two selves, and preferred the expatriate one to the one, which dominates in her home country. She often spoke of escaping her homeland, both as a physical place and as a culture in which she must bend her individualism to fit accepted norms. I believe her extraordinary emotional openness during the interviews was at least in part attributable to her seeing me as a fellow expatriate. I represented someone who could not just listen to, but also relate to her experiences. This could not have happened had I not been an expatriate myself. This led also to Brandy initiating conversations unlikely to have happened had I maintained the same professional distance the other members of my faculty did. Brandy lived and worked far away from the TESOL site. In order to allow her to participate in the research, I offered to commute the 2 hours to her hometown to conduct interviews, a development which surprised her. After her first interview, she asked me to join her for lunch in order to talk among other things about expat life. She was preparing to become an expatriate herself, with the program serving as a springboard to her participation in an M.A. TESOL in the USA.

The two younger men in the program sought me out as an older male (but younger than their fathers) to whom they could relate. At least part of this was due to my foreignness. Serge suggested that

of course you are my senior, but you are not my *hyung**, you know?

*Korean term for older male, whether blood related (“big brother”) or not.

Pierre and I once met by chance downtown, and immediately caught each other looking at a pretty woman strolling by, after which he engaged me for a half-hour to solicit my opinions on the nature of Korean beauty. The same week, Serge and I engaged in conversations on the bus about the state of hip-

hop music, and he was quite pleased to learn that some of the western artists he listened to were also to be found on my mp3 player. I am certain that had these two perceived our relationship to be exclusively that of professor and student, those conversations would not have occurred.

Overcoming Obstacles Based on Professional Status

The Researcher's Status

The unquestioned power I had as a professor relative to the students had to be dismantled if the research was to go forward as I wanted it. My first effort in this regard was administrative, and related to my role as researcher more than as a professor. I asked the program coordinator to recuse me from grading or evaluating the students in any way, and made this adjustment clear to the students. They therefore knew when deciding whether or not to join the research that I had no influence upon their grade in the program.

The second effort to reduce the power of the researcher was through an appeal. Instead of telling the students about the research and urging them to join in, I sent them each an explicitly worded invitation, one that reiterated the voluntary nature of participation.

When I finally got to meet them to discuss the project, they had therefore already become familiar with its details, its timeline, and its demands. My next move was instrumental, I believe, in establishing our collegial relationship: I asked them for a list of objections they had. My exact question to them was:

What do I have to do to make participation more attractive to you?

A long list of objections followed, mostly related to time, work demands, and technology use. I gave in on all counts. It was vital for potential participants to understand that I could not do this without them, and that they were therefore in a position of power to make-or-break the project. Ten of thirteen students deciding to participate in the inquiry proved that my submission to their requirements was successful.

The Professor's Status

In order to convey my dedication to the idea that we were professional equals, I subordinated myself and my presence to community of learning that was the TESOL program and the students in it. That is, I stressed their ownership of the classroom and of the learning community, and actively and ongoingly sought permission to enter it. When I visited the classroom on non-teaching days, I asked their permission to physically enter the classroom. Prior to all my lessons I

thanked them for having me as an instructor. I introduced lessons by asking them if there was any material in particular they wished to cover, rather than prioritize my own plans for the lesson. My classes were seminars (not lectures) and throughout my time in the classroom as a professor I encouraged a classroom atmosphere of mutual learning, as opposed to more traditional professor-led models. The participants clearly embraced this pedagogical model. Twyla said of the class:

Here, the colleagues all help each other. It's very good.

She went on to say that whenever her own work was done but others were still busy, she (without any coaxing or seeking permission from me) left her seat and:

I was helping them.

Sarah also spoke of the collegiality that existed, saying:

After class, if I didn't understand I make sure again [with] another student.

At the heart of mitigating the power imbalances in my dual position of professor and researcher was the identity I shared with the participants, that of an educator. If I could foreground our collegial ties as proof of our equality, the research could take place on some degree of equal footing. Deanna, who ordinarily considered her classroom identity to be “very nervous and uncomfortable”, went on to tell me:

But your class is very casual, and very practical, and very good. I had a good time to think about the content and the way to teach. What did the [other] professor want to teach us, I couldn't understand her lecture. . . Your class was so good, because we took part.”

By encouraging an atmosphere in which students were comfortable operating as teachers to their peers—on an equal footing with myself—I established that we were in fact, a group of educators sharing knowledge together.

All of the participants in one way or another displayed an acceptance of my role as their equal. Sometimes the group did this as a whole, and specific instances were illustrative of the success of my determination to overcome obstacles and level the inquiry's playing field. Three episodes in particular illustrated that my efforts were successful.

At several points in the program, students were required to perform in teaching demonstrations for which they would be graded. As I have noted, I was not involved in the grading process and the students knew this. As a result, I was able to spend several hours prior to the demonstrations advising the students. Had I

been part of the grading committee, I would have been unable to assist in that manner. On the date of the first demonstration, my advice was asked.

I told a flustered Jo not to panic, and to remember that the evaluating profs were rooting *for* them to succeed. Shauna asked me to repeat that, and rather than say it half a dozen times to individuals, I told the whole class: I told them “Hey, you’re teachers. This is what teachers do.” I told them how scared I still was standing in front of a room full of people, and that my perceiving them as my colleagues is what saved me every day.

On the second demonstration day, I observed that:

It’s very freeing, participating in these things without being allowed to grade them. The students all know—even those not in the study—that I am only there for moral support, and they seem to really thrive on that knowledge.

On several occasions during the program, the students asked me to go out on the town with them after class. Early on in the program I bowed out of the dinner, despite their protestations: I wasn’t sure yet of how the group saw me. I hadn’t thought I was going against societal participation norms since I was the instructor. I soon stood corrected, as Sarah reminded me that:

“we’re all teaching colleagues here.”

Dashed by my own words, everyone thought it was very funny. Twyla insisted I come along to the post-class dinner. She said she’d specifically asked the class if it was OK, and the unanimous response was that they’d be disappointed if I didn’t come. I was the only TESOL instructor in attendance. Assuming I wasn’t the only one invited, I asked if the others had demurred, to which Twyla replied:

they are not one of us.

Pierre backed her up, saying:

even when we’re in the classroom, you’re like one of the students, with us.

This was a tremendous validation of my goals, and was well-timed coming near the mid-point of the program. It was not until much later that a similarly powerful endorsement of my methods would appear.

At the program’s graduation ceremony the third of the illustrative episodes occurred. As was typical at such events, seats had been reserved for instructors at the back of the room, while the students sat nearer the front. I could not locate the chair with my nametag among the instructors’ seats. One of the students had

sneakily removed it and placed it on a chair in the midst of the students. When I located it, the students teased my befuddlement and Shauna said:

You belong here, with us

The ceremony was an emotionally powerful affair. Most of the students shed a few small tears, but two wept openly. Shauna and I leaned on one another while crying, and then slid into giggles as the ridiculousness of crying on such a happy day hit us. This could not have happened had I been sitting off to the side of the room with the other instructors. Shauna's invitation for me to sit next to her—and my choice to accept it—during the ceremony made it possible. Ignoring prescribed or expected professional roles enhanced both of our experiences.

Overcoming Other Obstacles

As I have shown, several participants were hesitant about the all-English nature of the program, and by extension of my research. I took several measures to minimize their trepidation.

During my preamble to each of the interviews, I reminded all participants that I did not want them to consider language a barrier, and that if they felt they could not express themselves to their satisfaction in English, that they were welcome to switch to Korean at any time:

Speaking Korean slowly during the interview is OK.

As I was recording the interviews and had access to translation services, there would be no burden upon me as a result of their using their native tongue. To further emphasize this point, I told them this in Korean.

Deanna in particular, relied on occasional Korean use to make herself understood during the interviews. One example thereof was as follows:

It is very 아까워요, 아까워요: what is 아까워요 in English?

To which I responded:

That's OK. That's all I need. I do the translation later, so you don't have to worry. Any time you get into trouble, go ahead and say things like that. I'll write them down and if I spell them correctly, I can find them and I know what you're talking about.

By empowering participants to use their native tongue during the interview portion of the research, I reduced barriers that would have existed had I been dogmatic about English use. For Deanna in particular, this left an impression.

When I asked her at the conclusion of our first interview for her impressions of the process, she replied:

It is also a good experience to me. It is the first time to talk English, only English, with a foreigner. So this is very impressive. I also remember when I will be a grandmother, I'll say: 'when I was young, younger than me, I had an experience, blah, blah, blah, blah,' so this is very good experience, and thank you very much.

At times the allowances I made during the interviews stood out against the linguistic difficulties participants faced inside the English-only classroom. For Brandy, the interview portion of the inquiry stood in stark contrast to the challenges she faced in the classroom, and allowed her to identify the limitations she felt there:

I want to have enough time to show my opinion. But now, it seems to me I have enough time to speak to you.

By approaching language as a non-issue, especially in an environment in which it was so important to the participants, I defused its oppressive power. Making it my responsibility instead of theirs further rebalanced our positions within the inquiry, as they no longer had to concern themselves with impressions made or perceptions taken.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

As I have demonstrated, it was vital for me to have established and foregrounded a collegial relationship with the students if I wanted the research to proceed successfully. First and foremost it was incumbent upon me to recognize I was entering a community of professional practice. Bellah (1985) writes of such communities: they are "a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it" (333). I further required the approval of the membership to enter their community, and my appeal to do so had to be rooted in the values espoused by the community as they created it. I made this entry both metaphorical and literal, as a means of reinforcing my desire to position myself as an equal, a colleague, rather than a professor/researcher. Despite all of my efforts, the sociocultural status of teachers in Korea meant my role in the TESOL classroom could have unduly influenced my participants. By foregrounding our shared professional identity, I sought to minimize these potential influences. Throughout my contact with the teachers in the classroom, I stressed our collegial relationship. All of these actions were taken with the same goal in mind: to enable the larger inquiry to take place in an environment of equality and

therefore legitimacy. I believe I have shown that this was very successful. I was accepted on equal terms into the group, and was able to conduct my research in the spirit it was intended. I have come to the conclusion that the inherent impediments of cross-cultural research can be transcended by a fundamental respect for participants as people. By observing strict rules of ethical conduct and creating an atmosphere of shared experience, researchers can more safely navigate the complexities and conundrums of cross-cultural research.

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