Being a Chinese Teacher in a Rural Primary School in Tibet: A Narrative Inquiry of a Han Chinese Teacher’s Identity Development

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ABSTRACT

China is a multi-ethnic country with one majority ethnic group (i.e. the Hans) and fifty-five minority groups. Nowadays Mandarin is a required course in Tibetan schools, and there are many Han Chinese recruited to teach Mandarin in Tibet. This article explores the identity development of a Han Chinese teacher as he works in a rural primary school in Tibet where the local language and culture is different from his own. From a social-cultural perspective and using narrative inquiry, this article views identity formation as an ongoing process involving interpretation and reinterpretation of one’s living experiences as well as acknowledges the social and contextual constructions of one’s life stories. The findings uncover the teacher’s identity struggles as he tries to adapt to local traditions of teaching. The narratives generate important implications for policy makers and language teacher training programs.

KEYWORDS

Chinese, Language Teacher, Narratives, Qualitative, Social-Cultural, Teacher Identity, Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL), Tibet

INTRODUCTION

The People’s Republic of China (PRC), founded in 1949, is a multi-ethnic country which consists of one majority ethnic group (i.e. the Han Chinese) and fifty-five minority groups. According to the 2010 National Population Census of China, the population of Han Chinese is approximately 1.2 billion, accounting for 91.51% of the total; the minorities, with a proportion of 8.49%, have a population over 113 million (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). Most of the ethnic minorities, except for the Hui and the Manchu, have their own languages, with many having functional writing systems (Zhou, 2000). Ever since 1955, the central government has established Mandarin as the official language and started to promote Mandarin education across the country, including the minority groups. The policy of bilingual education had been implemented until 2002, when English provision also became mandated for all minority students from Primary 3 (Ministry of Education, 2001).

The Tibetans, as an ethnic minority group in China, not only live in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), but also spread in several other regions such as the Qinghai Autonomous Region, Sichuan Province, Yunnan Province in China. Nowadays, even in very mountainous and remote areas in the TAR, educational systems and schools have been built and there are many Han teachers from thousands of miles away recruited to teach Mandarin in the TAR, since there is a lack of qualified language teachers in local Tibetan schools.
LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been research on teaching Chinese as a second language to minority students from both theoretical and pedagogical perspectives (Blachford, 1997). Some scholars, from a linguistic perspective, discuss how language differences influence the teaching and learning of Chinese (Cobey, 2007; Bialystok, 2001). Some scholars, focusing on classroom practices, discuss how Han teachers can provide effective instructions and address the cultural differences when teaching at local minority schools (Lin, 1997; Wan & Zhang, 2007; Wang, 2011; Zhou, 2001). There is also research evaluating the effectiveness of local school curriculums and providing suggestions for minority schools’ curriculum development (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Lin, 1997).

Besides, there is a lot of research on learning Chinese as a second language from minority students’ and teachers’ perspectives. For example, some scholars specifically focus on minority students’ attitudes, confidence, and motivation in learning Mandarin Chinese (Yang, 2015). Scholars have also investigated minority students’ bilingual learning experiences in local schools (Feng, 2007; Lam, 2007). In terms of minority teachers’ perspective, there is research exploring minority teachers’ teaching experiences, perceptions, and reflections of bilingual instruction (Hansen, 2011; Huang, 2007; Luo & Wang, 2004).

However, little attention has been paid to Han Chinese teachers’ emotion, adaptation, and identity formation when they teach in local ethnic regions. Although there have been numerous studies on second language (L2) teachers’ identities, they are mostly about L2 English teachers’ identity and professional development instead of that of L2 teachers of other languages (Johnson, 2006; Lee, 2013; Pavlenko, 2003; Tsui, 2007; Varghese, et al., 2005). However, a noticeable commonality among these studies is that many of them examine L2 English teacher identities from a sociocultural perspective. Johnson (2006) explains that the emergence of sociocultural research on L2 teacher identities is because more and more scholars have realized “the complex social, cultural, political, and institutional factors that affect L2 teachers and L2 teaching” (p. 250).

Therefore, this study which focuses on an L2 Chinese teacher’s identity development would help fill the current gaps in the study of language teacher identities. Due to the encouragement policy of the Chinese central government and an increase in educational NGOs, each year there are a lot of Han teachers migrating to western ethnic areas, and most of them are novice teachers who just graduate from college. When these teachers live and work in a remote place where the local language and culture are totally different from their own, they inevitably encounter many special challenges in the process of their professional development. Therefore, it is important to look into Han teachers’ lived experiences and life stories, not only because this is a less studied area, but also because it can generate interesting findings that inspire both Chinese teacher education programs and international language teacher training programs.

A SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON IDENTITY

This paper examines identity from a social-cultural perspective which views identity formation as an ongoing process involving interpretation and reinterpretation of a person’s life experiences as well as acknowledges the social and contextual constraints on the person (Kerby, 1991; Gee, 2001; Olsen, 2012). Therefore, the development of one’s identity is constantly and continuously shaped by the different scopes of a larger social environment as well as the specific context the person interacts with and lives in. Specifically, teacher identities are so complex and multifaceted that can be influenced by historical, sociological, psychological, and cultural factors (Cooper & Olsen, 1996). As for the Han Chinese teachers in minority schools, their identities are a socially-constructed, dynamic, and hybrid ecological integrity interwoven with their cross-cultural experiences (Canagarajah, 2013; Warriner, 2007).
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