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Understanding EFL teacher identity and identity tensions in a Chinese university context

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[Correction added on September 12, 2024, after the first online publication: In the Reference section, reference "VERBI Software. (2021)" has been updated in this version.]

Abstract

In the past few decades, teacher identity has been a popular topic in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching. As a construct that is socially constructed, teacher identity is influenced by situational contexts and is not fixed but multifaceted. While many studies have examined pre-service and novice teachers' identities, relatively fewer paid attention to experienced language teachers' identities and the conflicts they may encounter. This study investigates one seasoned EFL teacher's multiple identities and the tensions that existed in her identity in a Chinese university setting. Data included a semi-structured interview, class recordings, a stimulated recall, and artifacts such as the teacher's materials for classroom teaching. Findings demonstrated that the teacher practiced three sub-identities in her teaching, namely, an English language teacher, a guide, and an academic advisor. Additionally, tensions within her identity as an English educator were identified, consisting of the popularity of technology-driven tools in students' English learning activities and the need to conduct research while not possessing sufficient research skills. The pedagogical insights generated underscored the importance of teachers' agency and institutional support in resolving the tensions to facilitate experienced language teachers' ongoing professional development and identity construction.

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KEYWORDS
Chinese university setting, EFL, experienced teacher, identity, tensions

摘要

近年来,教师身份在英语作为外语教学领域中备受关注。作为一种社会建构的概念,教师身份受到情境因素的影响,并且不是固定的,而是多维的。尽管许多研究已经探讨了职前和新手教师的身份,较少有研究关注经验丰富的语言教师的身份及其可能遇到的冲突。本研究在中国大学背景下,调查了一名资深英语教师的多重身份及其身份中的冲突。数据包括半结构化访谈、课堂录音、激发式回忆及教师用于课堂教学的材料等。研究结果表明,该教师在教学中实践了三种子身份,即英语教师、指导者和学术顾问。此外,本研究还发现了该教师作为英语教育者的身份中的冲突,包括学生英语学习活动中科技驱动工具的普及和教师需要进行研究但缺乏足够研究技能。本研究产生的教学启示强调了教师自主性和机构支持在解决身份冲突、促进经验丰富的语言教师持续专业发展和身份建构中的重要性。

关键词
中国大学背景;英语作为外语;资深教师;身份;身份冲突

1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent years, teacher identity has become a popular topic in the EFL teaching landscape. A sociocultural view of teacher identity recognizes that the construct is not fixed or monolithic, but dynamic, relational, and experiential (Tsui, 2007), which "shifts as they [teachers] participate in varying communities, interact with other individuals, and position themselves (and are positioned by others) in social contexts" (Yazan, 2018, p. 21). Teacher identity is considered an integral part of teaching competence and performance for language teachers (Richards, 2010), and it is "continuously performed and transformed through interaction in classrooms" (Miller, 2009, p. 175). Previous studies have extensively reported pre-service and/or novice language teachers' identity and the dissonance in their teacher identity; experienced teachers, however, received less attention. Studies (e.g., Coldron & Smith, 1999) have demonstrated the differences between the two groups of teachers' identity at different stages of career development. Understanding seasoned teachers' identities is crucial, since teacher identity plays a subtle yet influential role in guiding teachers' instructional approaches (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Yazan, 2018; Yuan, 2019), and it is inextricably interrelated to teachers' thoughts, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes about their teaching (Miller, 2009). Further, understanding experienced teachers' identity is significant to illuminate potential challenges on their professional development, thus facilitating the ongoing negotiation and (re)construction of their teacher identity and contributing to their career advancement. Therefore, this study attempts to bridge the gap by examining the identities of an experienced EFL teacher in the university setting in China, and the tensions that persisted in her teacher identity.

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2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Teacher identity: Socially constructed and multifaceted

The proliferation of theories on teacher identity has afforded important approaches to understand the real-world complexities of the construct (see Varghese et al., 2005 for a review). Recent theoretical underpinnings on teacher identity converge on the idea that teacher identity is not an individual matter or a fixed construct, but a sociocultural product (e.g., Morgan, 2004) constructed and negotiated through the interactions between the teachers and the social and institutional contexts they are situated in (e.g., Sachs, 2005; Tsui, 2007; Yuan, 2019). Further, the sociocultural perspective posits that teacher identity is not monolithic; instead, it is "fragmented" and comprises multiple sub-identities (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beijaard et al., 2004) which are connected to their performances in society (Gee, 2000). That is, the self is composed of multiple I-positions (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011) that bring forward specific voices afforded by particular settings. The notion of identity, therefore, is captured as a plurality of sub-identities that co-exist with each other (Mishler, 1999), which individual teachers negotiate, (re)construct, and enact in their situational contexts (Yazan, 2018). The plurality and multifacetedness of teacher identity encompasses identity-in-practice and identity-in-discourse, with the former focusing on concrete practices and tasks and the latter constituted in discourse through individuals' use of language (e.g., Varghese et al., 2005).

Current scholarship on language teacher identity has extensively focused on preservice and/or beginning teachers' identity (trans)formation (e.g., Farrell, 2009; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Kudaibergenov & Lee, 2022; Li & De Costa, 2018; Pillen, 2013; Xu, 2012; Zhu et al., 2022), which have provided valuable understanding and insights. Studies focusing on experienced teachers' identity (e.g., Beijaard, 1995; Beijaard et al., 2000) suggest that their identity is significantly different from that of novice teachers (Coldron & Smith, 1999). For instance, assuming a pedagogical role (Beijaard et al., 2000), experienced teachers possess pedagogical knowledge that contains "more elements that are stable than still in a state of flux," while novice teachers' knowledge is characterized by "variable elements" (Gatbonton, 2008, p. 162). In another study, Bao and Feng (2023) illustrated how a university EFL teacher experienced a sense of marginalization in her community due to her lack research expertise early in her career; however, she gradually gained confidence in her teaching expertise, which allowed her to benefit a wide group of students beyond her institution. The process of identity transformation, from being an academic "outcast" (p. 5) to a teaching expert, highlighted the distinctions between the identities of novice and experienced teachers.

A few studies (e.g., Farrell, 2011; Kessler, 2021; Racelis & Matsuda, 2014) offered insights regarding the multiplicity of experienced teachers' identities in particular pedagogical settings. Farrell (2011) examined three experienced teachers' role identities in Canadian college settings. The study identified 16 professional identities practiced by the three teachers, which were categorized into *Teacher as Manager*, *Teacher as "Acculturator"* and *Teacher as Professional*. The author noted some of the role identities constructed by the three teachers (e.g., *collaborator*, *knowledgeable*, and *learner*) were individually created and negotiated through their own experiences, while teacher as *vendor*, *entertainer*, and *careprovider* were predetermined role identities the teachers fitted themselves into. In another study, Kessler (2021) reported a seasoned instructor's multiple role identities in a content-based legal writing classroom, which consisted of *a teacher/lawyer conduit*, *an authority figure*, and *an ability scout*. Finally, Racelis and Matsuda's (2014) study investigated composition teachers whose experiences with writing instruction ranged from 3 to 30 years and the multiple identities they demonstrated, and the study identified three sub-identities: writing teacher identity, language teacher identity, and L2 writing teacher identity.

2.2 | Tensions in teacher identity

The multiple voices and identities that constitute an individual's holistic self can harmoniously co-exist; however, they may simultaneously manifest conflicts and tensions (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beijaard et al., 2004), showing

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TABLE 1 Tensions university teachers experienced in previous studies.

Tensions university teachers experienced	Studies cited
Teaching vs. research	Barkhuizen (2009); Bao & Feng (2022, 2023); Xu (2014); Zhang et al. (2022)
Designated identity vs. practiced identity	Liu & Xu (2011); Tsui (2007)
Transitioning into a different teaching environment	Golzar et al. (2023); Howard (2021); Xu & Tao (2023)
Interactions with students	Skelton (2012)

that identity construction is a "continuing site of struggle" (MacLure, 1993, p. 313). Since the construct of identity is socially constructed and susceptible to contextual influences, the changes in the educational landscape can possibly lead to changes in teachers' identities, the process of which may often be accompanied by tensions and dilemmas (Beijaard et al., 2004). Tensions are often manifested as teachers' sense of insecurity and uncertainty (van Lankveld et al., 2017). Depending on if and how they are resolved, tensions can either inhibit or facilitate identity construction and development (Alsup, 2006; Golombek & Klager, 2015; Olsen, 2010; Pillen, 2013).

Studies examining teachers' identity tensions in the university setting around the globe have identified the predicaments teachers encounter concerning the relationship between teaching and research (e.g., Bai, 2018; Bao & Feng, 2022, 2023; Barkhuizen, 2009; Xu, 2014; Zhang et al., 2022), incongruence between teachers' designated identity and the actual practiced identity against the backdrop of educational reform (e.g., Liu & Xu, 2011; Tsui, 2007), tensions teachers come across in transitioning to an online and/or blended teaching environment (e.g., Golzar et al., 2023; Howard, 2021; Xu & Tao, 2023) due to the rapid educational technology development (Lam & Lawrence, 2002; Pokrivcakova, 2019), and issues emergent from interactions with students (e.g., Skelton, 2012). Table 1 displays the tensions in teacher identity in the university setting reported in previous studies. This line of inquiry has offered in-depth understanding regarding the challenges salient to university teachers in their professional lives. However, the diverse scope of educational contexts and participants' profiles in previous studies renders it necessary to investigate experienced language teachers' identity tensions in the Chinese university context, which has been relatively less studied (Liu & Xu, 2011). Such an inquiry is significant as it enables us to gather a deepened understanding of seasoned EFL teachers' identities, which are central in their professional life and instructional practices (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Tsui, 2007; Yazan, 2018), and it can simultaneously prompt us to take up an informed position about the situations experienced English language teachers are facing in the Chinese university context.

Teacher identity is a socially constructed concept comprising multiple facets, and its construction is neither smooth nor static but fraught with conflicts. This paper intends to investigate the multifaceted nature and the tensions in the identity of an experienced EFL teacher. The study is guided by the following two research questions (RQs):

1. What are the sub-identities of an experienced EFL teacher in a Chinese university setting?
2. What tensions exist in the participant's identity as an experienced EFL teacher?

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Context

With years of globalization and educational reform, English language teaching in China is transitioning from an exam-oriented approach to one that is language and learner centered. Recent trends in English language teaching and learning have moved beyond developing general listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, emphasizing the

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acquisition of market-oriented competences and cultural knowledge to meet the needs of China's development and international exchanges (e.g., Rao, 2013). In addition, the recent rapid development of technology, such as generative AI, has gained popularity among college students as a tool to assist with their language learning. Further, some universities in China now adopt a teaching model where students are assigned to different groups/classes based on their English proficiency (Li, 2012). This model was implemented in the teaching context examined in our study, which is introduced next.

This study was carried out in the Undergraduate English Teaching Department at a key university in China. A convention in the Chinese university setting is that non-English-major students are required to take general English courses for 1 to 2 years of college (Li, 2012), and they are expected to pass College English Test Band 4 and Band 6 (CET-4 and CET-6) as part of the graduation requirements. The Department at the research site offered English courses covering English language and culture to non-English-major undergraduates. Further, the research site admitted a number of students from socioeconomically developed and less developed regions every year. Based on first-year students' English scores in the university entrance exams, the university assigned the students into two sections—Section A was registered by students of higher English scores; Section B consisted of those of relatively lower scores.

3.2 | Participant

Adopting a case study approach (Duff, 2008), this study examined one experienced EFL teacher's identity in the Chinese tertiary setting. The participant, Lily (pseudonym), was a lecturer from the Undergraduate English Teaching Department at the research site. She was recruited through convenience sampling (Yin, 2018). After being informed of the research purposes and procedures by the co-author, Lily opted to participate as an opportunity to "reflect on herself and her teaching" (Interview). Lily's undergraduate major was English Language and Literature; her master's program focused on Translation Studies, and she completed both degrees at a key university in China. At the time of data collection, Lily had 18 years of EFL teaching experience in the university setting, and she was teaching College English to first-year students majoring in Environment and Biology (Section B). Besides teaching, publications were an essential index for the university faculty's promotions, so part of Lily's job was to do research and to publish her works.

3.3 | Data collection

As pointed out previously, teacher identity entails identity-in-practice and identity-in-discourse. In order to examine Lily's identity in a more full-fledged manner, data were collected entailing these two aspects: data addressing identity-in-practice included class recordings for two sessions, and Lily's PowerPoint presentations for the sessions, while identity-in-discourse included an interview and a stimulated recall, which covered "the narratives and stories that form[ed] the 'fabric' of teachers' lives" (Mockler, 2011, p. 519).

A semi-structured interview and a stimulated recall, the former lasting 1 hour and the latter 21 mins, were conducted in Chinese by the first author. The purposes of the interview were to investigate Lily's teacher identity through her narratives and her recount of experiences (Ochs & Capps, 1996). Specifically, questions were asked to elicit information about Lily's background, her approaches to teaching, the experiences of her being a senior EFL teacher, as well as the challenges she was facing in teaching. The stimulated recall was conducted after the two sessions were recorded. Before the recall, the first author had listened to Lily's class recordings, and came up with questions centering around her rationales for particular content delivery, her thoughts regarding students' performances in class, and her interactions with students during the class break. The guidelines for the interview and the stimulated recall can be found in the Appendix.

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TABLE 2 Observation checklist of the teaching practices in Lily's recorded sessions.

Item	Teaching practices
1	Talking in English in class
2	Encouraging students to speak English in class
3	Explaining language knowledge
4	Explaining culture knowledge
5	Giving tasks that encourage students to draw from their intercultural knowledge/experiences
6	Encouraging sharing of different cultural views/ideas
7	Using multimodal information on PowerPoint slides to deliver course content
8	Using culturally relevant examples
9	Carrying out student-led activities (e.g., individual student presentation)
10	Providing feedback
11	Delivering class in a comfortable and relaxing space
12	Interacting with students during class break

The sessions recorded were two class meetings from Lily's lectures in Section B, lasting 95 mins which covered students' presentations and her lecture on a passage from the textbook (the teaching scenarios observed can be found in the observation checklist in Table 2). The structures and content of the recorded sessions mirrored Lily's typical EFL teaching approaches in the College English classrooms. Lily's PowerPoint presentations used in the recorded sessions were also collected.

3.4 | Data analysis

The interview and stimulated recall were transcribed. The transcripts were then uploaded to MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021) for analysis, which followed the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In order to answer RQ1, first, the interview transcripts were read and reread carefully. During this initial coding stage, open coding was conducted to assign codes to interview segments that reflected Lily's identity-related issues primarily by highlighting information in Lily's talk. For example, Lily noted her rationales for speaking English in class in our interview, which was labeled with the code "speaking English in class." Further, in the stimulated recall, Lily explained her integration of the introduction of Chinese culture in the class, which was labeled "teaching culture in class." Next in the axial coding stage, the codes were compared and refined, and patterns were found to generate subcategories. The codes generated in the previous round, for example, were grouped under the code "teaching English in class." Following this, we selectively coded the subcategories and paid attention to those that were reflective of Lily's teacher identity and grouped the codes to form categories through rereading the data and constantly refining the categorization. For example, the code created in the previous round "teaching English in class" was refined into "An English language teacher" to represent Lily's sub-identity.

As to the identity tensions Lily experienced (in response to RQ2), similar data analysis procedures were followed. The interview transcripts and the stimulated recall were first marked for any comments that suggested the challenges the teacher encountered that may constitute threats to her identity being an experienced college EFL teacher. From the initial codes, two categories were identified: identity tensions caused by the technology-oriented language learning culture and by Lily's lack of sufficient research expertise.

Lily's PowerPoint presentations and the session recordings were separately analyzed, with foci on scenarios representing her (sub-)identities and the tensions in her perceptions and in the actual teaching. For example, two slides

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in Lily's PowerPoint file were devoted to vocabulary explanation, which was coded as her sub-identity of being "An English language teacher" since it specifically focused on explaining language knowledge to students, manifesting Lily's identity-in-practice. When analyzing the session recordings, we focused on the scenarios listed in the observation checklist in Table 2 that helped construct Lily's teacher identity. For instance, Lily used English for course delivery, which provided additional evidence for her construction of the sub-identity as an English language teacher identified in the interview and the stimulated recall.

Several measures were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. First, multiple sources of data were employed to scaffold the analysis, which also helped to present thick descriptions (Yin, 2018) concerning Lily's construction of multiple identities. Further, member check (Duff, 2008) was conducted by sending the findings and interpretations back to Lily to ensure the accuracy of the analysis. Additionally, both authors were involved in data collection and analysis—for instance, the interview questions were collaboratively developed, and coding was discussed between the authors until complete agreement was reached.

3.5 | Researcher positionality

In a qualitative case study, the researcher's role is considered the primary "research instrument" (Duff, 2008, p. 55) and constitutes "an essential element of understanding" (Stake, 1995, p. 55). The researchers' engagement and their reflexivity in the research process are integral and invaluable to the research itself (Duff, 2008). In the current research, both authors had experiences teaching EFL to undergraduates in the university setting in China. On top of that, the second author worked at the same university as the participant, which provided an important opportunity for the researchers to understand the research setting and to design the study with an informed perspective. Hence, the researchers' identity of the *researcher-as-insider* (Candlin & Sarangi, 2003) established a basis of mutuality when collecting data from the participant. This positionality of the researchers can provide insights that may not be accessible for researchers from different backgrounds. Additionally, having similar teaching experience positioned the researchers as *researcher-as-befriender* (Candlin & Sarangi, 2003), helping to build rapport with the participant and create a comfortable environment that encouraged the participant to share her experiences and reflections in teaching.

4 | FINDINGS

In this section, we first present the multiple sub-identities Lily projected in her teaching practices and her interview (RQ1). Following that, we report the tensions in Lily's identity as a seasoned EFL teacher in the university setting (RQ2). The sub-identities and identity tensions that Lily experienced are summarized in Table 3.

4.1 | Lily's sub-identities

This section reports findings to answer RQ1. Data analysis identified three sub-identities that Lily projected in her narratives and the teaching sessions: (1) an English language teacher, (2) a guide, and (3) an academic advisor.

4.1.1 | An English language teacher

Lily's sub-identity as an English language teacher surfaced multiple times in the interview and her instructional activities. As an experienced EFL English teacher, Lily considered the identity of an English language teacher central in her

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TABLE 3 Summary of Lily's teacher identity.

Lily's teacher identity			
Sub-identities	**Evidence**	**Identity tensions**	**Evidence**
An English language teacher	Using English in class; Introducing lexical knowledge in class	Identity tensions caused by technology	Having self-doubt on her role as an EFL teacher amidst the emergence of AI
A guide	Guiding students to generate more output in class	Identity tensions caused by conducting research	Not knowing how to conduct research
An academic advisor	Providing students with support for their studies in college		

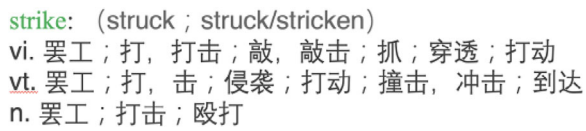


FIGURE 1 Lily's PowerPoint slide #1. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

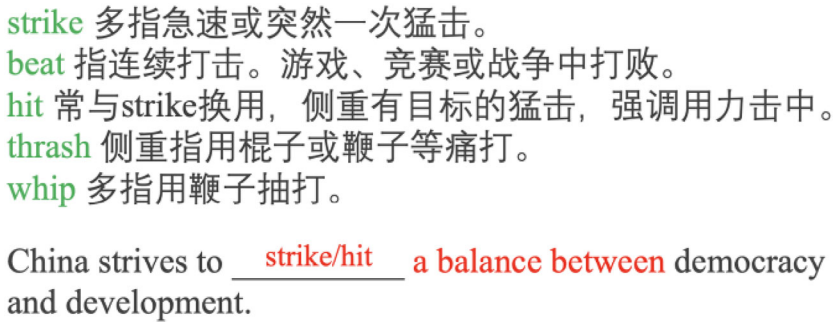


FIGURE 2 Lily's PowerPoint slide #2. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

teaching practices. One key indicator was her deliberate selection of the language used for course delivery. According to Lily, she delivered classes in English because she considered talking in English a prerequisite for English classes, as she said,

> If I didn't choose to speak in English 100%, maybe my students wouldn't think it's an English class, because now a lot of high school English teachers are using English throughout their classes, yes, and particularly because most of our students come from big cities. (Interview)

Besides using English as the medium for course delivery, the course content that Lily chose to focus on also demonstrated her sub-identity as a language teacher. As one of the goals of the course of College English revolved around the teaching of language skills, Lily included such content as vocabulary knowledge in her lecture. In the two recorded sessions, Lily introduced the key lexical items such as "strike" by providing its Chinese equivalents as well as its past tense and past participles, as illustrated in Figure 1. In addition, to further explain the word, Lily provided synonyms of the word "strike," displayed in Figure 2.

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Commenting on the inclusion of vocabulary knowledge in class, Lily said,

> In language courses, if you didn't cover knowledge about language, maybe there were a lot of words or grammar students still needed to look up themselves. Some students probably wouldn't do that after class. So, it's better if I include those in my lecture. (Stimulated recall)

Her identity being an English teacher was demonstrated not only in imparting English language knowledge to students, but also in her integration of English language and Chinese society. As shown in Figure 2, when offering an example to contextualize the meaning of "strike," Lily provided a sentence that was about the contemporary Chinese society. The motivation for Lily's doing so was that some heated topics in China started gaining dominance in nationwide English tests such as CET-4 and CET-6, which were of paramount importance for undergraduate students, and the postgraduate entrance exam. For Lily, it was the English teachers' responsibility to teach students to be able to "talk about China and Chinese stories in English" (Stimulated recall). As she articulated,

> In the most recent CET-4, CET-6 and the postgraduate entrance exam, there was a very obvious trend. In CET-4 or CET-6, some topics such as healthcare and elderly care were involved. The postgraduate exam had some topics related to ancient Chinese scientists. Some students really had no idea about those… So, talking about China in English is not something purely political or ideological. It contains a lot of things. The core is that you have to truly understand your country. (Stimulated recall)

4.1.2 | A guide

Lily considered herself a figure guiding students' cognitive and affective dimensions of English studying. This facet of teacher identity emerged on a few occasions. First, in terms of guiding students' cognitive facet of English learning, Lily did not exclusively focus on grammar-translation pedagogy, but considered it a prominent need for students to use English to express ideas. To this end, she designed courses to address those needs of the students' and she herself was a guide who provided students with learning materials and facilitate them to learn. As she described,

> I feel… now I am a guide for my students, which means that I guide students to focus more on language output. For example, before class, I would usually give them some materials, and then in class, I would have them integrate the materials I give to them with the course content. Based on the sources, my students will talk about their reflections or ideas about a certain topic. And for students of the proficiency level like them, it is not highly necessary for teachers to overwhelmingly focus on the explanations of vocabulary or sentence structure in class. (Interview)

Additionally, as an EFL teacher at a university in a socioeconomically advanced region, Lily practiced her identity as a guide, which was represented in her attitudes and the approaches she adopted to help students coming from less developed areas. Realizing the gaps concerning students' English proficiency levels, particularly in regard to listening and speaking, Lily helped navigate some students' English learning process outside the classroom context by sharing English learning resources with those students. As shown in the following extract:

> When I come across situations like that, I will send some learning materials on WeChat to students of lower proficiency levels, and I will encourage them to study on their own. Or I will casually chat with them after class, and recommend effective ways (for learning English). (Interview)

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On top of that, Lily would also follow up with the students and seek for their feedback after a period of time. As illustrated in the following interview excerpt:

> I would recommend some (English learning) official account, or some online learning platform. I'd encourage them to read or watch those, to try and practice. After some time, I would follow up with them and ask if they found them useful, and how they felt about the sources… Just chatting, nothing too serious, like after class, I'd talk to some students and ask him/her. (Interview)

Moreover, Lily's identity as a guide was projected in her teaching practices from the sessions recorded. The content the two sessions aimed to cover was twofold: students' PowerPoint presentations and Lily's lecture on a passage from the textbook. For Lily, having students present in front of their peers their self-chosen culture-specific topics related to China and/or English-speaking countries was more of an encouragement than an assessment of students' speech abilities, which was related to her affective considerations regarding students' English learning needs. As she noted, "I think this activity is more of a form of encouragement than evaluation" (Stimulated recall). When consulted about the rationales for designing the task this way, Lily shared her perspectives,

> The point of this activity is to encourage students to talk about something in public, because though some students might have had opportunities to practice their spoken abilities in high school, they didn't speak with an actual person but talked to computers. I feel human interactions are not the same as human-machine interactions. It brings different psychological effect. (Stimulated recall)

In the recorded class sessions, a routine procedure following students' presentations was a Q&A session, during which the presenters' peers engaged in discussions or raised inquiries in English pertaining to the presentations. This peer interaction served as one of Lily's strategies to encourage students to engage in English-speaking practice and to guide them to generate more language output. As she explained,

> I adopt an interactional teaching method… I definitely have discussion sessions in my class. For example, my students would do presentations in class; after their presentations, I'd invite students to ask questions about the presentations. I try to guide students to generate more output in class. (Interview)

4.1.3 | An academic advisor

Lily practiced her sub-identities in her teaching College English as an English language teacher and a guide; in her interactions with students beyond the course, her sub-identity as an academic advisor was constructed. Specifically, she took into consideration the needs of students who came from various social and educational backgrounds, and navigated students' efforts to achieve academic success in their undergraduate study and to lay the foundation for their future academic or career paths. Lily remarked,

> In general, I think teachers, not just teachers from the department of College English, including colleagues from other departments, will try our best to advise students to get used to the subjects and their disciplines. And we will try our best to advise them concerning how to manage their time effectively during the four years of college, and how to make their undergraduate studies more meaningful. (Interview)

As pointed out earlier, Lily's class constituted a majority of students coming from big cities who most likely had years of English education since kindergarten that covered all aspects of English skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and

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writing). However, there were some students coming from less privileged areas where fewer education resources were available, which made those students' English proficiency levels relatively lower, particularly in regard to speaking and listening. Some of the students, according to Lily, "struggled a lot in their first semester of college" (Interview). For this group of students, Lily paid special attention and managed to engage them into the new environment, particularly taking into account how English may play a role in their future academic goals or paths. She said,

> (For students coming from socioeconomically disadvantageous regions) Personally I would encourage those students to try their best to get used to the new environment, because our students will probably go on the academic route in the future. This means they will attend international conferences, or publish in international journals etc. So, they have to use English as a tool. (Interview)

4.2 | Tensions in Lily's teacher identity

In this section, we report findings to answer RQ2. Specifically, the popularity of technology (e.g., AI-powered tools) among students that to some degree altered student–teacher relations and Lily's obligations to conduct research while not possessing adequate research skills constituted the tensions in her identity as an EFL teacher.

4.2.1 | Language teacher identity amidst the technology-permeated educational landscape

It is worth noting that technology-assisted approaches in the teaching activities were not uncommon in Lily's EFL courses. The role technology played in teaching was prominent; using this useful and powerful tool, however, sometimes baffled Lily. As she stated,

> …Now the technology-assisted tools make teaching and learning more convenient and more efficient… and students are more willing to use these platforms. The difficulty is that when I prepare lessons using those platforms, I might come across some technical problems so I have to seek for help and learn to resolve them. (Interview)

Further, the rapid development of society and the increasingly technology-oriented social culture made the students Lily taught at the time of data collection "different from those she taught in her early career" (Interview). As an experienced teacher who had taught a large number of L2 undergraduate students, Lily found the students nowadays had greater access to information across various online platforms, leading to their increased independent thinking. This trend significantly reduced students' reliance on their English teachers to gain knowledge on the English language. Lily frustratedly remarked,

> I feel students from years ago relied more on teachers, because they couldn't find many sources for learning by themselves. Now there are all kinds of media and online sources. So, students can search for some aspects about English learning that interest them, like on *WeChat* and *Bilibili*. So, the challenges I'm facing now is how to arouse students' interests in my classes, because now the students have seen more, and they're more critical. (Interview)

The drastic changes in the student population underlay identity tensions Lily had to experience as a senior EFL instructor, which prompted her to think about what knowledge she could teach her students besides what was already accessible to students online,

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> Nowadays, my students know so many things. Sometimes about a certain topic, I don't even know as much as my students do… Now I often think about what I can bring to my students in the class. (Interview)

Given these frustrations Lily had due to the development of technology and the transformation of student–teacher relations, she was prompted to contemplate on her identity being a language teacher. As she said,

> Maybe it was the impact of technology, particularly the emergence of strong AI nowadays. For a teacher that teaches a foreign language, sometimes I'm also looking for my own position. (Interview)

4.2.2 | Difficulties caused by conducting research

For college teachers in China, conducting research and getting publications are essential job requirements for promotions (Bai, 2018). Being a researcher for Lily, who was primarily a teaching-oriented English instructor, posed considerable difficulties. When talking about her achievements concerning research, Lily acknowledged she realized "there is a big gap between her research accomplishments and some of the colleagues" (Interview). Besides that, after being an EFL teacher for 18 years, Lily grew accustomed to problems students may have without further contemplating on improving the issues through conducting teaching-informed research. As she stated,

> …Speaking of that (research and teaching), I feel after being a teacher for so many years, ironically, sometimes when students have some issues, I tend to take it for granted. I stopped reflecting on those issues or on myself. (Interview)

The difficulties caused by conducting research as a language teacher was also visible in Lily's frustrations about her lacking research skills. As a discourse system different from teaching, conducting research and writing papers seemed to be an area of knowledge Lily did not sufficiently possess. As she acknowledged,

> I feel… sometimes when I want to do research, it seems I can't find a topic worth studying… I don't know how or where to start… sometimes I really want to write something, but there's nothing in particular to which I think I can make a contribution. I feel all the research has been completed by other people. (Interview)

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Drawing on a social view of identity and multiple sources of data, this study examined one experienced EFL teacher's sub-identities and tensions in her teacher identity in a Chinese university setting. Specifically, we identified the participant's multiple identities in her teaching: an English language teacher, a guide, and an academic advisor. We also unpacked the tensions that existed in the participant's teacher identity: students' convenient access to technology and AI-assisted tools, which afforded immense learning opportunities and platforms, prompted the participant to reflect on her identity as an EFL teacher. Meanwhile, our participant was faced with the need to do research but did not possess the research skills and discoursal repertories to accomplish the requirements prescribed by her institution. The study offers important conceptual insights into the construct of teacher identity in a Chinese EFL setting, highlighting the complex interplay of classroom dynamics, institutional policies and individual teacher beliefs. These findings contribute to a deepened understanding of the identity of experienced EFL teachers.

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Lily's case illustrated the multiple and socially constructed nature of teacher identity; more specifically, it showed the impact of both micro and macro contextual factors on Lily's teacher identity construction. First, depending on the classroom dynamics, the micro contextual variable, she practiced corresponding identity (i.e., a guide) through providing students with learning materials and following up with students to facilitate students' English learning, as her students of lower proficiency levels may need additional resources to study English. Further, she responded to the changes in the broad social and educational milieu (i.e., updated requirements in high-stakes exams) and made adjustment to her teaching foci by including more content related to stories about China and Chinese society in English, which showcased her teacher identity was mediated by the value-laden and ideologically loaded macro social and cultural forces (Morgan, 2004).

Our study also unraveled the challenges Lily faced in her teacher identity, one of which was in relation to the emergence of AI and the powerful affordances it brought in students' language learning. Previous studies examining the role of technology in teaching have demonstrated the challenges of various kinds it posed in teachers' instructional activities (e.g., Golzar et al., 2023; Howard, 2021). Our study echoed those findings because Lily sometimes found it difficult using the class preparation software as assisting tools. The developments of modern information technologies may dramatically shift the traditional instructional paradigm (Pokrivcakova, 2019), thus influencing teachers' perceptions of their identity. As pointed out by previous studies (e.g., Lam & Lawrence, 2002), the easy access of technology, AI included, has redefined the roles of students and teachers in foreign language learning. In many cases, students had become more autonomous learners who were not merely the passive recipients of knowledge, while teachers tended to assume the role of facilitators instead of only being the expert and authority figures in classrooms (Pokrivcakova, 2019). This can be illustrated in Lily's case as she remarked that sometimes she felt her students knew better than she did about certain topics and the students nowadays were less reliant on their English teachers compared to the students in her early career. Student–teacher relations profoundly shaped the construction and negotiation of teacher identity (Beijaard, 1995). The role shifts to a certain degree took away a teacher's "personal sense of expertise, which is at the core of a teacher's identity" (Lam & Lawrence, 2002, p. 297). The powerful assistance the AI-driven tools brought (e.g., personalized learning, instant feedback) may more effectively contribute to students' English learning, but it could diminish the personal connection between teachers and students, leading to teachers feeling insecure, demoralized, and frustrated.

Another tension Lily experienced revolved around conducting research. Per the policies in China in recent years, publication is an essential index for university teachers' promotions, even if their positions are more teaching oriented (Bai, 2018). The salient challenges Lily faced regarding doing research and publishing were congruent with findings of previous studies that focused on the nexus of university teachers' teaching and research (e.g., Bao & Feng, 2022, 2023; Barkhuizen, 2009; Xu, 2014; Zhang et al., 2022). Specifically, Lily's lack of sufficient research knowledge and skills was a prominent challenge among EFL teachers (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2009). Research and teaching are inextricably related to each other for EFL teachers, and conducting research is considered a means to enhance teaching (Bai, 2018), yet Lily's identity as an experienced EFL teacher, to some degree, restrained her agency in bridging teaching and research, as she acknowledged she tended to take the issues students had for granted after being an EFL teacher for so many years.

This study contributes to the current body of teacher identity scholarship in the following ways. First, this study documents an often-underrepresented group of language teachers' multiple identities in her perceptions of her role as an English teacher and in her actual EFL teaching activities. Understanding experienced EFL teachers' identity is meaningful as this group constitutes a large number of practitioners in the university context and their teaching practices are characterized by unique features, differing from those possessed by novice or pre-service teachers (Beijaard, 1995). Such knowledge is essential in facilitating our understanding of EFL teachers' identity across professional development stages. Second, our study unveils the identity tensions that an experienced EFL teacher encountered due to the development of technology and the emergence and popularity of AI among students, which seems not to have been revealed in previous studies. This promotes our understanding of the challenges this group of teachers are faced with

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in the contemporary era. By disclosing the tensions caused by the AI-mediated learning environment, and the nexus between researching and teaching, this study can motivate EFL teachers having similar issues to engage in teaching endeavors to alleviate or resolve the tensions.

This study is not without limitations. First, though this study aimed to examine Lily's teacher identity in a comprehensive manner, we did not collect data from her students regarding their perceptions of Lily as the instructor. Since teacher identities are interlocking with learners, future studies can investigate teacher identity in a more full-fledged manner by including students' perspectives and student–teacher interactions within and beyond the classroom context. Second, this study only focused on one participant in the Chinese postsecondary setting; given its rather limited scope, findings of this study may not be generalizable to a wider population. Future studies may encompass a more diverse sample of experienced educators from varied backgrounds and instructional settings (e.g., Kessler, 2021) to provide more in-depth understandings of seasoned teachers' identity dynamics. Third, this study collected data from a specific point in Lily's teaching career. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design to gather data from experienced language teachers over an extended period, which would provide more comprehensive insights. It is also suggested that future researchers examine the different ways experienced EFL teachers respond to the conflicts and tensions in their identity construction and negotiation processes.

The study yields important pedagogical insights for EFL teachers and teacher educators. It is recognized that integrating teacher identity is key in teacher education (e.g., Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Olsen, 2008); hence teacher educators may need to incorporate this construct as a central theme in the seasoned teachers' training agenda. In particular, teacher educators can prepare teachers' application of various types of AI-powered tools into their language classrooms to make their teaching more up-to-date, and more effective (Pokrivcakova, 2019), so that senior teachers can feel confident in using the tools to benefit teaching in AI-enhanced environments. In teacher training sessions, teacher educators can also emphasize the affective dimension, and pay special attention to the difficulties language teachers are faced with, thus creating a sense of community and rapport. The measures may alleviate the teachers' anxiety and concerns about their roles, facilitate seasoned teachers' professional development and their (re)construction of identity amidst the L2 learning context characterized by the increasing permeation of AI-powered tools. Next, regarding the challenges university EFL teachers commonly face in doing research, it is helpful for language teachers to participate in Webinars and/or visiting programs that aim to foster their research abilities. Seeking connections and collaborations with experienced researchers within/beyond the teachers' institutions also constitutes an effective way to cultivate language teachers' research abilities and research productivity (Bao & Feng, 2022) as well as to benefit pedagogical practices (Barkhuizen, 2009). Worthy of note, it is also crucial for EFL teachers to exert agency to resolve identity tensions (e.g., Xu & Tao, 2023), to proactively seek solutions and improvements by reflecting on their professional challenges and taking initiatives in addressing them.

Some insights are generated to inform policymakers. At the institutional level, policymakers can develop and implement policies that support the ethical and effective use of AI in language education. Additionally, it is imperative that policymakers ensure adequate funding and resources for schools to implement AI tools effectively, including access to the necessary technology and technical support. Concerning the difficulties related to doing research, policymakers can design research training and mentoring infrastructure to enhance teachers' research skills and facilitate the development of their professional identity.

Further, as insights generated from studying experienced teachers' identity can guide novice teachers' understanding of their identities and teaching practices (Gatbonton, 2008; Kessler, 2021), it is equally vital for novice teachers to recognize that teacher identity formation is a process of "continual becoming" (Alsup, 2006, p. 7), characterized by evolving challenges and opportunities at different stages of their careers (Coldron & Smith, 1999). By acknowledging this ongoing developmental journey (Beijaard et al., 2004), educators can adopt a growth mindset, embracing continuous learning and adaptation to navigate the complexities of their professional roles effectively.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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APPENDIX: Guidelines for interview and stimulated recall

Interview guidelines

1. What was your major when you were a student? Which university did you graduate from?
2. When did you start teaching College English? What made you start this career path?
3. How many classes are you teaching right now? Which year/s are they?
4. How do you define yourself as a CE teacher?
5. What are your teaching beliefs? Have they worked well in classrooms?
6. What are your career goals? How might those affect your role as a CE teacher now?
7. What requirements does your university/school have for teaching College English? Have you followed all of them? Have you disagreed with any? In what ways?
8. What are your research interests? Do you also write papers in the meantime? Does your program require publications for promotion?
9. Do you often communicate with colleagues about teaching, research, students, etc.?
10. How do students' reactions impact your teaching decisions?
11. What difficulties are you facing now? How have they changed from when you were a new teacher?

Stimulated recall guidelines

1. Is this session how you normally teach course content?
2. How did the presentation task work? Did the students have assigned topics each week?
3. How did you feel about the students' presentations?
4. It seemed their PPTs had the same structures and topics; Why was that?
5. The fourth presenter talked about a different topic; Was that something you assigned him?
6. In class break, you talked with students about the changes to the final oral test. What were the reasons for making the changes?

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