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University English Teachers' Professional Development Through Academic Visits: Using Identity as a Theoretical Lens

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Abstract: Academic visitor programs aim to enhance university teachers' teaching and research capacity and intercultural competence. Its impact, however, has remained under-researched. Using the data collected from two rounds of in-depth interviews with 13 Chinese university English teachers over a year and a half, this study explored their experiences as academic visitors in the UK through the lens of professional identity. Findings revealed that the participants came with various expectations and negotiated and constructed different identities during their academic visits. The participants' developing identities in turn affected their investment in their professional development in their situated contexts. The study provides important implications for academic visit programs which need to be designed in line with the complex needs and identities of university teachers.

Introduction

Numerous studies have been conducted to explore the impact of overseas immersion programs on the professional development of school teachers. Very few studies, however, have explored the impact of similar programs on university teachers who go to a foreign university as visiting scholars (Patricio et al., 2018). Universities and governments across the world encourage and support university teachers to go overseas as visiting scholars to improve their research and teaching as part of the process of higher education internationalization (e.g. Liu & Jiang, 2015; Mo, Chao & Kuntz, 2015; Patricio et al., 2018). In particular, the Chinese visiting scholar program is large in scale as many teachers from Chinese universities apply for a scholarship to study in Western countries for 6-12 months each year. Unlike school teachers who participate in immersion programs to improve their teaching, the focus of university teachers is largely related to research (van Lankveld et al., 2017). Visiting scholars are not enrolled in a specific program, but rather they are expected to engage in self-study (e.g., by choosing to attend courses) and perform independent research with the support from mentors and colleagues in the host university. Exploring how teachers develop in such a visiting scholar program will deepen our understanding of how overseas immersion programs may influence teacher and researcher development. In addition, first-hand experiences from visiting scholars enable us to see the learning opportunities these programs might provide. Failure to do so risks an expensive and time-consuming experience that has the potential to damage confidence and negatively impact cultural relations.

Teacher identity, which constitutes teachers' understanding of "how to be" and "how to act" professionally (Sachs, 2005, p.15), has been widely accepted as an important

component of university teachers' professional development (van Lankveld et al., 2017). It explains how teachers position themselves and "where teachers place their effort, and whether and how they seek out professional development opportunities" (Hammersness et al., 2005, p.383-384). Furthermore, teachers' identity evolves with their situated social and cultural context, thus making the developmental process an ongoing and dynamic one (van Lankveld et al., 2017).

Although many studies have been conducted on the identity development of university teachers (e.g. van Lankveld et al., 2017), few have investigated their identity development in an immersion context. Among the few existing studies on visiting scholars' overseas experiences, researchers have investigated their motivation and perceived benefits and challenges (Patricio et al., 2018), as well as their academic socialisation process in academic exchange programs (Liu & Jiang, 2015; Mo, Chao & Kuntz, 2015). Little research has investigated the impact of the immersion experience on the visiting scholars' professional identities, which can play a crucial role in shaping their continuing academic development through the programs and beyond. Furthermore, previous studies (Mo, Chao & Kuntz, 2015; Patricio et al., 2018) have focused on the immediate effects of overseas immersion on teacher learning, whereas little attention has been paid to the long-term impacts. To fill this gap, the present study, adopting a qualitative approach, looks into a group of university English teachers' identity construction during and after their overseas immersion.

Literature Review

Immersion for Teachers

Overseas immersion programs have become prevalent for both pre-service and in-service school teachers in the 21st century (Lee, 2011), and these programs have been shown to be an effective way to enhance teachers' intercultural learning as well as personal growth (Smolcic & Katunich, 2017). The limited studies on the immersion of university teachers involve teachers from different disciplines. For instance, Patricio and others (2018) reported a small-scale academic exchange program between one American and nine Portuguese universities, in which Portuguese university teachers from different disciplinary backgrounds spent 2-6 months taking graduate-level courses. Findings of the study show that the participants reported improvement both in their teaching behaviour and in their research agenda. Mo et al. (2015) investigated the socialization of 15 Chinese visitors (from both social science and science subject areas) in American universities and concluded that their socialisation process was affected by their motivation and goal orientation as well as the support they received from mentors and host universities. Many visitors felt a lack of belonging since there was no strong supervision relationship between the mentor and the mentee. The authors also pointed out areas for future research including the professional identity development of academic visitors. In a similar study, Liu and Jiang (2015) interviewed 17 returning Chinese academic visitors (social science specialists) from Canadian universities and focused on the impact of the immersion on their teaching and intercultural communication. The authors suggested that academic visiting programs should be built into a comprehensive faculty development mechanism for university teachers to develop their international mobility.

Unlike teachers in designed immersion programs or international students who have their own community, academic visitors usually travel alone and have less built-in social support (Mo et al., 2015) as they are not enrolled in a specific program, but expected to work independently at the host university (often with meagre interaction with a host-assigned

mentor). Considering the increasing popularity of overseas immersion programs, research into this area, and particularly focusing on teachers of English, is insufficient.

University Teacher's Professional Identity and Investment: Personal and Contextual

The concept of identity often refers to the image that teachers hold of themselves (self-image) and what motivates them to teach or research (Tran et al., 2017). It is derived from the interaction between an individual's self-perceptions and social image and it relates to his/her cognitive experiences and social interactions. It also carries a strong emotional dimension with powerful impacts on individuals' affective state and motivational tendency. Identity has been found to be strengthened or constrained by contextual factors such as institutional policy and resources (van Lankveld, 2017) and also determined by the individual's personal dispositions, motivation, investment and engagement (Yuan, 2019).

University teachers' professional identity has been increasingly investigated in recent years as it is so important that it shapes teachers' decision-making and their present actions and future plans (Norton & Early, 2011, Serena, 2014, Tsui, 2007). Although increasing importance has been attached to their research, especially publications, in appraising staff, university English teachers in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) contexts tend to have a weak research tradition (Dai, 2009, Serena, 2014). With a heavy teaching load and limited research skills, some teachers are unmotivated to conduct research, failing to see its significance (Al Maamari et al., 2017, Borg, 2006), which in turn reinforces a weak academic identity. Recognising the barriers to research proficiency, many universities are introducing policies and strategies to encourage research engagement among teachers (Serena, 2014, Yang & Welch, 2012), including an overseas academic immersion programme.

In view of the complex and often conflicted nature of teacher identities influenced by both personal and socio-cultural factors, we adopted the concept of identity investment (Norton, 2000) to examine university EFL teachers' identity construction through their overseas immersion experiences. The notion of "investment" was originally proposed by Norton (2000, 2010) to account for language learners' varying desires and commitments to learn a language. According to Norton and Toohey (2011), the concept of "investment" sees individuals as "having complex identities, which change across time and space, and which are constructed on the basis of the socially given, and the individually struggled-for" (p. 420). This idea can be applied to a teacher's engagement in overseas immersion in which their identities are implicated in the investments they make in teaching, research, and collaboration at both individual and collective levels (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton & Early, 2011), which generate a "return" of increased professional competency and social power (Barkhuizen, 2010). Moreover, the concept of "investment" can also be aligned with teachers' "imagined identities" about their future practice and development across time and space (Yuan, 2019). In this sense, teachers might look beyond their situated community and/or their current situation to actively invest in their preferred/imagined identities and affiliate with communities of the imagination (Norton & Toohey, 2011).

Against this backdrop, the present study explores the experience of Chinese university English teachers who undertook academic visits in the UK through the lens of professional identity. Identity serves as the theoretical framework of this study as it is deeply intertwined with a teacher's motivation towards teaching and research, which will then impact his expectation for the visit, investment in different tasks during the visit, and then different gains (return). To be more specific, the following research questions will be answered:

1. How does the participants' identity mediate their expectations for and perceived gains from their academic visit?
2. How is the participants' professional identity and professional development affected by their study-abroad experience?

The Study

Research Context and Participants

The Chinese government began funding its university faculty for foreign exchange in 1955 (Liu & Jiang, 2014) and has been increasing its investment in the endeavour ever since. One of the purposes is to align its own higher education with international standards by funding teachers from higher education to go to Western countries as visiting scholars for 6-12 months to improve their research and teaching. The China Scholarship Council (CSC) provides national-level funding (Mo et al., 2015) and many provinces and universities have their own schemes to financially support their faculty for overseas academic exchanges.

Academic visitors from 2018 cohort (the first author was a member) in the UK established a WeChat group to share information and help each other solve practical problems. As the members' time of entry into the group varied, the number of members constantly changed. The total number was 269 teachers from different subject areas while the study was conducted. There were 21 English teachers in the group and the first author sent invitations to all these teachers individually. Nine of them accepted the invitation to be interviewed.

The first author also had personal contacts with visiting scholars at her host university and had observed how they interacted with colleagues in the university. Through personal contacts, two more participants were recruited. Another two participants arrived via the introduction of one of the two participants. Therefore, altogether thirteen academic visitors from nine universities in the UK were recruited at the end. They were all university English teachers, with only one male, which roughly reflects the dominance of female English teachers in Chinese universities. The age of the participants ranged from 30s to late 40s. Table 1 provides a profile of the participants. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Data Collection

In-depth interviewing was the data collection tool. Two rounds of one-to-one interviewing with each of the participants were conducted through WeChat audio

Participants	Gender	Education	Discipline	Title	Visiting period
Emma	F	Master	Literature	Associate professor (AP)	One year
Hanna	F	Master	Applied linguistics	Lecturer	One year
Cathy	F	Master	Applied linguistics	AP	One year
Mary	F	Master	Literature	Lecturer	Six months
Dora	F	Ph.D	Applied linguistics	AP	One year
Charis	F	Ph.D	Applied linguistics	AP	One year
Rona	F	Master	Applied linguistics	Lecturer	One year

Jessie	F	Master	Applied linguistics	Lecturer	One year
Daisy	F	Master	Applied linguistics	Lecturer	One year
Donna	F	Master	Applied linguistics	Lecturer	One year
Christy	F	Master	Applied linguistics	Lecturer	One year
Bella	F	Master	Literature	Lecturer	One year
Leo	M	Ph.D	Applied linguistics	AP	One year

Table 1: Participants' Profile

calling, with each ranging from half an hour to 1.5 hours. One participant, “Mary” had been in Britain for four months at the time of the first interview, the rest for seven to nine months. The second interview was conducted after the participants had returned home for about six months. The purpose of the first interview (see Appendix) was to investigate their expectations of the academic visit, their experiences and perceived gains. The second interview was to check the interpretation of the findings of the first interview and investigate the longer impact of the visit. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin-Chinese and the quotations in this paper are the authors’ translation.

Data Analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and then imported into Nvivo. The first round of coding was a deductive analysis (Hennink et al. 2011), guided by the interviewing questions as informed by the research questions and theoretical underpinning of identity. Data were coded under the following broad categories: expectations for visiting, priorities (also reflecting the participants’ motivation and investment) in teaching and research, impact on teaching and research. The second round of coding was inductive, with subthemes drawn from the data. Then within-case identity development was mapped out from original position to indicators of identity development through the participants’ expectation, priorities and ongoing changes. Taking Rona as an example, she focused almost completely on her teacher identity at first because she regarded research as boring and useless (“I did not want to do research in the past. I had tried to read some papers on linguistics in Chinese journals and found it so hard to understand. It made no sense to me and I lost interest in them”), but developed a more positive attitude towards research during her visit because “Now, I think some of the research is worth doing. I want to do research that will benefit my students and my teaching”. After mapping out each participant’s identity trajectory, cross-case comparison (Miles, & Huberman, 1994) was then made. While each visitor had a unique experience, it became evident that there were some shared development journeys that could be categorized roughly into five groups (Table 2). To ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis, the first author analysed the data independently and then engaged in rounds of discussion with the second and third author about the findings.

Findings

My expectations for the visit were threefold: to improve my English, teaching and research. I think this is true for all academic visitors. (Mary)

This quotation represents many participants' multi-faceted expectations, and thus reflects their multi-identities as university English teachers who are expected to have a good command of the language, in addition to teaching expertise and high-quality research capability. Nevertheless, during the visit, each teacher may have positioned themselves differently. It was found that the participants' identities mediated their expectations and achievements, and the participants' experiences during their visit affected their professional identities and development, as explained in the next sections.

Language Teacher Identity

Skilled Linguist

Although all visitors were confident speakers of English before their visit, they were aware that their knowledge was limited in terms of accents and nuance.

[Having learned and taught English] for so many years, there is still so much that I don't understand about British culture. I don't want to be a half-empty bucket in front of my students, therefore, I want to learn as much as I can.

(Christy, I1-first interview)

During and after the visit, nearly all participants emphasised that their deepened understanding of Britain gave them confidence as teachers equipped with improved language skills.

My listening comprehension and spoken English have greatly improved and I am able to understand different people's accents. It's important to train students to listen to different accents of English rather than only listening to British or American English, because in the future, the students will communicate in English with people from all over the world, but not only from Britain and America. (Dora, I2-second interview)

Dora's recognition of the value of recognizing different accents indicates her developing awareness of English beyond the classroom.

Proactive Learner

Additional to their learning of language, the visitors commented on the activity of learning itself. Taking the role of a student changed Dora's perception of English learning and the importance of learner motivation and commitment:

I used to think that once you are in the English environment, your English will naturally improve, but it's not true. I noticed that many international students stayed with their co-nationals most of the time and their English would not improve much even if they were in Britain. So I think the environment for learning is to a large degree created by the learner himself. The learner should have the awareness and motivation to do so. I told my students that they can learn English very well even if they are not in the native language environment. (Dora, I2)

Dora showed that the experience not only made her realise the importance of taking responsibility for her own learning, regardless of the environment, it also had long term impact on her teaching practice.

Cultural Authorities

Before the immersion, the visitors were aware of the need to have cultural knowledge as well as linguistic fluency.

As an English teacher, when you teach British culture, European culture and the history of civilization, if what you teach is all from books, you are just repeating what others say. You will lack confidence. (Cathy, I1)

Many commented on the impact of cultural immersion in developing their confidence and providing inspiration. Cathy visited museums frequently, Rona worked as a volunteer in her children's school.

The visit has broadened my horizon and provided me the opportunity to see Europe in a way I could never have learned from the books. Sharing with my students the culture I have experienced makes my teaching more interesting. (Hanna, I2)

Agents of Pedagogical Innovation

Before coming to the UK, the visitors were already aware of the importance of bringing their subject to life, but some believed that there was much to learn from British pedagogical practice. Attending postgraduate courses in host universities developed a sense of themselves as agents of pedagogical innovation. Some were motivated to change their practice: Leo commented in the second interview that "the curriculum design and the way of teaching I observed in Britain give me some inspirations in managing my teaching", and both Daisy and Jessie said they had learned some classroom management skills or emotion expressing techniques. Rona read numerous items of children's literature and collected teaching material from those books in order to invigorate her teaching and Cathy also felt that she could go beyond the textbook as a result of her experiences.

Christy reported that she became more creative in designing class activities; however, she was also selective in her adoption of UK practice:

Five teachers applied flipped classroom teaching, a popular teaching method hailed by many teachers in the world, but I found one third of these classes were not successful at all. I realized that no teaching method is perfect and that I should be more flexible in my teaching and not to follow the fashion blindly (I2).

Her critique indicates a strengthening of her personal identity and what she considers valuable. Others similarly noted that pedagogical strategies were not necessarily to be envied. The teaching style in British universities was not considered to be more advanced than their own. They explained that it was due to the fact that Chinese English teachers have been working hard to innovate their teaching in recent years and teaching demonstration and experience-sharing prevail among teachers across the country.

Student-focused Pedagogue

Before the visit, the visitors believed that they would see different practice in terms of student autonomy, teacher-student relationships and learning motivation. Several participants developed their awareness of student learning needs during the visit. They commented on the equal status between British teachers and students and the students' autonomy, which caused them to change their teaching ideologies:

British teachers tend to encourage students to find their own ways of learning and students are given more space and freedom to improve themselves. I think I can try to make such improvement in my own teaching. (Hanna, I2).

The change of identity of the participants, from the identity of a teacher back to a student, enabled some to reconsider their teaching behaviors in classroom.

(In British classroom) I expected the teacher to encourage me to talk and helped me to elaborate my ideas but the teacher only gave me some superficial responses which did not help. Now in my teaching, I'm more sensitive to students' emotional needs and tried to give them more encouragement and emotional support. I also tried to train them with thinking skills and help them learn to elaborate their ideas. (Christy, I2)

Cultural Ambassador

Before the immersion, the participants viewed their visit in terms of the exposure to the UK culture that it would provide, but without thought to their own culture. Interactions with the host community made some develop their identity as a representative and source of Chinese cultural information. They realised that when teaching, they had an opportunity to develop their own and others' understanding of their own culture.

Many foreign people don't know much about China and some hold prejudice against China. I think one important reason is that we Chinese don't have the awareness to help them know more about us. Actually, I realized some Chinese themselves don't know much about Chinese culture or may not be confident with Chinese culture. Now, in my teaching, I will help my students to know more about Chinese culture, for instance, compare and contrast Chinese culture with other cultures. (Christy, I2)

To conclude, being exposed to British culture and educational practice provided an opportunity for the participants to enrich their knowledge of English language and British culture. They were not necessarily inspired to adopt new pedagogical skills but re-thought pedagogical issues and educational ideology, and became aware of the opportunity to consolidate their own cultural knowledge. The academic visitors, having a strong teacher identity at the start, were able to identify many valuable opportunities provided by the visit, further reinforcing and enhancing their teacher identities.

Researcher Identity

While all participants expanded and enriched their language teacher identity, they experienced different routes in their identity construction as an academic researcher.

Capable Investigator

Initially the majority confessed that they enjoyed teaching, but not researching. They suffered a heavy teaching load or were burdened by administrative work and did not have the time for research. Although the participants all held master's or doctoral degrees, some lacked confidence, often as a result of not having engaged with research since studying for their qualifications:

After graduating from my MA program, I have been busy with teaching, getting married and starting a family. I have not done research for a long time (Donna, I1).

Others were unequivocal in their lack of interest in research: Rona stated, “I’m not interested in doing research, I’m here to experience”.

Some did not go on to develop a confident identity as an investigator. One felt that this was due to lack of supervisory help in the host university: “Since I cannot get research help from the supervisor, I won’t bother starting any research studies for the time being” (Daisy, I1).

However, many were influenced by their mentors’ passion for research, their relevant and useful output, and were persuaded that research could benefit their teaching practice:

Now, I think some of the research is worth doing. I did not want to do research that is not related to my teaching. But teachers here have done some interesting research, which is easy to understand and helpful. I want to do research that will benefit my students and my teaching (Rona, I1).

Some were able to build a sense of expertise and authority as a result of attending courses at their host university:

The courses I attended here enabled me to refresh my knowledge and I have a more systematic understanding of my major now. Although I’m not devoted to research, my knowledge in my major has improved and I have a clearer idea about how a paper should be written now (Hanna, I1).

Cathy was able to use the break from her responsibilities at home to study in a new direction, writing a paper on multimodality in Chinese painting after being inspired by paintings in the British Museum.

Whether inspired by colleagues, courses or the environment, most of the visitors felt that they made some movement towards the identity of an investigator, but recognised that progress was slow – they had a greater interest in teaching and developing research capacity was harder and took longer to make an impact.

Published Author

Many participants mentioned the pressure to publish, which was compounded by the difficulty in getting a paper accepted and delayed feedback. “I’m no longer young and I’m still a lecturer, I had a lot of pressure from the research requirements” (Mary, I1).

The visit gave some the opportunity to see the value of publications in terms of personal professional development rather than externally imposed obligation: Christy moved towards an identity of an author.

I have met some good Chinese visiting scholars here who are good at both teaching and research, whose academic achievements have gained themselves better opportunities for development. I want to have better opportunities for my professional development too (Christy, I1).

Similarly, Mary recognised the value of research for her professional standing, and was inspired by the research activities being undertaken at the host university:

There are so many capable researchers here. As an English teacher, I feel that I’m so inadequate. Other researchers have their research areas and their English is very good too. It seems that we English teachers have no speciality, so I’m thinking of doing a Ph.D after the visit (Mary, I1)

Active Collaborator

Although the visitors knew that there was no obligation for the host university to facilitate their research, some had high expectations at the start for collaboration and interaction with colleagues.

Before I came here, I expected to have more contact with the host university, for instance, to be able to join their research team, have more discussions with faculty and do some research together and write some papers... Otherwise there is no point to come all the way to a foreign country (Leo, 11)

However, once in the UK, opportunities to collaborate were not always provided for academic visitors, preventing the development of this identity.

I feel that my mentor does not want me to get involved. I have tried quite a few times, asking whether I can join their research project, but got no positive reply at all (Leo, 11).

Nevertheless, Leo recognised that he was partly responsible for not developing his collaborative opportunities, which he felt was due to his own reticence and lack of self-belief:

Although the colleagues here made announcements inviting anyone who would like to share their research to give a presentation, we Chinese academic visitors seldom take the initiative to ask for a chance. I think I have this problem. I don't feel confident to talk about my own research...I lack academic self-efficacy.

Nevertheless some visitors were able to benefit from collaboration with colleagues in their host universities and had published joint papers on their return. Another was able to benefit from the support of a well-known professor whom she had requested to work with because their research interests matched. They met regularly and she attended his courses, and she has invited him to lecture at her home university in China.

I had worked very hard during my visit, attending classes and doing my own research, which had often exhausted me. But I have achieved a lot and it has great impact on my teaching and research. I have established strong relationship with my supervisor and I'm very satisfied with my visit (Emma, 12)

Academic Community Member

Aside from the opportunity to work on collaborative projects, academic visitors had expected to feel a sense of belonging in an academic community. However for some, membership in an academic community was not enabled, leaving them feeling isolated and professionally lonely.

My old social network has been broken and my social circle is really small here, with the academic visitors in the university as my only contacts. We academic visitors have no sense of belonging. We do not belong to the British university here, and we are kind of separated from our home university too. As an academic visitor, what I need is a community where I can do research and share ideas with others. But once I set my feet on the land of Britain, nobody cares about us. We are all isolated individuals, without a community to belong to (Leo, 11).

Dora identified the no man's land that she felt herself to be in: "I'm someone caught in between. I'm not a student, nor am I a teacher" while Charis described herself as "like air, and nobody sees me". This isolation had an impact on their progress towards improved research capability, but also on their wellbeing and attitude towards their host.

To summarise, the participants varied in the degree to which they possessed researcher identities. In the end, some returned from the visit with an enhanced researcher

identity while others were almost less confident than when they started. There are similarities in the experiences of several of the visitors, and in the next section we will look at possible factors behind their different outcomes.

Participants' Identity Journeys

There were common features to several of the reports which allowed five identity journeys to be described (Table 2). The descriptions used arise from the characteristics observed, as agreed by the authors.

The “committed teachers” all held master’s or doctoral degrees, but lacked confidence and motivation for research, often not having engaged with research since studying for their qualifications. They were unimpressed by the research they had seen, failed to see its usefulness and demotivated by the difficulty of getting published. They needed support from others and when it was not forthcoming, they made no progress.

The “research initiates” had initially similar attitudes to the “committed teachers” but they were able to take the first steps towards adopting a researcher identity by working with colleagues who could demonstrate the value of research. Christy and Mary were influenced by other academic visitors and their mentors and Rona was positively influenced by attending seminars and reading papers, as well as discussions with colleagues. It seems that the difference between the “committed teachers” and “research initiates”, both of whom lacked confidence in their research skills at first, was the influence of committed researchers who could share the value of their practice.

The “independent spirits” were less influenced by colleagues, and more affected by their situation. Two of them specifically referred to their desire for a change of scene, and they appear to have taken full advantage of the opportunity to pursue their own interests. While this was intended to develop their teaching expertise, it encompassed research skills, such as Cathy’s paper on Chinese painting inspired by her time in the British Museum. The difference between the “independent spirits” and the “committed teachers”, both of whom ended their visits without taking on a conventional academic research identity, appears to be their expectations of the experience. The “independent spirits” were confident in their authority to pick and choose their opportunities for development, whereas the “committed teachers” lacked this autonomy and appeared to rely on others for guidance and inspiration.

The one participant (Emma) in the “balanced teacher researcher” journey was satisfied with her visit in developing both her teaching and researching identities. Like the “committed teachers” she brought back teaching materials and focused on improving her pedagogical skills, but she did not limit herself to her teaching development. Like the “research initiates” she was inspired and influenced by colleagues and by academic opportunities, but her initial research that allowed her to select a particularly symbiotic host colleague made her experience far more successful in terms of publications, confidence and ongoing academic relationships. However, the development of both teacher and researcher identities required hard work, prior research and was exhausting.

Identity journey	Participants	Priorities/investment with regard to teaching and research	Impact of the visit	Identity development
Committed teacher	Daisy, Donna, Bella	Focused nearly totally on developing their teaching	Mainly reported gains in teaching	Strengthened teacher identity, no researcher identity constructed
Research initiate	Rona, Christy, Mary	Prioritised teaching, but experienced a change from an unfavorable attitude to a favourable one towards research	Reported more gains in teaching than in research	Strengthened teacher identity, had a favorable turn towards the development of researcher identity
Independent spirit	Jessie, Cathy, Hanna	Prioritised teaching slightly over research, but tried to do their research according to their own agenda, without being pushed by external pressure	Reported both gains in teaching and research but more gains in teaching	Strengthened teacher identity, and developed researcher identity at their own pace.
Teacher researcher	Emma	Managed to keep a balance between these two by attending courses and collaborating with her mentor	Happy with gains both in teaching and research	Strengthened both teacher identity and researcher identity.
Disenchanted researcher	Leo, Dora and Charis	With much expectation for publication and developing their research ability to join the international community, invested most of their time in research during the visit	Reported more gains about research than in teaching	Already with a strong researcher identity, but looked for a stronger international researcher identity. Strengthened teacher identity.

Table 2: Participants' Priorities/Investment, Gains and Identity Development

The few who already had a researcher identity found it difficult to make their hoped-for gains through the visit. These “disenchanted researchers” came with high expectations for collaboration but found that these openings did not occur, either because of deliberate exclusion or lack of interest from their host colleagues, or by their failure to self-promote and be proactive in seeking opportunities. While they were not unsuccessful in their research output, their imagined identity as members of an academic community were frustrated (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Perhaps the difference between these and the “balanced teacher researcher” who was able to forge a collaborative identity was that the “balanced teacher researcher” had done more preparation and planning before the visit which generated practical benefits but perhaps also led to a more realistic and considered growth trajectory.

Discussion and Implications

Motivation, Investment and Identity

A qualified university teacher is expected to be competent in both teaching and research (Borg, 2006). Findings in this research indicated that the academic visitors appeared to separate out the two roles of teacher and researcher, albeit with overlaps. Participants held different identities and imagined identities and therefore achieved different gains, or “return” in Barkhuizen’s (2010) terms. During their overseas visit, the participants’ identification affected their motivation and investment in teaching and research. For instance, nearly half of the participants identified themselves more strongly as teachers and therefore attached more importance to developing their teaching capabilities during the visit. All participants attended courses, practiced their English and took various opportunities to learn about the culture in order to enhance their linguistic, pedagogic and cultural knowledge in the practice of teaching. Their strong motivation affected their investment and resulted in their strengthened teacher identity.

The development of participants’ identity as researchers, however, was more complicated. Although research productivity is expected of university academics internationally (Bai & Millwater, 2011) and has become one of the basic requirements for promotion and an important means of professional development (Al-Maamari et al., 2017, Borg, 2006), many university English teachers see their role primarily as a devoted teacher, and have a weaker sense of the research side of their identity. Unlike teaching, where expectations are clear and shared, research is something that requires development and is a lonely endeavour which may need more nurturing. Undertaking research is made challenging by the stresses and constraints experienced by university English teachers, including a heavy teaching load, lack of time, inadequate research skills and institutional support, and a misconception of the relationship between research and teaching (Al-Maamari et al., 2017). Most participants’ motivation for doing research before the visit was not strong. Some teachers felt forced to conduct research due to top-down pressure, and those who were not competent experienced “reduced self-esteem” and enthusiasm in teaching (see van Lankveld et al., 2017, p. 331), thus affecting their investment in their academic identity development (Serena, 2014). Perhaps as a result their expectations were more aspirational than realistic, causing them to be under-prepared to maximise their opportunities.

During this visit, however, some participants took a favourable turn towards a research identity due to the affordances provided by the visit (e.g. time and resources) and support from others (e.g. mentors), and therefore invested more in the construction of their (imagined) identity. Immersion in the UK and encountering experienced researchers broadened their horizon and renewed their understanding of how to conduct research. They started to reflect on their identities as teachers and researchers in a new research environment. The different identity growth trajectories of the participants demonstrated the contextual impact and importance of support in orientating burgeoning research interests (Serena, 2015).

Over and above the development of identities separately, is the question of whether there was conflict or congruence between the two. Certainly for Christy at the outset she felt there was a conflict – time and energy spent on research would come at the cost of time spent preparing for and undertaking teaching. However, she came to realise that there was a complementary relationship in that her research efforts contributed towards her teaching in enriching her appreciation of her subject, as well as the more prosaic function of enhancing her status. Some continued to feel this conflict despite the visit, and returned identifying as a teacher but not researcher more strongly than ever. Others recognised the congruence of the roles, seeing the knowledge they gained as a teacher as contributing to their capacities as a researcher.

Furthermore, the participants' developing identities in turn affected their investment in their professional development in their situated contexts (Darvin & Norton, 2015, Yuan, 2019). The participants' stories show that affected by their identity and motivation, which is constantly changing, their investment in their professional development is also complex and in a state of flux (Darvin & Norton, 2015). The ongoing interaction between motivation, investment and identity suggests the dynamic nature of teachers' professional development.

Implications

This study echoes Beijgaard and others (2004) that university teachers need to balance different identities and sometimes struggle with different or even conflicting notions of identity. Some participants suggested that although they are encouraged to become researchers, as universities emphasise teachers' research publications in the fierce competition for funding and prestige (Serena, 2014), a lack of support can inhibit them from developing the necessary skills for conducting research (e.g. Al-Maamari et al., 2017). Therefore, it is recommended that teacher educators in higher education should encourage teachers to perform research according to their own interests or as a response to their concerns about their own teaching, helping them build connections between research and teaching.

The struggle between prioritizing teaching or researching was observed in several participants. It is suggested that successful teacher identity construction and maintenance needs a sense of appreciation (for teachers' efforts), connectedness, competence, and commitment (personal interest and devotion) while imagining a future career trajectory (van Lankveld, 2017). It can be assumed that the same qualities are required for the development of a researcher identity.

Data from this study indicates that an individual's identity influenced their expectations and investment for the visit and also suggests that an individual's identity is socially and culturally situated (Norton, 2000). The new social contexts the academic visitors were in played a crucial role in their development, which means that the choice of visit destination is a key consideration not to be taken lightly by those about to embark. Some academic visitors reported disappointment due to mismatches with their mentors in terms of research interests. It is suggested that initially, well before travelling, university teachers should have a clear goal for their own development and thus choose an appropriate place that matches their self-positioning. They can also make better preparation by seeking advice from previous visitors, or even from potential mentors before their visits.

It is also suggested that university teachers' self-positioning should be acknowledged and both teaching and researching should be valued. Thus, academic visit programs would benefit their participants by being either more research-oriented or teaching-oriented, to suit the needs of different teachers. For teachers who choose to enhance their teaching ability, sending them to host universities to work as teaching assistants or co-teachers with a mentor would provide them opportunities to develop both their English and teaching capacity. For those wishing to develop their researching ability, sponsoring authorities could establish a database of good host universities and mentors in different disciplines and establish long-term relationships with them, enabling teachers to locate an appropriate host for more efficient and beneficial visits.

Furthermore, academic visitors should be aware of the cultural differences between the visitor's and the host's culture. For example, in the case of the present study, mentors in western universities expect their students (mentees) to be more independent (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). Thus, mentees should take the initiative to seek out opportunities for collaborating and

self-development. As Leo suggested, coming to an English-speaking university, Chinese teachers may automatically turn themselves into a student-like reactive identity waiting for teachers' instructions, rather than a teacher-like identity, i.e., able to collaborate with their foreign colleagues and mentors on an equal footing.

Finally, it is desirable that the mentors and host universities could see the visiting scholars as a valuable resource for intercultural collaboration both in teaching and research. Efforts made to involve visiting scholars with the host university might be paid off in terms of enhancing the intercultural communication, teaching and researching collaboration of the staff.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences and professional development of 13 academic visitors in the UK through the lens of identity. Generally speaking, by participating and investing in their academic exchanges, participants acquired a wider range of symbolic and material resources (e.g., new pedagogical practice and research skills). This "return" (Barkhuizen, 2010) had tremendous impacts on teachers' identities, for instance, many participants became more confident and competent in teaching and research; some moved from passive recipients and consumers of research knowledge to autonomous professionals and producers of academic knowledge. Nevertheless, as the participants came with various expectations and identities, their "return" showed individualistic features. The participants' identity or imagined identity affected their investment in professional development during their visit, and at the same time they were influenced by the contexts they were in. Professional development is a long-term issue, and teachers need time to move from one stage to another. It is suggested that university teachers' identification with teaching and research be fully acknowledged and teacher development programs including academic visiting programs should take teachers' different developmental needs into consideration by offering either research-oriented or teaching-oriented programs. For those who have less experience in conducting research, more guidance and support are needed for them to develop their identity as researchers.

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Appendix

Interviewing Guide

First interview (4-10 months during the visit)

1. Demographic information: gender, educational background, discipline, title, visiting period
2. Is this your first time to study abroad?
3. What's your motivation of taking the academic visit?
4. What was your expectation for the academic visit?
5. How do you position yourself between a teacher and researcher?
6. How did you choose your host university?
7. Are you satisfied with your academic visit?
8. Are there any changes in your understanding or practice of English learning, English teaching and researching, etc.
9. Have you experienced any problems or difficulties?
10. Is there anything that you would like to be improved?
11. Do you have anything else to share with me?

Second interview (6-10 months after the visit)

1. When you look back at your academic visit in Britain, how do you feel?
2. What are your major comments on your visit?
3. Has the visit changed your teaching practice in any way? If so, how?
4. Has the visit changed your research practice in any way? If so, how?
5. Do you have any suggestions for those who are going for the immersion program?