

Teachers' Identities AND Creative Teaching IN Language Immersion Classrooms

by Dr. Kaishan Kong

Language immersion programs are growing rapidly in the United States and students' academic achievement is becoming more evident, but critical problems still exist, one of which is how teachers view their roles as both a content and language teacher. The concern of integrating content teaching and language teaching has inspired a large number of studies; however, a considerable amount of literature is heavily concentrated on the learners or the professional development of teachers; less light is shed on the importance of relating the teachers' identities with pedagogies (Cammarata and Tedick; Danielewicz; Fortune, Tedick and Walker; Walker and Tedick). Immersion teachers' identities refer to their perception of immersion education and their roles in this context.

The connection between teachers' identities and their influence on creative teaching can be found in literature on identity negotiation theory (Norton) and relationship between teachers' understanding of themselves, knowledge and teaching practice (Johnson and Golombek). Informed by the relevant literature, this qualitative

inquiry explores two Chinese immersion kindergarten teachers' perception on their roles in the immersion environment and their creative pedagogies. Research questions include: (1) How do the Chinese immersion teachers view their roles as both content teacher and language teacher? (2) How do their perspectives on their identities influence their instructional approaches in the immersion classroom?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Immersion education

Immersion is a form of bilingual education where students receive at least half of the subject instruction through a language they learn as a second, foreign, heritage or indigenous language; additionally, students will receive instruction in the majority language used in the community (Cammarata and Tedick; Lyster). Numerous empirical studies discuss predominant advantages of immersion education in helping students in linguistic, cultural, cognitive and psychological aspects (i.e., Cummins; Lambert; Lindholm-Leary; Lindholm-Leary and Howard); however, critics raised some salient problems in immersion education. Most of the problems are related to students' unsat-

isfactory linguistic development (i.e. Harley, Allen, Cummins and Swain; Lyster).

These problems uncover a more profound concern: the balance of content and language in immersion teaching. "How to promote a successful learning environment in which both language and content develop simultaneously and successfully continues to be the crux of immersion language teaching" (Walker and Tedick 22). Research identifies a prevailing predicament wherein immersion teachers struggle to simultaneously balance their role as a content teacher and a language teacher (Cammarata and Tedick; Swain and Johnson). Increasing research on immersion teachers' personal and professional experiences gives rise to the uniqueness of their identity.

Teacher's identity

Norton believes that identity is a person's understanding of himself or herself in relation to the outside world and across the time. Many scholars echo this belief that identity is a person's sense of who they are in relation to the social world and the time, which explains that identities can be formed and developed through dynamic and relevant social interaction (Atkinson; Lee and Anderson; Ushioda). Studies have been conducted to explore how teachers' multiple identities (gender, class, race, sexual orientation, culture) are constructed and negotiated through the process of instruction and interaction in bilingual contexts (Morgan).

Recently, researchers have developed more in-depth understanding of how immersion teachers perceive their own roles. One example is Walker and Tedick's inquiry into immersion teachers' understanding of balancing content and language instruction through in-depth conversations with six elementary immersion teachers (Walker and Tedick). They found out that how teachers perceive their dual role as a content teacher and language teacher is one of the major factors that will influence the effectiveness of the teaching. In the same light, Cammarata and Tedick conducted a phenomenological study to probe into Spanish and French teachers' challenges of integrating content and language through their lived experiences. Even though these studies adopted dissimilar theoretical and methodological lenses, they both illuminate the importance of associating teachers' backgrounds, philosophies, experience, language proficiency and their decisions in

balancing language and content in immersion context.

Identity and instruction

Teachers' beliefs, knowledge and attitudes are not isolated in affecting their actual practice in the classroom. On the contrary, it is the teacher's whole identity that determines the priority of teaching and related teaching decisions (Van Den Berg).

Diverse bodies of literature have reviewed teachers' identities in relation to pedagogies. Simon suggested a move from teacher identity *and* pedagogy to a notion of teacher identity *as* pedagogy. Morgan agreed with Simon that a teacher's identity, his or her image-text, could serve as valuable pedagogical resources for bilingual and second language education. Since extensive research demystifies the relationship between a teacher's identity and language instruction, it becomes more apparent that understanding teachers is crucial in understanding language instruction and learning, and to understand teachers we need to understand their multifaceted identities: their professional self, cultural self, political self, and individual self (Varghese et. al).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Set in an early total Chinese immersion program in the U.S., this study investigates two kindergarten teachers' perception of their roles as content and language teacher in relation to their selection of pedagogy. The first participant Dong had seven years of Chinese immersion teaching experience in the U.S. and prior to that, she had had other bilingual teaching experience in an Asian country. The second participant Yang had two years of Chinese immersion teaching experience in the U.S. and also had other bilingual experience in Europe and the Middle East before moving to the U.S.. Data collection included class observation, semi-structured interviews and class materials as supportive documents. The following section will discuss the major themes that emerged from the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Dual roles as a language and content teacher

During the interview, both Dong and Yang clearly stated that they considered immersion teachers playing dual roles as a language and content teacher simultaneously. As Dong stated,

我觉得应该是齐头并进。我们沉浸式老师，教数学也是用中文来讲，科学

也是用中文来讲。我觉得讲数学或者讲科学的过程中本身就是提高语言，帮助学生提高他们的语言能力 (I think these two roles should go hand in hand. We are immersion teachers, teaching math in Chinese and teaching science also in Chinese. I think the process of teaching math and science itself is improving language, helping students to improve their language proficiency).

Dong did not see the separation of teaching math and language; instead, she considered herself doing two jobs at the same time. Yang echoed,

应该是两者都兼顾，因为要通过不同的科目才能扩展语言的能力。不可能单单通过中文的教学来让他们学习。要通过discipline的学习。特别是我们kindergarten的话，孩子的语言掌握的途径，不单单是从中文课，还有很多是通过数学课。通过数学课的趣味性和变化性，让孩子在语言的听力和表达能力上都有帮助。(We teachers should handle both roles because language ability can be developed only through various disciplines. Learning occurs not through only Chinese language class, but through disciplinary learning. Especially for kindergarteners, kids' mastery of language occurs not only in Chinese language class but in math class. The fun and variability of math class is helpful to children's listening and communication skills).

How immersion teachers view their dual roles as language teacher and content teacher is shaped through their personal experiences, ethnic cultural values, educational background and professional interaction with colleagues, students and their parents. Dong and Yang, both immigrants from China, received education in Chinese and worked in the same field. These personal experience and educational background had profound impact on how they viewed their professional responsibilities as immersion teachers.

In return, their sense of professional self affected their classroom instruction. According to Van Den Berg,

The professional behavior of teachers is assumed to be jointly determined by their earlier experiences and their current expectations with regard to the future. People have, after all, a life history, and this history is—for most professions—essential for understanding their professional development and expectations for the future. (588)

Both teachers had background in bilin-

gual education in other countries, and their success in the past was informing them the importance of dual roles. To achieve both the content and the language goals, these two teachers stressed the essential importance of creating meaningful activities that could enhance content understanding and linguistic skills.

Creative and meaningful activities to ensure students' understanding of the content

Tsang stated, "What teachers think and believe shapes the way they understand teaching and the priorities they give to different dimensions of teaching" (164).

Priorities is a keyword in Tsang's statement as it accentuates teachers' selection of pedagogy inspired by their identities. As discussed in the previous theme, the two participants understood the uniqueness as an immersion teacher; therefore, they intentionally created activities that were different from traditional foreign language class.

For instance, when teaching map, instead of teaching students how to say map in Chinese, Yang asked students "你坐过飞机吗? 从飞机上往下看你会看到什么? 你看到的树是绿色的圆形还是站着的一棵树? (Have you taken a plane before? What can you see below from the plane? Do you see trees as circles or as upstanding?)" And students answered that trees looked like a circle and the houses were in square or rectangle shapes. She explained that encouraging students to consider a map from a bird's view could help students understand the concept of map in a more dynamic dimension. To further connect students' concept of map with everyday life, she created an activity that required children to draw the map of their neighborhood. Children used squares to represent their house, drew trees and used various colors to represent different roads. According to her, these activities activated students' multiple senses when learning the concept to achieve more profound understanding. In the meanwhile, multiple categories of vocabulary such as colors and shapes were reviewed. When asked if the language was too difficult for kindergarteners, she emphasized the importance of reflective and adaptive teaching. Over the years, she reflected and adapted her language to suit the students' level. Her example lent support to Johnson and Golombek's notion that teachers' evolving knowledge and teaching grow through their professional lives.

Creativity and meaningfulness also emerged in Dong's teaching when she connected science, math and children's personal life in class. When she taught animals, she gave each animal a Chinese name and integrated Chinese into math learning. For example, she said, "安娜有三只小青蛙, 美丽又送给了安娜一只小青蛙, 那么安娜一共有几只小青蛙? (Anna has three little frogs. Meili also gives Anna one little frog. Then how many frogs does Anna have?)" She said that students were very excited to hear their names mentioned in class, and looked forward to seeing whose names would be mentioned in the next class. Dong said, "因为他们学了青蛙, 所以我把青蛙放在了数学题里面, 我把中文和数学加在一起, 让他们觉得数学不是一种负担, 而是很盼望下一个数学课。(Because they had learned the Chinese word for frog, by putting the word frog in a math problem, I got to connect Chinese with math. They didn't find learning math as a burden but something they looked forward to.)" Small creativity and connection increased students' engagement in solving math problems.

In the bilingual classroom, the teacher's participation in the context and interaction with the students contributes to his or her sense of who he or she is (Morgan). In this study, both participants' pedagogy in class reflected their sense of professional self. Yang's example of using multiple activities to teach the concept of map and Dong's pedagogy of connecting disciplines and children's names displayed their dedication to nurture students' profound understanding of content while at the same time reviewing language. Being a content and language teacher required them to create hands-on and personal-related activities.

Creativity and intentionality for students' language practice.

Dong and Yang were certain that ensuring students' understanding of content was not and should not be at the cost of their language learning. Instead, they emphasized that language learning in an immersion context required creativity and intentionality. Dong said, to assess students' language proficiency in introducing family members, she would not simply ask students to recite the Chinese vocabulary for members; instead, she invited each student to bring their family photos to class and introduced the photos in public. She explained that having students introduce the photos would allow

her to see if they truly connected concept with language, as she said, "让小朋友自己来表达, 来介绍自己的家庭成员。从这个你就可以检查他们是否理解了。(Having the kids to express ideas, to introduce their family member, would allow you to assess if they truly understood.)"

Similarly, when Yang was teaching similarity and difference, she created an activity for students to find a friend holding the same photo and another friend holding a different photo. To the observer, it was obvious that students understood the teacher's instruction and completed the task accordingly. However, students had challenges in using the complex structure to express similarities and differences, as was expected by Yang. When interviewed, Yang noted the linguistic challenges and said she would try other approaches to help students practice the very linguistic point. "Given imposition of the additional language as a medium of instruction, a different kind of teaching takes place and new issues arise" (Walker and Tedick 22). Yang's example showed her creativity in teaching students comparison and contrast, but a new issue arose, which was the complexity of language. Even though the result was not as successful as she had expected, it displayed Yang's intentionality to develop students' linguistic ability and her understanding of the importance of language.

Additionally, both participants' emphasis on language practice was also reflected in their avoidance of using oversimplified language. Even though they were teaching kindergarteners, they underscored the importance of authentic language for early learners from the beginning stage. Dong stated, "我不会用一般小baby的语言和他们讲话, 因为他们马上要上一年级了, 如果一年级老师用很普通的学校语言和他们讲话, 他们未必能接受得了。(I would not use little baby's language to talk to them; otherwise, when they progress to the first grade, if their first grade teacher speaks to them in normal language, they would not be able to understand.)"

In the exploration of teacher identity and instruction, Cummins asserted that academic achievement is related to teacher-student identity negotiation. Morgan complemented Cummins' framework by saying that "[s]eating arrangements, classroom materials, peer relations, extra curricular activities, in addition to home and community language practices, family relations

and personal experiences all potentially influence the interpersonal meanings given and received in class" (177). When Dong and Yang conversed with the kindergarteners in authentic language, they behaved in the same way as average teachers in China would do with their students, so as to distinguish themselves from foreign language teachers who may use easier language to ensure understanding. In the meanwhile, they were negotiating students' identity as if they were average students in China, instead of foreign language learners. Their intentionality and creativity reflected the teacher-student identity negotiation noted by Cummins. Class observation clearly showed that students were very comfortable with their teacher speaking Chinese with them.

CONCLUSION

In this study, both participants perceived themselves as both a content and language teacher in the immersion kindergarten; therefore, their dual identities inspired them to be creative in class activities to ensure students' content and language learning develop simultaneously. Not only did they create various activities to nurture students' multi-dimensional understanding of a concept, they also paid close attention to assess students' linguistic development as they discussed content.

Schifter perceived the plurality of teacher's professional identity in terms of the multiple roles the teacher has to play in tutoring the students, managing the classroom and collaborating with other colleagues. Dong and Yang also underscored the importance of constant reflection on a professional and personal level. Reflection enables teachers to negotiate their multiple identities, adjust their teaching pedagogies and grow as an individual and team player.

"Teacher professional identity is how teachers define themselves to themselves and to others. It is a construct of professional self that evolves over career stages ... and can be shaped by school, reform, and political contexts" (Lasky 901). This study is significant in sharing two in-service immersion kindergarten teachers' perceptions of their roles and exploration of best practice. The purpose is to contribute to the knowledge base of immersion teaching and to call for more light to be cast on teachers' identities and pedagogical effectiveness.

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Dr. Kaishan Kong is an Assistant Professor of Chinese in the Department of Languages at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. She is also the Secretary of Teaching and Learning of Cultures SIG under ACTFL. Originally from



the south part of China, Dr. Kong received her B.A. in English Education in China, M.A. in Intercultural Communication in the U.K. and PhD in Second Languages and Cultures Education in the U.S. She has over 10 years of language and culture teaching experience in K-16. Prior to her PhD study, she taught Chinese language and culture to K-8 students and heritage learners. Due to her dedication to education, diversity and social equity, she has received several prestigious awards, including Wisconsin Teaching Fellows and Scholars Award, President's Student Leadership and Service Award, Mary McEvoy Award for Public Engagement, Scholarly Excellence in Equity and Diversity Award, and Buckman Fellowship for Leadership in Philanthropy.