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## A Dramatic *Perezhivanie*-based Analysis of EFL Teacher Identity Development: An Autoethnography

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### Abstract

This study reports an autoethnography of how the first author grappled with her EFL teacher identity crises in her transformative periods. The sociocultural concept of dramatic *perezhivanie*, i.e., how one experiences a crisis through the emotion-cognition dialectic, is employed as a unit of analysis. Through thematic analysis and dramatic *perezhivanie* analysis of semi-structured interviews and other data including teaching portfolios, chatting records on WeChat (a local social media), emails, drafts of manuscripts, the study reveals her four individualized crises: losing teaching identity, lack of qualitative research ability, ignorance of philosophy, and the balance between teaching and research. Her negative emotions not only indicated the peak of each crisis, but also interacted with her cognition to influence her attitudes to situational features, thus leading to positive or disruptive outcomes. Interactions with different mediators expanded her ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) to achieve her coordinated positive emotions and cognition. The study demonstrates that reflective autoethnographic narratives within the framework of dramatic *perezhivanie* helps to ontologically explore and construct one EFL teacher's authentic and whole self in a time of flux and transformation.

**Keywords:** *EFL Teacher Identity, Dramatic Perezhivanie, Crisis, Autoethnographic Narrative, Whole Self*

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### <sup>1</sup>Introduction

Despite the teacher-researcher divide as a global issue (Leow et al., 2022), EFL (English as Foreign Language) teachers have been called on to be holistic professionals “converging

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researcher and teacher identities” (Rose & McKinley, 2022, p. 530), thus triggering their professional identity tensions. Such tensions might evolve into identity crises when “teachers are vulnerable to stress, marginalization, conflicts, and powerlessness” under “the entrenched discourse of performativity” (Gao & Yuan, 2021, p. 1). Against this background, many EFL teachers’ subjectivity has been weakened and their professional pursuits have been suppressed, which has made them lost. This is particularly true for most Chinese EFL teachers who have traditionally been teaching-oriented but have to confront the quantitative professional evaluation policies stressing research productivity (Zhang et al., 2022). Early-career teachers, owing to their “stereotypical view of teachers and teaching” (Wei, 2021, p. 9) and lack of professional experience, are more likely to experience the conflicts between the changing social expectations and their naive inner landscapes, which may result in their burnout and early-career resignation (Zhang & Zhang, 2023).

A paucity of studies explores how EFL teachers cope with the struggles among their multiple identities. The limited publications on EFL teacher identity crises have mainly addressed “How should I do?” (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Yazan, 2019b), while few studies have explored the teacher self ontologically to inquire “Who am I?” and “Who will I be?” in their actual life. Based on dialectical materialism, individual development is determined by internal and external factors, with the former acting as determinants and the latter acting through the former. Hence, it is urgent to ontologically quest for who they are and who they long to become in the transformative times. This can help them understand their inner landscapes to construct harmonious identities.

To address the above gap, this study reports an autoethnography of a Chinese novice EFL teacher coping with various conflicts to construct her ideal professional identity. The theoretical framework is informed by the sociocultural concept of dramatic *perezhivanie* (how one experiences a crisis through the emotion-cognition dialectic). This study aims to provide insights into contemporary EFL teachers’ identity development and well-being through inquiring into their inner landscape. The research questions are as follows:

**RQ1:** How did an EFL teacher develop her identities through her dramatic *perezhivanie*?

**RQ2:** How did she pursue her true self in transformative educational contexts?

### **EFL Teacher Identity Crisis**

Language teacher identity is “a protean process in which teachers continually struggle to develop a sense of themselves relative to the roles and positions they believe or imagine themselves as holding in a community as well as how they believe others in the community see them” (Zhang et al., 2022, p. 2). EFL teacher identity results from both individual and contextual factors (Wei, 2021; Weng et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022), which influence teachers’ teaching practice, professional development, well-being, and career longevity (Zhang & Zhang, 2023). When an EFL teacher is in equilibrium with his/her environment, he/she tends to stay in a professional comfort zone. When such equilibrium is broken, the teacher may experience negative emotions like anxiety and dismay indicating short-term or long-term tensions. Such tensions between the teacher’s aspirations and social expectations can be salient and even cause identity crises when he/she grapples with new institutional and interpersonal dynamics in the rapidly transforming societal circumstances (Appleby, 2016).

To resolve such identity crises caused by research-oriented educational reforms, some researchers put forward various suggestions, including reforming the overwhelmingly quantitative research evaluation policies to foster young teachers' development (Yang, 2017), creating favorable conditions for teacher-researcher collaboration to build the pedagogy-research link (Spade & Lightbown, 2022), raising teachers' problem awareness and improving institutional management to construct their resource-mediated identities (Xu, 2021), teachers' enjoyment in teaching contests to improve their teaching academic ability (Qian & Meng, 2023), etc. These suggestions are indisputably conducive to improve EFL teachers' research ability. Nevertheless, they have kept an outsider approach to addressing how EFL teachers become socially qualified teachers or/and researchers (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Yazan, 2019b), even when their agency is boosted. This "outside to inside" approach conceals teachers' subjectivity to a large degree. What might be more critical but almost missing is an inquiry into the authentic teacher self from the ontological vantage point. This "inside to outside" mode emphasizes an individual's cognition, emotion, desires, and well-being, which is beneficial to unveiling a positive and authentic self.

Moreover, how these heterogeneous factors interplay to resolve the crises and how an EFL teacher's past, present, and future interact to construct a decent identity are all but a virgin land, and the separate exploration of cognition and emotion may ignore the complexity of EFL teacher identity construction (Zhang et al., 2022). Given this, it is necessary to integrate cognition, emotions, actions, contexts, social culture, personal history, and identities into language teacher development (Borg, 2019; Johnson & Golombek, 2018).

The sociocultural concept of *perezhivanie* can be a viable holistic framework because it captures the dialectical unity of emotion and cognition, thus enabling researchers to "study the role and influence of the environment on psychological development" (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 343)". Only a few researchers focused on language teacher identity from the *perezhivanie* perspective. Wei (2021) used narrative inquiry to probe into the interactions between the intellectual-rational and the social-political facets in a Chinese teacher's professional identity construction, but the indispensable emotional facet was not highlighted in his denotation of *perezhivanie*. Weng et al. (2023) foregrounded the emotional aspect of *perezhivanie* in an ethnography of the professional development of an English language teacher, and examined "*perezhivanie* as a conceptual framework for examining the intersectional nature of language teachers' personal and professional identities, the related emotional experiences, and the agentic choices", but the cognitive denotation of *perezhivanie* seemed missing this time. The dialectic of cognition, emotion, and the environment in *perezhivanie* was embodied in Zhang et al.'s (2022) study which focused on how a Chinese EFL teacher became a socially qualified researcher without enough attention to his inner pursuits. *Perezhivanie*, which unifies emotion and cognition, can be a viable concept to interpret EFL teachers' inner landscapes in their identity development. *Perezhivanie* in crises, i.e., dramatic *perezhivanie*, can better help to reveal the mechanism of EFL teachers' identity development in a time of transformation.

#### *Perezhivanie, Crisis, and Dramatic Perezhivanie*

Vygotsky (1997) argued that "social relations, real relations of people, stand behind all the higher mental functions and their relations" (p. 106) and interpersonal social relations are internalized into intrapersonal functions via the social mediation in the process of development.

The social relations do not shape one's psychological development directly but through his/her *perezhivanie*. Phenomenologically, *perezhivanie* refers to "how a child becomes aware of, interprets, and emotionally relates to a certain event" (Vygotsky, 1994, pp. 340-341). *Perezhivanie* is also abstracted into a unit to analyze individual psychological development methodologically. With *perezhivanie* as a unit, we can start with the dialectical interaction of emotion and cognition to explore the contradiction between an individual and the environment. An individual's emotions and cognition interact to decide his/her attitude towards the situation he/she is involved in and affect his/her subsequent actions to solve the contradiction, thus bringing about psychological development (Zhang et al., 2022).

To appreciate the relevance of *perezhivanie* for psychological development, including EFL teacher identity development, it is indispensable to introduce the concept of crisis (also called drama or dramatic event) (Fleer, 2017, p. 91, see also, Qin et al., 2022). Based on Vygotskian psychology, psychological development is characterized by "neoformations", referring to "a new construction of an individual's psychological functions that emerge through the reorganization of the whole system of functions in consciousness" (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 6; see also, Veresov & Mok, 2018, p. 90). Neoformations, also called qualitative changes, tend to occur in "periods of crisis" in human psychological development (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 29). A culmination point in which the crisis reaches apogee distinguishes between the period of the crisis and the stable psychological developmental periods. At the culmination point, sharp conflicts between an individual and the environment usually give rise to painful experiences (Vygotsky, 1998, pp. 191-195). A positive and creative content is hidden behind the harmful symptoms because the crisis is a turning point of psychological development depending on one's *perezhivanie* refracting the crisis.

In periods of crisis, the interaction between an individual and the environment frequently takes the form of dramatic collision, appearing as a contradiction of an ideal and present form (Veresov, 2017, p. 61). Dramatic or critical *perezhivanie*, i.e., how one experiences a dramatic event or crisis, can be used to probe into the dramatic collision and track how one's response to the collision causes his/her qualitative changes (Veresov, 2017, p. 68). Dramatic *perezhivanie* is particularly viable for examining the critical and revolutionary aspects of the sociocultural genesis of the human mind because it can delve into the essence of cultural development. In the dialectic of the individual and the environment, learning and development are "processing through conflictual relations between demands and motives that both change the child and his environment" (Hedegaard, 2014, p. 193). Dramatic *perezhivanie* can be an appropriate theoretical tool to analyze the complex sociocultural genesis of the human mind in two key dialectical aspects of contradictions and qualitative changes (Fleer et al., 2017, p. 249).

The dialectic of dramatic *perezhivanie* should also be foregrounded in subsuming the future orientation. Vygotsky believed it is not enough to truly understand the human mind only through tracing its origin, but it is also necessary to explore its potential development. To dig into how an individual can become what he is not yet, Vygotsky introduced the construct of "the zone of proximal development" (ZPD), defined as the distance between a person's "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving" and the higher level of "potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). ZPD is about making an individual's future depending on access to mediation (Xi & Lantolf, 2020) offered by human

mediators, artifacts and institutional resources, specially designed social activities, etc. Within the ZPD, an individual can leave the present and return to it through imagination, extending his lived experience and action in the world (Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013). With ZPD as a tool, the future orientation and developmental sense of dramatic *perezhivanie* can be crystalized in one's refraction of the contradictions between him and the environment in crises.

We adopt dramatic *perezhivanie* as a tool to inquire into how an EFL teacher's cognition and emotion interact to shape her responses to the conflicts between her inner pursuits and the environmental expectations in periods of crisis.

## Research Method

Guided by the conceptual framework of dramatic *perezhivanie*, the present study employs an autoethnographic approach in qualitative research methodology to explore the identity development experiences of an EFL teacher in a tertiary institution, particularly the process of her coping with identity crises. The in-depth portrayal and interpretation of the case can enable readers generate a historic and holistic understanding of the teacher's identity development.

### *Autoethnographic Narrative*

Autoethnographic narrative is an appropriate method to explore the process of teachers' discovering, modifying, and improving themselves in interactions between themselves and the professional world from an emic perspective (Zhang, 2020), and thus it has recently become a viable research approach in language teacher identity inquiry and practice (Qian & Meng, 2023; Yazan 2019a, 2019b; Yang, 2019). Canagarajah (2012) defined autoethnography through the three terms that constitute it: *auto*, *ethno*, and *graphy* (p. 260): *auto* refers to the presence and situatedness of the self and knowledge construction based on one's identities, which highlights the self as a treasury of lived experiences and personal perspectives; *ethno* underlines the interplay of individual experiences and the sociocultural; *graphy* involves narrating for data production, collection and analysis in empirical studies. Autoethnographic narrative can be used as a research tool to explore teachers' "hidden feelings, forgotten motivations, and suppressed emotions" (Canagarajah, 2012, p. 261) in their identity development. Autoethnographic narrative shares much in common with the theoretical essence of dramatic *perezhivanie* regarding the individual, sociocultural, emotional, conflicting, and transformative aspects. Thus, we adopt an autoethnographic narrative as a research tool to collect an EFL teacher's professional experiences, especially in periods of crisis. Since this study is the first author's autoethnography, the stories are told in the first person "I" (Yang, 2019).

### *Participant*

After graduating with an MA degree in applied linguistics at a key university (University X) in China, I, twenty-four years old, worked as a full-time EFL teacher in an independent college (College Y) in a provincial capital city of northwest China from 2013 to 2018. In those 5 years, as a teaching-oriented teacher, I experienced a shift from temporary passion to burnout and boredom. I quit the job and turned back to pursue a PhD degree at University X. In the subsequent PhD study of five and a half years, I married and gave birth to a child. In struggling to balance study and family, I had both sorrows and joys in responding to some dramatic events.

When I undertook this autoethnographic study, I was thirty-four, just earned my PhD degree, and was offered an EFL teacher position at University X. In this transitional period, I share my stories to understand better who I am and who I will be as an EFL teacher with the purpose to enlighten other early-career EFL teachers' professional identity development in times of dramatic transformation.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The semi-structured interview was used to get a systematic understanding of my teacher identity developmental history. The interview questions were written and revised by the first and second authors. The second author Meng was my mentor ushering me in my critical times starting from the year 2013 when I worked as an EFL teacher at College Y. Two interviews were conducted by the third author, my bosom friend Zhao. Zhao is a novice EFL teacher in her in-service PhD study and her research interests include language teacher development. The interviews were conducted in our mother tongue Chinese in a relaxing and pleasant atmosphere.

Guided by dramatic *perezhivanie*, the interviews mainly captured interactions between my cognition and emotion, the qualitative changes of my teacher identity, and the contradictions between my personal and social features during my identity crises. Take my professional outlook on the teaching-research dilemma for example, the questions are as follows:

- 1) Do you want to become a teaching-oriented or research-oriented teacher? Why?
- 2) How will you balance teaching and research?
- 3) What resources and supports will you need for professional development?
- 4) How do you feel about the performative research evaluation policies and requirements?

The interviews were triangulated by other data including my teaching portfolios, chatting records on WeChat (a popular IM app in China) with the second author (also my Chinese PhD supervisor, Meng, henceforth) and my friend Zhao (also the third author), emails with my American PhD supervisor James Lantolf (Jim, henceforth), drafts and revised manuscripts.

The first author conducted the initial thematic analysis according to the coding steps of qualitative data recommended by Creswell (2015, pp. 243-244) to get the general history of my identity development. Next, informed by the concept of dramatic *perezhivanie*, dramatic negative emotions were found to identify a peak of an identity crisis. In each crisis, I focused on how my cognition, emotions, and the environment interacted to solve the contradictions between my pursuits and the social demands. The qualitative changes in my teacher identity were identified depending on positive emotions caused by resolving the contradictions via mediation attuned to my ZPD. The qualitative changes in my identity were considered as the reconstruction and reorganization of my past experiences, which, in most cases, shook or transformed my existing beliefs and values of teaching, research, education, and even life. To enhance the credibility of the study, after my data coding, the second author and the third author also respectively analyzed and interpreted the data from more objective and critical perspectives. Those data we initially didn't agree were eliminated. The three authors made thematic refinement, cross-validation, and interactive data analysis with openness, self-responsibility, and truth-seeking required by self-narrative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## Results

The analysis presents the narrative process of my identity development from the time I entered College Y as a teaching-oriented EFL teacher to the time I was in the transitional phase of completing my PhD study and becoming a university EFL teacher. In the past ten years, I experienced four identity crises which brought four qualitative changes in Table 1. These crises are elaborated upon in the following subsections.

**Table 1**

*The Crises and Qualitative Changes in My Teacher Identity Development*

The Crises	The Qualitative Changes in My Identity
Losing my teaching identity	A passionate teacher → A promising researcher
Lack of qualitative research ability	A quantitative research enthusiast → A competent qualitative researcher
Ignorance of philosophy	An objector to philosophy → A philosophy enthusiast
The dilemma between teaching and research	A divided self → A whole self

### *Crisis 1: Losing My Teaching Identity*

After completing my master's degree, I decided to pursue a dream career as a foreign language teacher. I firmly believed I would become a professional and respectful teacher popular with my students. I put much time into designing innovative class activities, caring for my students like my children, and trying to understand their unique characteristics and learning needs. In turn, they appreciated me. Even for now, 10 years later, many of them still seek my advice on their work and life. Nevertheless, my enthusiasm for teaching gradually waned because, for one thing, the overloaded schedule left me exhausted. For another, the evaluation system overly emphasizing student grades often brought me into miserable distresses. Ironically, the other contrary evaluation criteria primarily focused on research, for which, I was not fully prepared. Little by little, I could no longer find my passions for creative teaching. It became a job for a living, failing to bring me a sense of fulfillment. These negative emotions indicated the peak of this crisis. I could not see my future, which gradually produced in me a strong desire that "some changes need to happen". I thought of further education, like pursuing a doctoral degree, would be a way out. This idea inspired me, although, at that time, I had no plan.

As my determination for PhD study became clearer but nobody to resort to, a former teacher Meng's image began to become more vivid. I had known her since my master's degree studies (who later became my doctoral supervisor). I visited her and asked to join her national social science project. Although I had no idea what I was able to do in research at the time, participating in Meng's dynamic assessment teaching experiments and attending her regular research team meetings revealed another picture of being an EFL teacher. Especially the team environment of innovation and collaboration further enforced my determination in pursuing my PhD.

Therefore, I embarked on the challenging yet rewarding journey of preparing for the doctoral program entrance exam. In retrospect, four activities characterized my preparation: attending an academic conference, reviewing related literature, auditing graduate courses, and writing a research proposal. Following Meng's guidance, I decided to present my MA study at

an international conference. Due to my years of non-research participation and a minor research flaw, however, I had to give up the night before the presentation. The strong sense of failure and embarrassment struck me. The second endeavor was my attempt to write a literature review on the think-aloud method, drawing from a research gap in my master's thesis. Meng guided me in literature search, selection, and critical reading. The publication of this review enhanced my confidence in research. The third was that I audited research methods courses at University X. I actively participated in class discussions and the course professor's praise for one of my presentations encouraged me. I began to feel "somewhat proud". This fueled my determination to continue to move on, despite the challenges of commuting between my teaching at University Y and audition at University X, which once even caused my burnout. One last thing that motivated me a lot was my doctoral research proposal. After numerous discussions with Meng, I finalized the research topic. When I encountered difficulties with research methods, I also sought advice and literature recommendations from other team members. Through my perseverance in great efforts, and the guidance, assistance, and emotional comfort from Meng and others mentioned above, I overcame the hardships of preparation and developed skills of critically analyzing literature, identifying research topics, understanding basic qualitative methods, and interpreting statistical results. All these helped me to win the top score in my entrance examination, which boosted my confidence, signifying my identity shift from a teaching-oriented teacher to a will-be researcher.

### *Crisis 2: Lack of Qualitative Research Ability*

Our PhD program was interdisciplinary, combining linguistics with one of the three: computer science, philosophy, or management. I initially assumed I would choose computer science mainly due to its popularity and my research team's emphasis on quantitative research. Consequently, I took courses on quantitative research methods, statistics, and data mining. However, as I approached the time to prepare my dissertation proposal in my second year, I was torn apart again by the decision. On the one hand, I had been studying quantitative research methods but lacked a focus in linguistic area. On the other hand, I was working with Meng on qualitative research of foreign language teacher development, which stimulated my interest, though I still shared many peoples' concerns about the objectivity and generalizability of qualitative methods. The uncertainty of the decision-making process caused anxiety.

As our teacher development research progressed, I found my anxiety gradually diminished. When Jim, my American co-supervisor, made very positive comments on our study, I made up my mind to focus on qualitative research in teacher development. My qualitative research abilities and paper writing experienced a transformation after I learned more from Jim. He has been a passionate advocate for SCT, in which mediation is a key concept. I could see how he practiced it in making good judgment of my ZPD and providing appropriate mediation accordingly. In this way, he helped deepen and expand my original thinking without drastically revising my major ideas (See Participant H's case in Meng & Zhang's paper in this volume for details). This enhanced my self-confidence. When my first paper rejection disheartened me, Meng gave me much comfort. In an email, Jim reassured me, saying, "Don't feel disheartened. I don't think the reviews were that bad". He then advised me to critically view the reviewers' feedback and work on the revision of the paper. When my other paper was accepted and published in a top journal, I found myself a young scholar, especially when I was invited as a



reviewer for two international SSCI (Social Science Citation Index) journals, signifying my transition into a promising qualitative researcher. Overall, my writing and publication experiences constituted a gradual journey toward my independence where I wrote as an executant, a first author-to-be, a first author, and a reviewer. I could design and conduct qualitative research and critically evaluate and enhance my writing from both an author's and reviewer's standpoint.

### *Crisis 3: Ignorance of Philosophy*

I chose to finish an interdisciplinary doctoral dissertation combining linguistics with philosophy, which matched more with my qualitative research topic to address language teacher identity issues. Then, I encountered my most dramatic challenge during my doctoral studies: my ignorance of philosophy. My fear of philosophy learning stemmed from three reasons: I was biased against philosophy, perceiving it as abstruse and overly intellectual; I did not have a professional supervisor to guide me; I could not see any point where I could integrate philosophy into language studies. Consequently, I had frustration with and resistance to philosophy, reflecting the height of this crisis. My efforts in learning philosophy and Jim's support alleviated such negative emotions. Later I found myself fully immersed in philosophy.

Given that the philosophical foundation of SCT is primarily rooted in Marxism, I decided to engage with Marxist philosophy. Realizing the broader theoretical framework necessitated systematic study, I started with the history of philosophy, then Marxist philosophy either by self-teaching, auditing famous philosophy professors' classes, or enrolling in online courses. When I shared my newfound enthusiasm for philosophy with Jim, he remarked, "All doctoral students specialized in humanities should explore philosophy, as the degree they pursue is 'Doctor of Philosophy'". In an email, he emphasized the positive impact of studying philosophy on enhancing deep thinking. See the following excerpt:

*"As an undergraduate, I had to take four years of philosophy coursework. I didn't appreciate its significance until I went to graduate school. It is what has helped me in my theoretical thinking so deeply..... Vygotsky made it very clear that the key to understanding psychology and to forming a viable theory began with philosophy."*

I incorporated philosophical knowledge into my research and completed my doctoral dissertation. The relief I felt after completing this task indicated that I had made a significant breakthrough in combining the two disciplines. The intersection of philosophy, foreign language teacher development, and SCT ignited my passion for foreign language education research from an interdisciplinary perspective.

### *Crisis 4: The Dilemma between Teaching and Research*

I am now in a new transitional phase from a PhD graduate to a university EFL teacher. The sense of separation between teaching, research, and life prompted me to seek self-renewal through reflection. Exploring the self, particularly through writing the present autoethnographic paper, brought me great joy: "It enhances my presence and liberates my subjectivity or agency".

There were two types of job positions for me to choose, a teaching-oriented position and a research-oriented one, when I was recruited as an EFL teacher. Teaching-oriented teachers had a heavy teaching load but relatively low research assessment requirements, while the opposite was true for research-oriented teachers. I thought research-oriented teachers tended to have higher academic ability, financial income and social status. The decision of whether to focus primarily on teaching or research entangled me in confusion, which prompted me to reflect on two paradoxes to redefine my identity: the paradox between teaching and research, and the paradox between individual academic pursuits and the transformative academic environment.

1) *The paradox between teaching and research.* My teaching experiences made me view teaching as a non-creative endeavor, and I even had strong resistance to teaching. However, my perception of teaching evolved during my doctoral studies: teaching can be creative. For instance, implementing new teaching concepts such as dynamic assessment (DA) and concept-based language instruction (CBLI) in teaching practice can enhance student learning and, in return, refine these concepts. Reflecting this teaching improvement to produce papers means theorizing the practice. Publishing the articles helps disseminate research findings and facilitate knowledge exchange. More importantly, Jim and my other teachers exemplified to me how the two can be perfectly integrated. Their lived examples of fostering teaching innovation and advancing research endeavors ultimately helped shape a cohesive teacher identity for me.

2) *The paradox between my academic pursuits and the transformative academic environment.* Nurtured by the professional assessment system in higher education stressing research productivity and excellence, I believed that teachers with higher research productivity were superior and had a better social status. I was inclined to prioritize research output over improving teaching, although I grappled with the ethical implications of potentially compromising teaching quality. This distress drove me to dialectically examine the interplay between my academic pursuits and social expectations through a historical perspective. The growing importance placed on research productivity spurred the research vigor among many traditionally teaching-oriented EFL teachers, including me. It motivated me to navigate my identity crises and embark on a journey of self-reconstruction based on my research progress and philosophical reflections acquired during my doctoral studies. Nevertheless, the current excessive focus on research output risks overshadowing the individual subjectivity of teachers, entangling them in a dilemma between pure academic pursuits and social expectation, a predicament I also found myself struggling with. As the education authorities start to recalibrate such policies to address this overwhelming emphasis on research, I anticipate a gradual shift away from the current research-centric paradigm, allowing a return to a more balanced approach.

Reflecting on the two paradoxes, I recognized my divided identity, with teaching, research, individual pursuits, and the transformative environment as fragments. Yet, my desired self was wholeness, with those factors in harmony. How could I construct such a holistic identity? I reflected further as follows.

To combine teaching and research, I need to expand my teaching and research praxis skills to adapt to the evolving landscape of educational reforms. Pursuing truth should be the center uniting all learners, including teachers and students. Teaching, research, and learning should move around the center. I was straying away from truth-seeking by solely focusing on research output that caused my confusion and distress. Returning to truth-seeking to reconstruct my lost

self had helped address my struggles in cognition. However, a thorough realization of a whole self required transformative professional practices, which would undoubtedly present challenges to my unified identity, but I should leverage the resources available to engage in such practices to restore my subjectivity. An article on the challenges of maintaining a positive and authentic self in China's curriculum reforms reminded me that I was not alone in this journey of reconstructing the whole EFL teacher identity. This excitement inspired me to find like-minded individuals, such as my supervisor and co-supervisor as my guides, and EFL teachers who had also experienced the pains of a fragmented identity. With a clear goal, I have embarked on the journey to strive for a whole identity, both for me and those EFL teachers suffering from a divided life.

## Discussion

This section discusses how my dramatic *perezhivanie* reveals the changes and construction of my teacher identity and how self-reflective narratives function as a tool to express and reconstruct a true and whole self as an EFL teacher.

### *Dramatic Perezhivanie as a Unit to Analyze EFL Teacher Identity Development in Crises*

Dramatic *perezhivanie* is a holistic conceptual framework to unify heterogeneous factors in teacher identity development, which is called for language teacher identity research by Borg (2019) and Johnson & Golombek (2018). Adoption of dramatic *perezhivanie* as the unit of analysis empowered us to start from the dialectical interaction between emotion and cognition to identify my identity crises in the transformative times. My dramatic *perezhivanie* revealed the contradictions between my pursuits and social expectations, and showed how I interacted with the contextual features to solve the crises and realize qualitative changes in my identity.

My dramatic *perezhivanie* indicated four crises I encountered in the transformative professional contexts: losing my teaching identity, lack of qualitative research, ignorance of philosophy, and the dilemma between teaching and research. These crises and their resolutions drove me to shift from a teaching identity to a researcher identity, and then from a divided identity of the two to a unified identity. My identity construction and reconstruction journey attested to Appleby's (2016) finding that the tensions between the teacher's aspirations and social expectations could cause identity crises when she/her grapples with new institutional and interpersonal dynamics in transforming societal circumstances. In a period of crisis, negative emotions not only indicated the peak of each crisis (Vygotsky, 1998, pp. 191-195), but also interacted with my cognition to reveal the contradiction between my actual identity and my desired identity. The positive emotions from the resolution of each contradiction marked my transformation. For example, losing my passion for teaching and feeling distressed indicated my first identity crisis. The negative emotions and my recognition of teaching as merely "a job for a living, failing to bring me fulfillment" exposed my poor identity characterized by inadequate teaching ability and my ideal identity as a teacher with strong teaching ability.

Emotions not only indicated crises and qualitative changes but also prompted critical decisions. For one, negative emotions in a crisis, if not managed in time, may lead to identity retrogression, while effective regulation of the negative emotions can bring self-reflection of the crisis and promote development. For example, losing hope in teaching, but without any

emotional mediation, led to my giving up altogether; during my preparation for the doctoral admission, the course teacher's praise boosted my confidence and perseverance to overcome burnout and move forward. Emotional supports from my supervisor and co-supervisor during my first paper rejection encouraged me to critically view the reviewers' comments for further revisions. Such positive emotions can promote further learning. For instance, my newfound enthusiasm for philosophy inspired me to actively immerse myself in varied attempts at self-teaching and other available resource exploration. Complete absorption in what I did rendered a joyful learning journey, which coordinated my emotions and cognition, thus strengthening my identity as a researcher.

In a crisis, one's dramatic *perezhivanie* can lead to positive or disruptive outcomes depending on how he/she manages his/her attitudes to situational features (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 346). My dramatic *perezhivanie* revealed three strategies for crises and thus produced different outcomes. 1) In the case of teaching identity crisis, when I lost hope, I failed to obtain any mediation about the dialectic of teaching and research. Consequently, I took a dichotomous attitude and ended up giving up teaching and turning to research. 2) Confronted by inadequate qualitative research ability and ignorance of philosophy, I took the initiative to search for academic guidance and emotional support from mediators, such as my supervisors, and the research team as well as available resources to construct a researcher identity; 3) When deciding my new job as teaching- or research-oriented on graduation, I found myself so bewildered by a divided identity like "either A or B", but I assured myself of a whole identity like "the dialectic of A and B" in the end. These cognitive changes were brought about by reflecting on the relationship between teaching and research based on my identity development experiences. Each of the three types of responses to crises reflected a different way of resolving the contradiction between my actual identity and ideal identity: 1) abandoning the current identity in favor of constructing a new one, 2) preserving and developing the existing identity, and 3) resolving the crisis by integrating the polarity of paradoxes into a unity.

While overcoming the crises, my interactions with different mediators continually expanded my ZPD to resolve contradictions. As Xi & Lantolf (2020) viewed that ZPD was about making an individual's future depending on access to mediation, responsive mediation attuned to my ZPD led to my development, and vice versa. For example, each time Jim revised my paper draft, he exquisitely offered just enough help to highlight my original ideas without changing the whole structure. This ZPD exploration facilitated me to create and realize my writing potential. This testifies to Vygotsky's argument: "The right kind of education involves awakening in the child what already exists within him, helping him to develop it" (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 51). An opposite case that I gave up the conference presentation suggested that a research task beyond one's ZPD is not conducive to development. In addition, an effective way to expand ZPD is the apprenticeship model proposed by Lave & Wenger (1991). My prior writing experience was a case in point. My collaboration with my supervisors played a critical role in gradually and continuously expanding my ZPD, increasing my involvement, contribution, and confidence until I was able to complete the writing task independently. My case verified the point of Spada and Lightbown (2022) that following up and providing feedback in dialogue and collaboration helped learning and teaching take place. Thus, the ZPD is a "socio-cultural activity of people together creating the 'zone' (the learning-leading-

development environment) as well as what is created (learning-leading-development)” (Holzman, 2018, p. 45).

### *Self-Reflective Narratives as a Tool to Interpret and Reconstruct a Whole Self as an EFL Teacher*

In self-reflective narratives, teachers not only express and recognize their identity features, but also reflect and construct their identities through intersecting their desires and social demands and reconciling their past, present, and future (Yazan, 2019b).

For one, in the analysis of my self-reflective narratives under the framework of dramatic *perezhivanie*, I illuminated my identity via speaking, writing, and theorizing. Reflecting on my past teaching experiences and doctoral studies, I recognized a fragmented self. Self-reflective narratives allowed me to view myself from an outsider’s perspective and brought me “great joy” by enhancing my “presence”. This echoes Li’s (2010, p. 190) view that the process of uncovering a teacher’s subjectivity was essential for establishing his/her identity, as such a reflective way of expressing and listening to oneself was crucial for identity construction. For another, through reflection, EFL teachers can “enact a transformative role” in the sociocultural contexts (Sardabo et al., 2020, p. 2) to pursue their desired selves. I identified a whole self as my ideal identity by dialectically analyzing the relationship between my desires and the involved environment. “Whole self” means “becoming more real by acknowledging the whole of who I am”, instead of becoming perfect (Palmer & Scribner, 2017, p. 58). Reflection also allowed me to go beyond the socially expected self with higher research productivity and to become a transformative practitioner to build a whole self. The fact that I found some like-minded people who pursued a whole teacher identity encouraged me to become a “new professional”, one who not only possessed expertise in a foreign language but also had the grit to persist and help transform unreasonable factors threatening the integrity of teacher self (Palmer, 2019, p. 299). Thus, self-reflective narratives can help teachers reconcile their past, present, and future to make transformative choices in identity crises.

### **Conclusion**

With the SCT concept of dramatic *perezhivanie* as a unit of analysis, this study illustrated how I (the first author) grappled with identity crises to develop my EFL teacher identity. Through unpacking the autobiographical narratives, my dramatic *perezhivanie* presented how my dramatic emotions and cognition prompted me to solve the dramatic collisions between my actual and ideal identities. Meanwhile, the process of writing this autoethnographic paper was transformative practice of interpreting my inner landscape and seeking my true self in a soothing and relieving way. The recognition of my divided identity through self-reflection, featured successively by the fragments of teaching, research, individual pursuits, and socio-cultural contexts, aroused my awareness of emerging changes and urged me to enact a transformative role in pursuing a whole self.


Although such ethnographic narratives may become “vulnerable as we share self-critique through personal stories for public reading” (Yazan, 2019a, p.5), these accounts are expected to resonate with those EFL teachers suffering from a divided life and foster their critical reflection on their life experiences and identity development. To survive identity crises in a time of transformation, first and foremost, EFL teachers should approach their identities from


inside to outside, which requires them to explore the inner landscape of their life through critical self-reflection; secondly, they should replace their dualistic perspective with the dialectical mindset and become transformative agents to strive for the wholeness of teacher identity with teaching, research, individual pursuits, and socio-cultural contexts in harmony; thirdly, they should seek mediation attuned to their ZPD and regulate their emotions to improve their expertise in unifying teaching and research.

Future research may adopt the conceptual framework of dramatic *perezhivanie* to explore EFL teacher identity crises in education reforms, emphasize an understanding of individual EFL teachers' subjectivity through autoethnographic narratives, and search for possible pathways for them to move from a divided identity to a whole self, thus providing insights for EFL teachers, teacher educators, and institutional decision-makers.

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No, there are no conflicting interests.

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