

**A narrative study of English language teacher identity in
Chinese vocational education**

by

LIU, Xiao Yi

A Thesis Submitted to

The Education University of Hong Kong
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for
the Degree of Doctor of Education

April 2024

Statement of Originality

I, LIU, Xiao Yi, hereby declare that I am the sole author of the thesis and the material presented in this thesis is my original work except those indicated in the acknowledgement. I further declare that I have followed the University's policies and regulations on Academic Honesty, Copyright and Plagiarism in writing the thesis and no material in this thesis has been submitted for a degree in this or other universities.

Abstract

This narrative study explores how three English language teachers (ELTs) in a Chinese vocational college construct their teacher identities through the lens of positioning. Situating this vocational education (VE) ELT identity investigation within scholarship that conceives teacher identities as fluid, multifaceted, contested, and shaped by power relations, a narrative approach was employed.

Narrative frame data were collected from 19 VE ELTs in the vocational college, three of whom were purposefully selected as the focal participants: a novice, a mid-career, and a veteran VE ELT. Multiple sources of narrative data were gathered over one and a half years, including narrative frames, interviews, online conversations, and their online postings. Barkhuizen's short story approach is utilized to analyze the extracted short stories from the teachers, informed by positioning theory.

Analysis of the teachers' stories indicated that the VE ELTs constructed their teacher identities by repeatedly committing themselves to particular identity-categories and by (re) positioning themselves, others, and external discourses to accommodate the situated contexts. They agentively opposing to or identifying with certain positions, expressing and developing certain teacher identities. In addition, the study enriches current understanding of teacher identity construction in four ways: negative incidents evoking strong emotions trigger teachers' (re)positioning acts; positioning manifests and achieves differently across contextual scales; positioning is shaped by teachers' personal experiences, beliefs, morals, and the external discourses that ascribe positions to VE teachers; teacher agency, teacher emotion, and positioning constitute an interconnected triad, each element informing the others.

Implications for building and bolstering positive VE ELT identities and VE student identities are also discussed.

This narrative study contributes to scholarship of teacher identities by delineating the intricate process of VE ELTs' positioning and the salient mediating factors. The interaction among teacher agency, teacher emotions, and positioning is revealed, advancing the understanding of how teachers negotiate and construct their professional identities in (re)interpreting and exercising their duties, rights, and responsibilities.

Keywords: narrative study, teacher identities, vocational education, positioning

Acknowledgments

My heart is filled with gratitude for all the people and experiences that have led me to and guided me through this rewarding journey. First, I sincerely appreciate all the teachers who participated in this study. Their openness and willingness to share their stories with me have been essential to this research.

I am deeply grateful to my supervisors, Professor John Trent and Dr. Liu Yiqi, and my research methodology course tutor, Dr. Chan Kit Wa, Anita. Their guidance and encouragement enabled me to write and conduct the research with confidence and depth.

I am also thankful to the external examiners, Professor Xu Yueting and Professor Liu Honggang, for their constructive and insightful comments, which guided me to think more critically and enhance the quality of my work.

Finally, I am immensely grateful to my dear parents, my two daughters, Xilin and Xiwen, and my husband, for their endless love and support that made this journey possible.

Table of Contents

Statement of Originality	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Abbreviations	viii
List of Figures	ix
List of Tables	x
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Introduction	1
Chinese vocational education	3
Vocational education teachers	5
Significance of the research	5
My stories as a vocational college English language teacher	6
Thinking teacher identities narratively	10
Chapter organization	11
Chapter 2: Theoretical Underpinning	12
Introduction	12
Teacher identities	12
Positioning as a theory to teacher identity research	14
Conclusion	19

Chapter 3: Literature Review	20
Introduction	20
Teacher identity, teacher agency, and teacher emotion	20
Studies on teacher identities	22
Studies on vocational education teachers	26
Chapter 4: Methodology	29
Introduction	29
Researcher positionality	30
Setting and participants	30
Data collection	32
Data analysis	34
Research validity and ethical consideration	37
Chapter 5: Findings from the Narrative Frames Data	39
Introduction	39
Became a VE ELT: motivation and expectation	39
Becoming and being a VE ELT: struggling, adjusting, learning and emotionally complex	41
Imagined VE ELTs: of value to students, enhanced competence, and external recognition	49
Other stories: emotion-charged stories between teachers and students	51
Conclusion	52
Chapter 6: Tina: A Novice VE ELT's Stories of Empathy, Devotion, and Anxiety	55
Tina's experiences as a VE ELT in the narrative frame	55
Findings from Tina's short stories	56
Discussion	73

Chapter 7: Nancy: A Mid-career VE ELT's Stories of Escape, Vulnerability, and Evolution	77
Nancy's experiences as a VE ELT in the narrative frame	77
Findings from Nancy's short stories	78
Discussion	104
Chapter 8: Cara: A Veteran VE ELT's Stories of Modification, Tension, and Reconciliation	107
Cara's experiences as a VE ELT in the narrative frame	107
Findings from Cara's short stories	108
Discussion	135
Chapter 9: Discussion and Implication	139
Introduction	139
Discussion	140
Implications and suggestions	146
Limitations of the study and directions for future research	148
Concluding thoughts and reflection	149
References	153
Appendix A: Positioning coding categories	167
Appendix B: Narrative frames	168
Appendix C: Clustered matrix for narrative frames analysis	169
Appendix D: Consent form	172
Appendix E: Excerpt from the research journal	173

List of Abbreviations

VE	vocational education
ELT	English language teacher
MoE	The Ministry of Education

List of Figures

Figure 1	A screenshot of Tina's WeChat posting on 20 June, 2023	70
Figure 2	A screenshot of a student's reflection in Dec. 2023	150



List of Tables

Table 1	Participants' profile	31
Table 2	Overview of the data source, data collection time/period, and data type	34
Table 3	Short story analysis matrix	36
Table 4	Motivation for becoming a VE ELT	40
Table 5	Expectation for being a VE ELT	41
Table 6	Problems confronted	43
Table 7	Actions taken to solve the problems	46
Table 8	Aspects of doing well	47
Table 9	Emotions	48
Table 10	Imagined-self as an excellent VE ELT	50

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

“Ten years elapsed in a flash. I have compromised. There had been breakdowns due to vocational school students’ terrible state and disruptive behaviors during classes. I couldn’t help getting angry in class and walking away from them ... but more often than not, I didn’t give up and still appreciated and cherished the better classes I taught, trying to find ways to make my class interesting to engage the students ...”

(Nancy, extract from the narrative frames, June 2022)

“At that time, there was no performance evaluation or competition. I felt that life was so comfortable; just ‘lying flat’ was enough ... now I feel lost, running wearily in the whirlpool of evaluation, class preparation, and teaching competitions, but I haven’t figured out the essence of being an English teacher and the value of English in vocational education. In a meeting with the vocational course teachers from the Design Department, basically, what the vocational course teachers and the Director meant, beating around the bush, was that, in reality, they believed they didn’t need English, so there’s no need to design an English textbook tailoring to their specialty. They all subtly expressed their opinion that their students didn’t need English. So, if the teachers all think that way, what do you think the students would feel ...”

(Cara, extract from the 1st interview, July 2022)

Nancy and Cara (all names are pseudonyms) are English language teachers (ELTs) in a vocational education (VE) college in China. The struggles and tensions they describe provide a snapshot into the challenges that teachers in the demanding Chinese VE context encounter. Yet, despite the growth of VE worldwide, the voices of Nancy, Cara, and other VE teachers are only rarely heard in the international literature.

VE that promotes “inclusive and sustainable economic growth and social equity” has

been in the top of countries educational policies (Caves et al., 2021; Majumdar, 2017, p. x; viii; OECD, 2021; Wang & Guo, 2019). The recent upgrading and reforming of VE around the world is driven by rapidly changing labor markets and new understandings of VE within the shifting socioeconomic and education landscape (Caves et al., 2021; OECD, 2021). In China, the past decade has witnessed extensive and significant VE reforms (State Council, 2017, 2019, 2022), aiming to fill skill gaps in economics and promote national competitiveness. In addition, to enhance the VE status, the revised *Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2022) stipulates that “vocational education is a type of education in an equally important status as general education, an important part of the national education system and human resource development.” The success and sustainability of VE are underpinned by high-quality and devoted VE teachers, yet paradoxically, the voices of these teachers remain largely absent in international literature and policy discussions (Orr, 2019). Therefore, this narrative study aims to give voice to a cohort of vocational college¹ ELTs in China through delving into their teacher identities. This research situates teacher identity examination within scholarship that conceives teacher identities as dynamic, multifaceted, and a site of struggle, constructed by teacher agency and emotions in fluid power relations (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; 2019^a; Norton & Morgan, 2012; Reeves, 2018^a; Varghese et al., 2005; Yang et al., 2021; Zembylas, 2003).

Teacher identity is a key variable in teachers’ “sense of professionalism, levels of commitment,” “capacity for resilience” (Day, 2017, pp. 25-26), “self-esteem and self-efficacy” (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013, p. 122), shaping their teaching practices, professional choices, and development (Varghese, et al., 2005). In addition, teacher identity has been deployed as an analytical tool for gaining insight into the complex issues regarding “theory and practice in education” and relationships between teachers, schools, and society (Gee, 2000, p. 100; O’Keeffe & Skerritt, 2021). As will be discussed in Chapter Three, little is

¹ Chinese VE system consists of lower-secondary technical and/or vocational school, upper-secondary technical and/or vocational school, and higher vocational education carried out by vocational and/or technical colleges (Wang & Guo, 2019). The research setting is a vocational college located in south China.

known about identity construction challenges of ELTs in VE settings (Trent & Liu, 2023^a; 2023^b). Teachers' positionality to their situated socio-institutional contexts is vital to their understanding what it means to be teachers (Barkhuizen, 2017; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Kaplan & Garner, 2017; Tao & Gao, 2018; Varghese et al., 2005). The following two sections introduce Chinese VE and VE teachers, furnishing the contextual background that shapes the participants' VE ELT identities.

Chinese vocational education

VE is widely recognized as vital for empowering nation's development. However, in many countries, including China, VE is deemed inferior to the so-called academic education and "positioned at the bottom of the post-secondary education hierarchy", unattractive to students and parents (Barak & Shoshana, 2022; Hao & Pilz, 2021; Li, 2017; Rözer & Bol, 2019; Wang, 2021^a; 2021^b, p. 1009; 2022; Woronov, 2016).

Under the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China passed in 1986, China has adopted a nine-year compulsory education system. Upon finishing the compulsory education and a competitive high school entrance examination (*zhongkao*), each student has three alternatives: admission to a general high school, enrollment in a secondary vocational school, or direct entry into labor market (Hao & Pilz, 2021). General high school education and secondary vocational school education comprise Chinese upper-secondary education section. Graduates from this section can further their study in post-secondary education that offers two different tracks: a university (academically-oriented) and a technical/vocational college (vocationally-oriented). Access to any form is mainly determined by the high-stakes National College Entrance Examination (*gaokao*). The top-tier most-prestigious universities normally recruit the academically-best students, followed by the second-tier provincial universities. Vocational colleges are "at the bottom of this educational caste system", "which accept the 'left-over' students" (Li, 2017; Wang, 2021^a, p. 3). Given their less desirable scores, VE students are stereotyped as "stupid and lazy," "bad seeds," "left-over" or "non-academic others" in the population, suffering entrenched prejudice and negative stigma in societies (Ling, 2015; Wang, 2021^b, p. 1008). These low positionings of VE students

manifest the permeating meritocratic ideological discourses, upholding certain power dynamics in the education system and the society (Wang, 2021^a; Woronov, 2016).

Currently, there are 1,489 vocational and technical colleges with 16,709,000 students enrolled in China, exceeding the enrollment of universities by around 15% (MoE, 2022). However, as the cases in other countries, VE is “mostly chosen by default or as a last resort” and “a poor second choice” for the students failed the *Gaokao* (Wang, 2021^a, p. 3). Research has shown that the VE track garners far less interest from students and parents compared to the general or academic routes (Li, 2017; Hao & Pilz, 2021; *ibid.*). In addition, VE tends to attract the students “from relatively disadvantaged family backgrounds” with limited resources and social connections (Hao & Pilz, 2021, p. 474; Wang & Guo, 2019). The lack of appeal of VE is closely linked to the job prospects of VE graduates, as becoming a worker or technician in China is perceived to enjoy less job security and lower social status (Li, 2017; Wang, 2022).

Over the past decade, Chinese government has undertaken extensive and significant VE reforms to promote VE status, adaptability, attractiveness, and quality (State Council, 2017, 2019, 2022). For instance, in 2022, the State Council of the People’s Republic of China issued “The Guidelines for deepening the Reform of Modern Vocational Education System Construction”, which proposes the coordination of general academic education and VE that allows VE students to develop themselves within the education system. Academic subjects such as English are required to learn in order to pass relevant exams to gain admission to universities (Haidar & Fang, 2019). According to the *English Curriculum Standards of Higher Vocational Education* (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, MoE hereafter, 2021), English language course is an integral part of the VE curriculum, “a compulsory or distributional elective course for students of all majors” in Chinese vocational colleges (p. 1). The policies implemented in VE have also shifted VE classroom ecology. For example, the 2019 initiative of one-million enrollment expansion in higher VE (MoE et al., 2019) has led to heterogeneous student population in vocational colleges, which includes vocational school graduates, high school graduates, social personnel, and veteran. Their

diverse academic foundations, interests, motivations, goals, and personal backgrounds present considerable challenges for VE teachers in terms of instruction and education.

Vocational education teachers

The curriculum of VE institutions is designed according to the needs of labor market and closely related to the economic development, shaping the composition of VE teaching faculty (Wu & Ye, 2018). According to OECD (2021), VE teachers can be divided into three main types: teachers of vocational theory, teachers of vocational practice, and teachers of academic subjects, such as English and Math. Teachers of vocational theory and vocational practice are referred to as “dual profession,” who possess “both pedagogical and industry knowledge to prepare young people and adults for the labor market” (ibid., p. 11; Tyler & Dymock, 2021). Building and training “dual profession” teaching staff have repeatedly highlighted in Chinese VE policies (State Council, 2017, 2019, 2022). Vocational course teachers consider their experiences and expertise in industries as “an asset”, greatly valued by their VE institutions and themselves (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén, 2014, p. 208; Tyler & Dymock, 2021; Viskovic & Robson, 2001). However, vocational identity developing from a trade is not readily available to VE academic subject teachers. VE ELTs without industrial experiences and expertise are thus ascribed “marginalised and subordinated identities” in VE institutions (Trent & Liu, 2023^b, p. 8). How VE ELTs negotiate such identities and construct their distinctive VE teacher identities remains unclear due to the limited research into them. A thorough understanding of VE teachers and the overall enhancement of VE teaching quality cannot be achieved without attending to VE academic subject teachers. Therefore, this narrative study employs positioning theory (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a) to unpack the identity construction of a cohort of VE ELTs in Chinese VE context.

Significance of the research

The significance of this research is three-fold. Academically, this study shall enrich the current teacher identity literature by giving voice to the underexplored VE ELTs, contributing to a more complete picture of teacher identity in its complex manifestations across contexts.

Practically, making visible the tensions and struggles in VE ELTs' experiences, this narrative study can engender suggestions for various stakeholders, including vocational education teachers, policy-makers, teacher experts, and administrators of VE institutions, to empower VE ELTs for better teaching practices, development, and well-being. This shall in turn improve the overall VE teaching and learning qualities and effectiveness. Besides, narrative research on teacher identities is reflective and emancipatory (Barkhuizen, 2007; Xu, 2017). Engaging VE ELTs in telling their stories exists the potential to help them be more aware of their practices, emotions, and trajectories linked to multiple factors, which, I hope, can make the teachers more agentic and resilient in pursuit of fulfillment as ELTs in VE. Ultimately, I believe this study can deepen my understanding of the subtleties and complexities involved in becoming VE ELTs. Engaging in the process of co-constructing teachers' stories, I anticipate gaining greater insights into the teachers' inner world and the larger professional landscapes on which we all live. Alternative stories might, therefore, have a chance to be imagined, co-authored, or even co-created.

My stories as a vocational college English language teacher

I sketched my stories as a VE ELT for two reasons: as a reflexive methodology, narrative studies call for “visible researcher reflexivity” (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021, p. 6) and “begin with inquiring into researchers' own stories of experience” (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 543). My experiences as a VE ELT are interwoven with participants' stories and a part of the phenomenon under study, inspiring, informing, and enriching this research. In addition, the inherent relational nature of narrative research requires deep researcher engagement to gain deep insight into participants' meaning making (Barkhuizen, 2019). The stories unveiled my experiences in the same socio-institutional context as the participants. This background plays an important role in facilitating this narrative study and my continued engagement with the participants. Thus, it is essential and accountable to acknowledge and make transparent my personal experiences and insider position from the outset, be aware of, but more importantly, to embrace and value it throughout the research.

Relax and Rejoice

It is fantastic that I am an academic subject teacher in the vocational college.

I had been an ELT in a private university for three years before joining a vocational college, the chosen research setting, in July 2010, shortly after my first daughter had been born. Its location and state-funded nature attracted me, yet I knew little about VE then. I was satisfied with my work as an ELT in the vocational college. Apart from relatively intense teaching workload, academic subject teachers in VE, such as ELTs, were not responsible for specialty development, VE student recruitment and enrollment. Students were high-school graduates, sincere and respectful with medium or low English level. There were no stringent policies on performativity. I had enough freedom, time, and passion to explore and implement teaching innovation, do (action) research, write papers, or partake in teaching competitions out of love or interest. In those years (2010-2017), teacher canteen and offices were always full of laughter and I was filled with relaxation and joy.

Burnout and Bottleneck

Being regulated and marginalized made things difficult.

In 2018, the college introduced the *Professional Title Appraisal System* to evaluate teacher performance in various aspects, such as teaching hours, research output, practice in industries, and awards. Teachers' professional title risked being downgraded to lower levels for poor performance. Anxiety and dissatisfaction spread when teachers suddenly found their worth encapsulated in indexes. I loathed those policies that intended to drag me into a set orbit and drained my energy into fixed areas, but I doubted how much I wanted, and I could resist or ignore them when stuck in the system. I involuntarily, began to follow the policies but soon felt exhausted and a sense of meaninglessness for forcing myself to do the work merely for satisfying the requirements. Besides, the key criteria for advancing to (associate) professors, such as national teaching competition awards, were extremely difficult to meet for marginalized academic subject teachers without the competence to be 'dual professionals' and the support to enhance our abilities. Professional progression seemed to hit a bottleneck.

In 2019, under the initiative of one-million enrollment expansion in higher VE (MoE et

al., 2019), the students I taught were of low English proficiency and little motivation from heterogeneous backgrounds (e.g., vocational school graduates; social personnel; veteran; high school graduates). Teaching which used to be my biggest source of happiness became a little dull, repetitive, and even painful. I wondered and reflected if that was because I was no longer a teacher full of vitality, flexibility, love, and hope for my work, caught in the web of performance indicators.

The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic at the end of 2019 made online teaching from home normality. I used the time saved from commuting and on-campus work to ponder over what I could do and really wanted to be. I decided to pursue a doctoral program when that seemed a way forward in composing my life and an ‘antidote’ to break the stagnation that plagued me. I added a paragraph of reflection at the end of my submitted doctoral research proposal on teacher autonomy (my original research focus), from which I can still feel my yearning for changes and growth for a better teacher and a better self:

“I am convinced of two things: 1. teaching career cycle is a dynamic ebb and flow and I won’t be trapped in one stage as long as I still have the motivation and autonomy to grow as a teacher and exploit the affordances to break the stagnation. 2. one of teaching’s great rewards is the spiraling teacher-student relationships when ‘the old empower the young with their experience and the young empower the old with new life’ —illuminate each other, as I often say to my students. If enthusiasm and love for teaching run out, I will not truly get into and light students’ hearts. By courageously exercising autonomy, expanding the boundaries and venturing into the unknown, I may find new chances for development and rekindle my initial passion as a teacher. Deep in my heart, I want to inspire my students to be as courageous as me when they experience lows in their future careers and lives.”

(December, 2020)

Those words which seemed to write to ‘impress’ the potential supervisors, in fact, are words I wanted to encourage and say to myself at that time.

Exploration and Enjoyment

New spirits come with new experiences.

Thankfully, I got the EdD offer from The Education University of Hong Kong on 21 April 2021 and embarked on my doctoral study journey the same year. There were no precedents for in-service teachers' study-leave in my college. For better concentration on my study, I wrote a long application letter to the leadership to request a one-year study leave. After rounds of discussion, they approved it and revised the teacher development regulations to support teachers under 45 to pursue doctoral degrees with one-year paid leave. I have been deeply grateful for what the college did for supporting teachers and felt proud that my agency 'won' and helped to create time and space for teacher learning and development outbound. It was wonderful that I was a 'full-time' student again in the university after years of teaching.

I was excited, learning research approaches systematically, interacting with course tutors while reflecting on my teaching from a student's perspective, attending academic conferences, and sharing my viewpoints and experiences with peers. New knowledge, new perspectives, new friends, new relationships, and new stories — all the new experiences brought by my new position and identity as a doctoral student, have instilled my life with feelings of absorption, expansion, and connection, making me grow again.

I was back to teaching in September 2022 with a new 'me'. Life has been busier and more challenging when I needed to teach, learn, research, write essays, and take care of my two daughters, but I have never been so fulfilled and bright. From students' positioning of me in their reflection, I knew that I had entered into their stories as a more loving and inspiring character:

"Hello, Yvonne. I am very happy to be taught by you this semester. I learned a lot. I want to say that I really like you because you are independent, free, and relaxed. There are many labels on women, but these labels don't bind you. You are still struggling for your own education, which made me understand 'it's never too old to learn.' Every class, you taught us not only the knowledge in the textbook but also some life philosophy. I remember in one class; you raised a question for discussion—what is love? I think your sense of responsibility for us is also a kind of love for your life and work!"

(My student Yang's English reflection, June, 2023)

Thinking teacher identities narratively

Telling my experiences, I began to see how my teacher identities had changed with and within time and contexts, convincing me of the power of stories to examine teacher identities that are personal, relational, contextual, ongoing, and fluid (Barkhuizen, 2017; Kayi-Aydar, 2019^b; Reeves, 2018^a; Xu, 2017; Zembylas; 2003). Personal stories are indelibly entangled with and living in the evolving stories of the situated setting and the world. My interactions with those big stories and discourses become part of who I am and who I am becoming (Huber et al., 2013).

When the environment constrained the maintenance and development of my preferred identities as a growing, vibrant, and self-regulated teacher, the idea of ‘escape’ took root and I began to explore new places to visit for fear of the deadening stagnation for the rest of my professional life. However, I cannot ‘escape’ from the system in a real sense. My agentic actions, triggered by my resistance to the imposed performative discourses and professional stagnation, can become another attempt in the future to comply with the dominant narratives I disidentify in order to survive and thrive in the institutional stories, driven by the desires for security, recognition, and self-fulfillment inside me within the system. Individuals’ stories are therefore always embedded in the shifting contexts and discourses, “alive, unfinished and always in the making” (ibid., p. 227), so are our identities.

My experiences inform the theoretical framing and methodological approach of this study. Teacher identities are internal and external, the interplay of which, albeit individualized, reflects the complicated agency-structure dialectics (Reeves, 2018^a; Varghese et al., 2005). Besides, in telling my stories, I unconsciously but actively positioned myself in relation to others and the dominant discourses with emotions. For instance, positioning myself taking responsibilities for my own professional development, I “loathed” the constraining and rigid policies dragging “me into a set orbit”; I was “grateful” for the enabling and supportive study-leave policy as I positioned myself as a teacher longing for growth through learning; I positioned my students differently across varied periods and was positioned by them simultaneously.

Studying experiences as stories allows researchers to explore the complexities of teacher

identities in relations and multilayered contexts (Barkhuizen, 2007). Further, narrative research is a “person-centered approach that emphasizes particularity and diversity”, through which a thick and rich description of individual teacher’s situated identity construction processes can be obtained (Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Josselson & Hammack, 2021, p. 9). By uncovering teachers’ “subjectively experienced realities” in specific context, Chinese VE here, including their experienced constrains and affordance, related policies, teaching practices, professional development, and social relations, we enhance the likelihood that these ‘realities’ and teachers’ stories will eventually inform policymaking at varied levels to empower teachers in the right way (Hayes, 2017, p. 59). Having reflected my experiences as a VE ELT in China, I embarked upon an exploration of other teachers’ stories with the following research question:

How does one group of ELTs in a vocational college in China construct their teacher identities?

Chapter organization

This dissertation comprises nine chapters that set out to answer the research question. Chapter 2 conceptualizes teacher identities from a poststructural lens and elaborates on the positioning theory adopted to examine teacher identities (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a). Chapter 3 reviews extant literature on teacher identities, highlighting the existing exploration in this area and identifying the gaps that this study aims to address. The research methodology is described in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 presents the findings from the narrative frames data, complementing the story analysis of three focal participants (Xu, 2014). Chapter 6, 7, 8 present the case studies of the three VE ELTs: Tina (Chapter 6), Nancy (Chapter 7), and Cara (Chapter 8). These chapters demonstrate how the three VE ELTs at different career stages construct their VE ELT identities via the lens of positioning. Chapter 9 further discusses the findings that enrich current understanding of teacher identity construction, and provides implications for facilitating VE ELTs’ and VE students’ positive identities. Limitations of this narrative study and directions for future research are then suggested. This dissertation ends with my reflection and inspiration derived from conducting this narrative research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Underpinning

Introduction

Starting from an elaboration on teacher identities as narratives and stories (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Georgakopoulou, 2007; Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Watson & Mcluckie, 2020), this chapter conceptualizes teacher identities from a poststructural lens. This chapter then moves to the positioning theory that underpins the theoretical framework for analyzing teacher identities. The links among positioning, teacher identities, and narratives are elaborated.

Teacher identities

Teacher identities as narratively constructed

Teacher identity can be understood as how teachers “make sense of themselves in relation to contexts and other people” (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013, p. 121). The practice of narrative and telling stories is “the most widely embraced way of making sense” (Rodgers & Scott, 2008, p. 736). Watson (2006) argued that telling stories is “‘doing’ identity work” in that it involves teachers’ “reflection on, selection of and arrangement of events” which are meaningful to them (p. 525). Narratives and stories², as the “privileged mode for making sense of self and others”, can therefore be used as the entry point into teacher identity construction process (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p. 32; Giaxoglou & Georgakopoulou, 2021).

Anchoring in the belief that “our lives are storied and identity is narratively constructed” (Clandinin, 2019; Smith & Sparkes 2008, p. 5; Watson & Mcluckie, 2020), this narrative study conceptualizes teacher identities as the stories teachers tell about their experiences (Arvaja, 2016; Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Teachers maintain and impart some degrees of coherence and continuity of evolving self and teacher identities through narratives (Arvaja, 2016). This is because narratives provide the structure for individuals to organize their self-perception over time, allowing people to (re)interpret their past and present

² I followed Clandinin (2019) here and treat narrative and story as equivalent expressions, but I used the term “narrative” exclusively when referring to research approach.

experiences and speculate their future (Georgakopoulou, 2007).

Defining identities as “collections of stories about persons”, Sfard and Prusak (2005) equated identities with stories that are “*reifying, endorsable and significant*” narratives about individuals (p. 16). They further explained those features: the reifying qualities are indexed by the verbs such as *be, have* or *can* and emphasized the action repetition by the adverbs such as *always, never, and usually*; the endorsable stories are those the tellers affirm reflecting their situation faithfully; the significant stories are those affecting narrators’ emotions. These characteristics imply that the stories expressing teacher identities entail actions and emotions in events that teachers believe to be truthful and telling.

Furthermore, “stories do not exist in a vacuum” but are embedded and shaped by both immediate and broader contexts (Jill, 2002, p. 208). The process of telling stories involves reference to others in story world and engagement with dominant narratives. Hence, stories uncover the contexts where teacher identities are constructed and how teachers make sense of their situated settings in relation to others (Barkhuizen, 2016). As Watson (2006) puts, stories enable teachers “to integrate knowledge, practice and context” (p. 525). Through storytelling, teachers engage in the interpretation of their experiences embedded in multilayered contexts, infusing them with personal relevance and significance. It is within this process that teacher identities emerge and manifest.

Poststructural teacher identities

Most recent line of teacher identity studies leans on poststructuralism to investigate teacher identities (Clark, 2023; Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a, 2015^b; 2019^c; Kocabaş-Gedik & Hart, 2021; Nazari et al., 2023). Poststructuralism views teacher identities as “multifaceted, dynamic, a site of struggle, and shaped by power relations between the individual and others” (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^b, p. 138). In other words, teacher identities “are constantly *becoming*”, negotiated, contested, and constructed “in interaction with others in a professional context” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 178). Teachers construct their teacher identities in relation to significant others, including their students, family, colleagues, and administrators, which in

turn links to classrooms, home, and broader socio-institutional contexts, interweaving and involving intricate power relations (Barkhuizen, 2017; Martel & Wang, 2015; Reeves, 2018^a). Power operating via discourses regulate and mediate teachers' actions and emotions (Clark, 2023; Lasky, 2005; Norton & Morgan, 2012; Zembylas, 2003). To theorize poststructural teacher identities is to describe how teachers experience, struggle to embrace or reject those discourses, and find their own voice and power therefrom (Zembylas, 2003, p. 229).

Regarding power relations, Foucault (1980, 1982) made two critical points that inform the analysis of poststructural teacher identities. First, “power must be analyzed as something which circulates,” in perpetual flux rather than in anyone’s hand. Teachers thus “are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power” (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). If teachers are “the vehicles of power,” in the words of Foucault (p. 98), they are supposed to possess degrees of power to reject certain assigned positions, invest in aspiring identities, or reconcile multiple identities, engaging in constructing and negotiating their teacher identities. Further, Foucault (1982) posits that power “does not act directly or immediately on others”, but rather exerts its influence by shaping or changing their actions (p. 789). This implies that power can only be articulated when individuals are recognized as agents who are acting upon and contributing to power circulation. The actions teachers take express and forge their teacher identities, stressing the central role of agency in the construction of teacher identities within power relations (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; Reeves, 2018^a; Trent, 2016; Varghese et al., 2005). Power relations are thought to shape teacher identities through positioning (Holland & Leander, 2004; Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Sosa & Gomez, 2012). The following section introduces positioning theory and justifies its adoption.

Positioning as a theory to teacher identity research

Positioning Theory

Being assigned positions by others and assigning positions to oneself and other is called positioning (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Contrasting to “static, formal, and ritualistic” roles, position emerge and change in interacting with others, and along with each position comes a set of duties and rights (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, p.

32). Position is defined as “a set of beliefs held by actors as to their own rights and duties and those of others engaged in an encounter or a longer strip of life” (Harré, 2015, p. 271).

According to Harré and Slocum (2003), rights are anticipatory or retrospective justification for the propriety of demands for actions by others; duties are anticipatory or retrospective expressions of demands for actions upon oneself. Harré (2012) defined positioning as “processes by which rights and duties are assigned, ascribed, appropriated, resisted, rejected, or repudiated” (p. 8), highlighting the fluid and relational nature of positioning. As teacher identities are constructed at the nexus of teachers and contexts, understanding the rights and duties in teachers’ situated settings and inside their moral and belief system is vital for exploring their identity construction through positioning (Harré, 2015).

It should be noted that “people can not only be positioned morally, they can also be positioned in terms of individual properties and particularities” (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, p. 397). Position is a notion collecting “a person’s ‘moral’ and personal attributes” (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 17), such as an approachable teacher and a reserved student. Positions assigned, imposed, or ascribing to oneself “limit or lead to possible actions and meanings as well as rights, duties, and responsibilities,” shaping who we are (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a, p. 22). In classroom, for example, what teachers say to students and how they interact with them are relative to teachers’ adopting positions that entail their perceived or expected duties, rights, and power within the moral order in which the discursive process occurs. In addition, teachers’ personal attributes or characteristics have a direct bearing on their acts. All these positions form their teacher identities over time (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a).

Harré and Van Langenhove (1999) introduced a variety of analytical distinctions regarding the positioning modes, informing the positioning analysis of VE ELTs’ identity construction. Essentially, there are interactive and reflexive positioning (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). While interactive positioning refers to assigning positions to others, reflexive positioning is about assigning positions to oneself. Both involve individuals’ understanding of their roles, rights, and duties relating to others in social interactions. Related to reflexive positioning, deliberate self-positioning expresses identities (ibid.; Harré & Van Langenhove,

1991). This can be done in three ways: by emphasizing one's agency; by telling one's autobiographic stories; or by indexing one's unique point of views (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Accordingly, teachers' assertion and assumption of certain rights and responsibilities are "basic active self-positioning moves," which reveals and constructs their teacher identities (Harré & Slocum, 2003, p. 105).

In examining classroom interactions and/or classroom conflicts between teachers and students, the analytical distinction of first-, second-, and third-order positionings is useful (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). First-order positioning can be tacit or explicit. For instance, when a teacher reminded a student not to play with the cellphone during class, she implicitly positioned herself as a teacher having the moral right and duty to keep students engaged in class, and simultaneously positioned the student as having the duty to focus on learning. If the student resisted the teacher by actions (e.g., keep scrolling the cellphone) or by languages (e.g., "Your class is boring."), he/she defied the first-order positioning and shifted the power dynamics. Second-order positioning occurs. Third-order positioning is the retelling of the event to others outside the original interaction (e.g., the interviewer/researcher/colleagues). Since most VE learners are "lack of interest and engagement in studies" (Köpsén, 2014, p. 206), it is possible that they might be in conflict with their VE English teachers who try to engage or discipline them in classrooms. In case of this, teacher identity struggles and negotiations may occur. Positioning helps teachers realize the gap, making the reasons underlying classroom conflicts visible. In this regard, positioning theory is a useful lens that can help elucidate how rights, duties, and obligations are interpreted differently by VE teachers and VE students in shared storylines and what leads to the positioning clash or conflicts in classrooms (Harré & Slocum, 2003).

Building on positioning theory (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), Bamberg (1997; 2020) applied the notion of positioning to analyze stories at three levels:

Level 1: *How are characters positioned within the narrated events?*

This level focuses on identifying the characters and how they are positioned in relation to one another. It analyzes the relational positioning of characters in space and time.

Level 2: *How do narrators position themselves to the audience (e.g., the researcher)?*

Level 2 analyzes how narrators use language to make claims about themselves and respond to the questions of “Who am I?” or “How do I want to be understood?” (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a). Level 2’s analysis illuminates the interpretation of level 1 and “becomes the constitution of a sense of self at Level 3” (Bamberg, 2020, p. 252).

Level 3: *How do narrators position themselves with regards to dominant discourses?*

This level analyzes how narrators position themselves vis-à-vis dominant discourses, thereby conveying their identities. It relates positioning analysis to broader socio-institutional contexts.

These positioning analysis levels, as well as the positioning types proposed by Harré and Van Langenhove (1991; 1999) inform the positioning coding categories (Appendix A) and the focal participants’ story analysis, as I elaborated further in Chapter 4 Methodology.

Teacher identity construction and positioning

Positioning is regarded as the “basic mechanism” for identity acquisition (Deppermann, 2013, p. 4). By positioning, individuals commit themselves to or invest in certain identity-categories “practically, emotionally and epistemically” (ibid., p. 4). It involves people’s beliefs, interpretation, and allocation of the duties, rights, and obligations between themselves and others (Harré & Van Langenhove 1999; Huang & Wang, 2021; Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018; Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a). The accumulations of certain positions over time and across contexts ascribe or construct identities (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a). When there is a clash between teachers’ self-positioning and others’ positioning of them, identity negotiation occurs, which is primarily accomplished by discourses, actions, and emotions (Reeves, 2018^a; Varghese et al., 2005). Thus, there is a strong connection between positioning and teacher identities in that positioning intertwines teacher agency, emotions, discourses, others, and power, collectively shaping and constructing teacher identities (Bamberg, 2006; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Deppermann, 2015; Kayi-Aydar, 2018; 2019^a).

Positioning captures the action-oriented nature of identity construction, locating

identities in “what people observably do” (Deppermann, 2013; 2015, p. 370). If what teachers do provide evident cues for the role they claim or ascribe to others, they engage in positioning that expresses and constructs their teacher identities (Hazari et al., 2015). Positioning is contingent upon others and power. Whether and how teachers engage in positioning themselves or others depend on the positions available or ascribed to them within discourses (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a). In other words, living out particular story or teacher identity, teachers need being endorsed or adopting particular positions to act in certain ways (Davies, 2000; Tao & Gao, 2021; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Yet, being positioned by others or external discourses, teachers can still “resist, negotiate, modify or refuse” the positions (Bamberg, 2009; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p. 43). In doing so, teachers engage in repositioning themselves, others, and master narratives to seek, construct, or create new positions, perspectives, and relationships that resonate with their values, beliefs, morals, or aspirations as teachers. Positioning then becomes “a resource” teachers can utilize to negotiate new positions in constructing their teacher identities (Søreide, 2006; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, P. 22).

As stated in chapter 1, VE ELT is positioned as a marginalized and “less valued” teacher group in VE institutions, higher education hierarchy, and societies (Köpsén, 2014; Orr, 2019, p. 333; Trent & Liu, 2023^a; 2023^b). They thus undoubtedly need to navigate, negotiate, or ascribe more powerful positions for themselves if they wish to survive, develop, and thrive in the demanding and competitive professional environment. Positioning theory with “its strong focus on social justice and inequality”, is therefore particularly relevant as a theoretical lens and analytical tool to unpack the power dynamics and marginalization in VE ELTs’ teacher identity construction (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a, p. 79).

Positioning, teacher identities, and narratives

Teacher identities can be conceived as teachers’ narratives about their experiences (Arvaja, 2016; Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Positioning as a mechanism for individuals to acquire and construct identities is closely linked to narratives (Deppermann,

2013; 2015; Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a). Van Langenhove and Harré (1999) highlighted that “whenever there are storylines, there are positionings” (p. 30). Watson and Mcluckie (2020) similarly wrote that “all narratives of personal experience involve the positioning of self in relation to the other” (p. 380). Teachers attribute specific positions to the characters in their stories, to audiences, to themselves, and to broader discourses (Brockmeier, 2012, p. 449). In doing so, teachers agentively engage in positioning themselves vis-à-vis others, the audiences, and dominant discourses, constructing multifaceted teacher identities in storytelling (Bamberg, 2006). Further, the rights and duties imposed on or claiming by teachers in contexts emerge in their stories (Harré, 2015). What and how those rights, duties, and responsibilities are undertaken and fulfilled by teachers manifest and construct their teacher identities.

Teachers *authoring* their stories (Davies, 2000) are positioned as agents “responsible for the shape and texture of their own experiences” (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 13). Deppermann (2013) suggested that examining positioning in narratives is particularly appropriate and useful to capture the discursive and agentive aspects of identities. Hayes (2016) and Trent and Liu (2023^b) also contended that narratives possess the power to present and analyze the agentive aspects of teachers who counter negative positions imposed on them, meanwhile unveiling the external discourses and forces within which their teacher identities are formed. Therefore, this narrative study delves into VE ELTs’ teacher identities through the lens of positioning.

Conclusion

This research sought to investigate the VE ELTs’ identity construction in Chinese VE context via the lens of positioning (Bamberg, 1997; 2020; Deppermann, 2015; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999; Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a). Teacher identities are conceived as teachers’ “stories to live by”, dynamic, multifaceted, shaped by power relations between teachers and others, and constructed in and by teacher agency and emotions (Deppermann, 2015; Clandinin, 2019, p. 9; Kayi-Aydar, 2015^b; Reeves, 2009; 2018^a; Varghese et al., 2005; Zembylas, 2003).

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Introduction

The previous chapter delineated the positioning theory employed to analyze teacher identities for the current study. This chapter first sets forth the constructs of teacher agency and teacher emotions, which are closely related to teacher identity construction (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020; Buchanan, 2015; Lasky, 2005; Liu & Trent, 2023^a; Kaplan & Garner, 2017; Karimpour et al., 2023; Kayi-Aydar, 2019^b; Martel & Wang, 2015; Miller, 2009; Reeves, 2009, 2018^a; Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Trent, 2016; Varghese et al., 2005; Wolff & De Costa, 2017; Xu & Tao, 2023; Yang et al., 2021; Zembylas, 2003). Following this, prior studies on teacher identities that link to teacher agency, teacher emotions, and positioning are reviewed. The current state of VE teacher research is also reviewed. This chapter demonstrates how teacher identities, including VE ELT identities, have been explored, highlight the distinct themes in the related literature, and identify the gaps to fill.

Teacher identity, teacher agency, and teacher emotion

Agency and emotion have been widely acknowledged as central in shaping and constructing teacher identities (Karimpour et al., 2023; Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; 2015^b; Liu & Xu 2011; Reeves, 2009; Trent, 2016; Xu & Tao, 2023; Yang et al., 2021; Zembylas, 2003). Teachers invest and exercise their agency in different ways across settings and career stages to develop their teacher identities (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^b; Liu & Xu, 2011; 2013). The exertion and achievement of agency in power relations influence teachers' emotional experiences and *vice versa* (Zembylas, 2003).

Teacher agency is relational, fluid, and dependent upon power and context (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Lasky, 2005; Kayi-Aydar, 2019^d; Zembylas, 2003). Specifically, individuals cannot exercise agency freely, but making “agentic moves only when they are assigned the position to do so” (Tao & Gao, 2021, p. 10). Agency is thus conceived as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act purposefully and reflectively on [one’s] world” (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013, p. 63). Within teaching contexts, teacher agency can be viewed as the capacity to enact

classroom practices that align with teachers' own values, beliefs, and goals (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018). As noted by Kayi-Aydar (2019^d), teachers can enable agency by assigning particular positions to themselves and others (e.g., students) despite constraints. Furthermore, viewing agency as discursive practices, Davies (2000) explains agency by the notion of *authorship*, meaning that individuals can “counteract, modify, refuse, or go beyond the discourses available to him or her” in narratives (p. 60). As teacher identities are constructed in and by discourses (Reeves, 2018^a; Varghese et al., 2005), by interpreting and creating meanings in and by stories, teachers agentively construct their identities (Davies, 2000; Hayes, 2016).

Emotion is viewed as the glue and source in developing teacher identities (Yang et al., 2021; Zembylas, 2003). Stories “with strong emotional resonance for the tellers” can be seen as their identities (Holland et al., 1998, p. 3; Zembylas, 2003). Teaching is not only a technical or intellectual pursuit, but entails teacher emotion. Teacher identities and emotions are mutually interpreted and informed, as emotions provide the meanings to teachers' experiences, connecting their “thoughts, judgments, and beliefs”, and shaping their agency (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Kayi-Aydar, 2019^d; Tao & Gao, 2021; Yang et al., 2021; Zembylas, 2003, p. 222). Teacher emotions are constructed in social relationships and discourses (Benesch, 2018; Yang et al., 2021; Zembylas, 2005). Teachers' experiences of interacting with others engender a plethora of shifting emotions. The ways in which teachers express and perceive their emotions embed in and reflect their situated power relations (Abu-Lughod & Lutz, 1990; Benesch, 2018). Besides, the emotion-imbued experiences shape teachers' perceptions about who they are, how they relate to others and the world, and how they act. Noteworthy is that dismissing the dichotomy of negative emotions as suppressed and positive emotions as enhanced, poststructuralism views all emotions as “valuable agentive guides” and “sources of engagement” for teachers (Benesch, 2018, pp. 60-61).

Below I review prior research on teacher identities that link to teacher agency, positioning, and teacher emotions.

Studies on teacher identities

Teacher identity construction rely on agency (Reeves, 2018^a; Trent, 2012^a; Varghese et al., 2005). Literature demonstrates that teacher exercises agency in varying degrees, ways, and aspects when (re)constructing and negotiating teacher identities or dealing with the identity tensions or struggles in their situated contexts (Buchanan, 2015; Liu & Xu, 2011; 2013; Moore et al., 2002; Tsui, 2007; Trent, 2012^a; Vähäsantanen, 2015; Xu, 2014; Xu & Tao, 2023; Yang et al., 2021). For instance, in education reform contexts, teacher agency ranges from weak to strong and manifests in various forms (Moore et al., 2002; Vähäsantanen, 2015). Teachers may maintain or transform their identities (Lasky, 2005; Vähäsantanen, 2015), strengthen and affirm their identities (Moore et al., 2002), act in line with or resist the top-down discourses (Buchanan, 2015), or change their practices to align with the dominant discourses (Huang & Guo, 2021; Reeves, 2018^b). Xu and Tao's (2023) study revealed how university language teachers in China deployed agency in multifarious ways to tackle the identity tensions experienced in online teaching: maintained an identity, adopted a new identity, changed between identities, and/or redefined their identities. Teacher emotion, identity commitment, beliefs, ethics, previous experiences, imagination for the future, positioning of the external discourses and others are found to shape teacher agency and the direction of teacher identity construction (Buchanan, 2015; Hiver & Whitehead, 2018; Huang & Guo, 2021; Lasky, 2005; Moore et al., 2002; Reeves, 2018^b; Tao & Gao, 2017; Vähäsantanen, 2015; Xu & Tao, 2023). Apart from the wider contextual policies or shifts, micro-politics within the teaching setting also affect teacher agency and identity negotiation (Huang & Wang, 2021; Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; 2018; Nicolas et al., 2017; Yuan & Lee, 2016). Similarly, teachers took various actions in response to the constraints, affordance, or negative events in their situated micro- or meso- contexts (e.g., Hiver & Whitehead, 2018; Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; Trent, 2012^a). Overall, there are a variety of manifestation of teacher agency “in the push and pull of internal and external forces” in teacher identity negotiation and construction (Lasky, 2005; Reeves, 2018^a, p. 5). Teacher agency is inevitably enabled and conditioned in the co-institution of teacher identities and their surrounding contexts (Miller, 2010).

One way external forces affect teacher identities is by imposing or assigning specific positions to teachers (Kayi-Aydar, 2018; Reeves, 2018a; Tan et al., 2022). When ascribed or imposed peripheral, illegitimate, or powerless positions, teacher identities, agency, and emotions can be eroded (Kayi-Aydar, 2018; 2019b; Liu & Xu, 2011; 2013; Trent, 2012a; Yang et al., 2021; Yuan & Lee, 2016). Besides, the clash between teachers' self-positioning and other-positioning in dynamic power relations can cause identity tension and negotiation (Reeves, 2018^a). However, teacher agency can enable teachers to resist certain positionings and practices, which may lead to oppositional stances and distinct identities (Duff, 2012). For instance, Liu and Xu (2011; 2013) documented that ELTs in Chinese universities assuming the imposed position to engage in and lead curriculum reforms embraced the responsibilities to promote and implement student-centered teaching practices. Yet, the power asymmetry in the workplaces and their disheartening experiences compelled them to construct teacher identities that deviated from the assigned positions, a tortuous process entailing teachers' emotional turmoil and demanding agency. Studies also show that by agentively ascribing certain positions to oneself, such as a caring and empathetic facilitator, teachers can enable agency and construct positive identities despite contextual constraints (Huang & Guo, 2021; Kayi-Aydar, 2018; 2019^b).

Limited studies delving into teacher identities via positioning lens reveal a complex picture on how teachers' positioning shape their teacher identities and agency (Huang & Wang, 2021; Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; 2015^b; 2018; Leigh, 2019; Tan et al., 2022; Whitsed & Volet, 2013). Positioning as a mechanism for identity acquisition and construction is relational and needs agency (Deppermann, 2013). Reviewed studies show that how teachers position themselves is tightly linked with how they position their students (Barkhuizen, 2010; Huang & Wang, 2021; Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; 2015^b; 2018; Tan et al., 2022; Whitsed & Volet, 2013; Yoon, 2008), mentors (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; Huang & Wang, 2021), colleagues (Kayi-Aydar, 2018; Trent, 2012^b), and the broader socio-cultural or institutional discourses (Arvaja, 2016; Barkhuizen, 2010; Huang & Wang, 2021; Leigh, 2019; Whitsed & Volet, 2013).

Teacher agency in positioning reflects the existence and wrestle of power. Teachers can agentively ascribe certain position to themselves and make pedagogical decisions, but their agency can be confined by external discourses that marginalize or illegitimatize those self-positionings (Kayi-Aydar, 2018). Huang and Wang (2021) reported that the pre-service teachers transformed their teacher identities through the negotiation of different positions. During this process, the pre-service teachers demonstrated distinct positioning acts, such as accepting the forced positioning by powerful others such as their mentors, selectively expanding the imposed positions, or performing their negotiated positions. For in-service or novice teachers, studies reveal that teachers' pedagogical decision and practices reified and aligned with their self-positioning or were constrained by other-positioning. For example, examining three pre-service ELTs in the U.S., Kayi-Aydar's (2015^a) research reports that teachers' self- and other-positioning shaped their agency in teaching English to English language learners (ELLs). An ELT in the study positioning her ELLs as new members of the American society and herself as a bridge between the ELLs and the new culture, leading her to integrate culture into teaching; while two other ELTs positioned themselves merely as language guides and resources for ELLs since they positioned ELLs' barrier lied in linguistic aspects. The close link between teachers' positioning and their agentic classroom practices is reported in other studies (Kayi-Aydar, 2018; Reeves, 2009; Tran & Nguyen, 2015; Yuan & Lee, 2016; Yoon, 2008). Consistent with Kayi-Aydar's (2015^a) finding, these studies indicate that how teachers positioned themselves and their students significantly influenced the classroom practices and other agentic actions that they considered beneficial and desirable for their students. Hence, positioning, teacher agency, and identities are intertwined (Kayi-Aydar, 2019).

Besides, teachers construct teacher identities through opposing to some positions they ascribe to others, such as colleagues or mentors (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; Reeves, 2009; Søreide, 2006). Kayi-Aydar (2015^a) observed that in positioning students, pre-service ELTs also engaged in self-positioning by distancing themselves from their mentors, whom they ascribed rather negative positions. This implicit distancing enabled the pre-service ELTs to assign

more capable positions to themselves. This finding echoes Reeve's (2009) study, where the participant adopted a position in contrast to his colleagues as "overly maternal," thereby strengthening his own oppositional self-positioning as a "stern, tough-love teacher" (p. 38).

Positioning process is not straightforward and linear as teachers did narrate the coexistence, coping, and transience of conflicting positions in power dynamics, leading to teacher identity negotiation (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; Trent 2012^b). Further, local moral order including relevant policies and dominant socio-institutional discourses shape teachers' positioning and concrete actions (Tran & Nguyen, 2015; Whitsed & Volet, 2013). Meanwhile, teachers' inner moral comes into play when they encounter conflicts, new demands, and barriers in teaching and development (Barkhuizen, 2010; Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a).

Another element related to teacher identities, agency, and positioning is emotion (Huang & Guo, 2019; Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Kayi-Aydar, 2019^d; Nichols et al., 2017; Song, 2016; Wolff & De Costa, 2017; Yang et al., 2021). Teaching involves emotions that offer crucial insights into one's evolving identity commitments (Nicholas et al., 2017).

Acknowledging the construction of teacher identities is fundamentally emotional (Zembylas, 2003), teacher identities can be conceived as "an emotional understanding of self" and constructed through emotions (Yang et al., 2021, p. 1; Yuan & Lee, 2016). Studies illustrate that negative emotions threaten teacher identities (Huang & Guo, 2019), but they can also be the "transformative power" or "driving force", prompting teacher identity adjustment and development (Nicholas et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2021, p. 9). On the other hand, pleasant emotional experiences may confirm and sustain teacher identities (Nicholas et al., 2017).

Thus, teacher emotion shapes teacher agency and teacher identities, influencing their actions and decision in identity construction. Huang and Guo (2019) noted that in Chinese context, teacher emotion and teacher identities are primarily centered around the ethical and caring responsibilities of teachers. The assumption of these responsibilities, a form of self-positioning, entails teachers' emotional attachment or commitment to certain positions (e.g., a caring guide) and entered into their teacher identity negotiation and construction (Davies, 2000; Kayi-Aydar, 2021; Shahri, 2018; Tran & Nguyen, 2015). Tran and Nguyen's (2015)

study revealed that teachers' positioning is concomitant with emotions that reveal their commitment and attachment to particular identity (i.e., intercultural learners). From the perspective of students, Yoon (2008) found that ELLs experienced positive emotions when they positioned themselves as “powerful” students because their teacher positioned them as important members of the learning community (p. 507). These studies supports the assertion that positions and emotions are connected (Kayi-Aydar, 2021; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), but their interaction remains largely unclear due to the scant research into their connection, especially in relation to teacher identities (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a; 2021).

Building on the previous review, two research gaps can be identified. First, although there are various manifestations of teacher agency in different power relations and education contexts, how teachers, especially in-service VE teachers, enact their agency in positioning still lacks sufficient research (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a). Investigation of teacher identities via the lens of positioning can illuminate the link between teacher agency and positioning. Second, positioning, agency, and emotion are connected (Deppermann, 2013; 2015; Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; 2021; Huang & Wang, 2021), yet the interaction among them in teacher identity construction remains largely unclear. This narrative study aims to address these gaps by examining how one group of VE ELTs construct their teacher identity construction via the lens of positioning.

Studies on vocational education teachers

Only a limited number of studies investigate VE teacher, focusing primarily on identities of vocational teachers in upper-secondary schools or training institutes in western countries such as Denmark, Finland, and German (Barak & Shoshana, 2022; Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén, 2014; Li, 2017; Lippke, 2012; Sarastuen, 2019; Tran & Nguyen, 2015; Tyler & Dymock, 2021; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009; Vähäsantanen, 2015; Vähäsantanen & Hämäläinen, 2019; Viskovic & Robson, 2001). Studies on VE teachers in eastern countries and in vocational colleges are notably absent. Further, research on VE ELTs is scarce, reflecting their longstanding neglected status in VE and scholarly communities (Trent & Liu,

2023^a).

Despite the lack of studies on VE ELTs, the limited literature on VE vocational teachers provides useful background and insights into the prevailing discourses towards students, teachers, and teaching in VE contexts, which is pertinent to the identity construction of VE ELTs. One recurring theme of those studies is teachers' negative positioning of VE students as at-risk youth (Barak & Shoshana, 2022; Lippke, 2012), “‘bad seeds’ with minimal motivation” (Wang, 2021^b, p. 1016), and lacking diligence, abilities, engagement, or interest in learning and studies (Köpsén, 2014; Li, 2017; Smith & Yasukawab, 2017; Wang, 2021^b). Such positioning echoes the socially low positioning of VE students stereotyped as “failed labourers” (Wang, 2021^b, p. 1010), “educational failures”, “lazy students, morally suspect youth” (Woronov, 2016, p. 50), and “bad students” (Ling, 2015, p. 120). With such positioning, VE teachers were found to embrace the fostering discourses and professional practices, emphasizing the affective and relational aspects of their role as VE teachers and forming “caring-based” teacher identities (Barak & Shoshana, 2022, p. 1; Köpsén, 2014; Lippke, 2012; Smitha & Yasukawab, 2017). Fostering VE students' academic skills is not stressed in VE teachers' work (Barak & Shoshana, 2022).

In addition, another feature of VE lies in its tight link with industries. Hence, vocational identity developed in industries is considered “an asset and a necessary prerequisite” for the vocational teachers, greatly valued by VE institutions and teachers themselves (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén, 2014, p. 208; Tyler & Dymock, 2021; Viskovic & Robson, 2001). Participation and engagement in both VE teaching community and occupational community (e.g., engineering, construction, hospitality) that vocational teachers have access to help them maintain and develop credible and strong VE teacher identities (Köpsén, 2014; Viskovic & Robson, 2001). However, VE ELTs without vocational experiences are instead positioned as teachers “of a different type” from VE students (Köpsén, 2014, p. 201), and not having “the same relational conditions and responsibility” as vocational teachers (p. 207). In other words, ELTs are ascribed “marginalised and subordinated identities” within VE (Trent & Liu, 2023^b, p. 8). This potentially results in identity struggles and reconstruction on the part of VE ELTs,

which warrants in-depth research. However, VE ELT is still underrepresented in international literature, with only a few empirical studies exploring their teacher identity construction (Trent & Liu, 2023^a; 2023^b). Trent and Liu (2023^a) reported that an ELT in a Chinese vocational college confronting the disparaged VE teacher identities exercised her agency to reposition herself as an ‘useful’ VE ELT by repositioning her students from marginalised learners to being able to assume the desirable identities as “ambassadors of Chinese culture” (p. 13). In another study (Trent & Liu, 2023^b), they contextualized VE ELT identities within neoliberal discourses in higher education. Six ELTs in a VE polytechnic in northern China narrated experiences of “competition, surveillance, and compliance” in which their agency had been conditioned and eroded by performative policies, students, colleagues, and vocational subject teachers (p. 1). Their studies demonstrate the varying degrees of agency VE ELTs can afford and exert under different discourses and relations of power, reflecting the diverse contextual scenarios that fashion VE ELT identities. Given the remarkable dearth of exploration into VE ELTs, we undoubtedly need more in-depth studies to further understand the complexities of being and becoming VE ELTs. Particularly, there is a need to study their emotional experiences, which are pivotal in constructing teacher identities but missing in the existing studies on VE ELTs.

In light of the research and contextual gaps identified earlier, this study is guided by the following question:

How does one group of ELTs in a vocational college in China construct their teacher identities?

Chapter 4: Methodology

Introduction

This research endeavors to answer the research question that has shaped the methodology:

How does one group of ELTs in a vocational college in China construct their teacher identities?

Teacher identity is not fixed, but rather shifts with context and time (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). To obtain an in-depth understanding of how the participants' positionings change in constructing VE ELT identities, I conducted a longitudinal narrative study over one and a half years to delve into the process by which complex VE ELTs' identities evolves over time, including the changes in the participants' positionings, agency, and emotions. Narrative study works with the participants' stories of experiences, in the past or imagined in the future (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021; Creswell, 2013). The adoption of narrative approach lies in three main ways: teachers' stories reveal their experiences in complexity and richness, including their situated socio-cultural and institutional contexts as well as their inner world (Jill, 2002); the temporal feature of narrative study enables investigation of teacher identities developed in an ongoing manner through teachers' talking about their stories in the past, present, as well as those envision in the future (Barkhuizen et al., 2014); narratives can capture the agentive and emotional aspects of teacher identity construction, including how they position themselves, position others, or resist the imposed positions, as well as their emotions associated with the positionings (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999; Hayes, 2016; Kayi-Aydar, 2021; Søreide, 2006). On balance, narrative approach that highlights "the experiences of marginalized groups" fits to study the VE ELT identity construction through the positioning perspective (Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 3).

Three VE ELTs' stories in a Chinese vocational college are at the center of this study. My researcher positionality is explicitly described before introducing the research setting and the participants. Story collection and analysis methods are then described. Finally, research validity and ethical consideration are discussed.

Researcher positionality

Given the strong collaborative and co-constructed nature of narrative study, it is vital for narrative researcher to not only actively involved the participants in the research but also to maintain sensitivity, reflection, and transparency regarding their positionalities and stories (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021). This narrative study is informed by my “researcher-as-insider positionality” (Tran & Nguyen, 2015, p. 963). My position as an ELT in a Chinese vocational college, the chosen research setting, for fourteen years provides me access to the field and the sensitivity, relationships, and insights needed in data collection and analysis. I recognized that my epistemological assumptions and ethical commitments can be influenced by my positions both as a researcher and a frontline ELT as the participants. In writing and reflecting on my stories in the opening chapter, I sought to disclose the contexts in which my participants and I situated and built our relationships, and how my experiences shaped the theory framing and the methodological choices. As Barkhuizen and Consoli (2021) argued, “recognizing the researcher’s voice and its idiosyncratic impacts on the participants and their stories will add to the richness of insights and meanings about the phenomena under investigation” (p. 6). Acknowledging this advantage, I also expounded strategies to enhance research validity and ethical commitments in the last part of this chapter.

Setting and participants

This research is a single-case design with multiple participants, meaning data were collected from several teachers within the same institution. Gathering stories in a bounded and specific context generates nuanced and holistic accounts of the complex VE ELT identity construction process. Having multiple participants is to triangulate the data for corroborating evidence, enhancing the validity of findings (Creswell, 2013). Following convenience sampling strategy, I selected the research site and participants from which I can easily access and collect data (ibid.). The participants are employed in a state-fund vocational college in China that awards three-year college diplomas in different specialties, such as Mould Manufacturing, Culinary Nutrition, and Horticultural Design. In 2021, the college amalgamated a local vocational school under the policy of enhancing vocational education by group-based operation (MoE,

2015). One of the interviewed participants (Nancy) had nine-year teaching experience in that school before teaching in the college. English is a compulsory course for all the freshmen in this college, which are taught by ELTs in the General Course Teaching Department. I elicited stories from this cohort of VE ELTs. They are my colleagues with whom I established rapport, thereby enhancing the possibilities to co-construct stories with them closely and continually. As Dwyer and Emerald (2017) put, in narrative research seeking deep understanding of person in context, “a richer and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon is made possible where research relationships are trusting and lasting” (p. 7). Moreover, since I do not hold administrative positions in the college, no status differences exist between the participants and me. This relationship can let the teachers feel candid and comfortable while sharing their experiences and feelings with me.

Three ELTs’ stories were collected for this inquiry. I chose them as focal participants in that they provided rich information and reflection in the narrative frames (Barkhuizen, 2014) among the 19 VE ELTs filling the frames. Also, they were willing and available to participate in follow-up interviews after completing the narrative frames. Table 1 presents their profiles. The small number of participants resonates with the principle that “narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals” (Creswell, 2013, pp. 73-74). Therefore, sampling is concerned with gathering thick description of teachers’ experiences within a specific context rather than demographic size or variation (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). In addition, small number of cases, no more than 4 or 5, as recommended by Creswell (2013), “should provide ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases as well as conduct cross-case theme analysis” (p. 157).

Table 1 *Participants’ profiles*

Name	Age	Experience (Year)	Education background	Professional title	Taught subject
Tina	29	3	BA in French MA in Education	teaching assistant	General English
Nancy	36	12	BA and MA in English	lecturer	General English
Cara	47	17	BA and MA in English	senior lecturer	Specialized English

Data collection

The central defining feature of narrative research is that “the data are in the form of a story” (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p. 10). Data triangulation is achieved by collecting teachers’ stories from narrative frames (Barkhuizen, 2014), narrative interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008), online conversations (Liu & Li, 2023), and WeChat postings from July 2022 to March 2024 (See table 2).

Narrative frame is a written story template with sentence starters for teachers to reflect and produce a coherent story within the structure of the frame (Barkhuizen, 2014). To elicit relevant stories on VE ELT identities and identify participants for interviews, I designed the narrative frame (Appendix B), which, following approval from the Ethical Review Board at the Education University of Hong Kong, was sent to all the ELTs (20 teachers) in the college in June 2022. 11 sentence starter prompts were designed chronologically (“in the past,” “now,” and “in the future”) to elicit and reveal the participants’ changing experiences. There are seven identity-related themes in the narrative frames (i.e., motivation for becoming a VE ELT, expectation, problems, actions, aspects of doing well, emotions, and imagined excellent teacher-self) (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020). Filling out the frames, participants retrospected, reflected, and envisioned from their present views and self. Simultaneously, they positioned their past, current, and future teacher self, revealing the shifts in their identities and situated contexts (Kayi-Aydar, 2021). Fragments relating to agency and emotion were included (e.g., “This problem made me feel ...”; “I am trying to solve the problem by ...”) to prompt participants to narrate explicitly the actions and emotions associated with their experiences. An optional free-writing section was added at the end of the frame. The rationale for including a free-writing section was to elicit more stories “outside the confines of the frame itself” (Barkhuizen, 2014, p. 17). 19 teachers out of 20 have consented to fill in the frames and returned the completed ones to the researcher via email. Their age ranges from 27 to 56, with various years of VE teaching experiences and professional titles (i.e., six teaching assistants; nine lecturers; one senior lecturer; and three associate professors).

Teacher identity construction is both contextual and personal (Varghese et al., 2005). As a preliminary data collection instrument, narrative frames provided an introduction to the

participants' situated context and reveal the commonalities among their experiences in the chosen vocational college (Barkhuizen, 2014). They complemented and corroborated the individual interviews. Another purpose of the narrative frames was to guide the selection of interviewed participants and the formulation of interview questions. Specifically, I read the narrative frames' data carefully to purposefully sample three teachers who had provided rich experiences and thus can best inform and help to understand the complexity of VE ELT identity construction (Creswell, 2013). Further, I allowed for "maximum variation" regarding participants' ages, teaching years, and professional titles to represent the diverse perspectives, experiences, and career stages, increasing the confidence and trustworthiness in findings (Table 1) (Miles et al., 2014; *ibid.*, p. 156).

Narrative interviews "center on the stories the subjects tell" and "interviewer can ask directly for stories" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, pp. 153-154). I interviewed each participant twice and each interview lasted around 1.5 to 2.5 hours. The first interview followed up the stories the teachers had written in the narrative frame. Typical interview questions include "Could you tell me more about the stories about/period when ...?" The first interview led to more elaborating and revealing stories built on the narrative frames. The second interview was conducted around one and a half years later, focusing on the participants' changing positionings, emotions, and views associated with their new experiences. Specifically, Tina, a novice teacher, encountered tensions as she learnt to assume and navigate her new roles and responsibilities over the past year or so (Hebert & Worthy, 2001; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). Both Nancy and Cara experienced significant events during that period. Nancy transitioned from teaching at a vocational school to the vocational college, while Cara became a visiting scholar. These changes led them to reconstruct and renegotiate their teacher identities. All interviews were conducted in Chinese, the participants' native language. With the teachers' consent, all the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English.

Identity construction "emerges through constant interactional positioning with respect to others in daily life" (Arvaja, 2016, p. 394). To better capture stories from the participants in

an ongoing manner, during the research period, I gathered text stories via the WeChat, the most widely-used online messaging and chatting application in China (Liu & Li, 2023). I informed the participants to share experiences with me anytime by the WeChat when they feel an urge to do so. Meanwhile, I asked for stories regularly to track whether there had been important happenings recently in their professional lives. This data collection method enabled the participants' timely sharing of the events through convenient online conversation, leading to short stories (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008).

Further, with participants' permission, I collected screenshots of their WeChat postings relevant to their professional experiences and took writing notes from informal conversations in offices, staff canteen, or school bus. These auxiliary data (i.e., informal conversations and WeChat postings) collected from the same participants at different times help me gain deeper understanding of their VE ELT identities and flesh out the re-storying with more effectiveness and detail (Barkhuizen, 2010).

Table 2 *Overview of the data source, data collection time/period, and data type*

Participant	Data source	Data collection time/period	Data Type
Tina	Narrative frames	June 2022	written texts
	Narrative interviews	1 st Round: July 2022	audio (~1.5 hours)
		2 nd Round: January 2024	audio (~1.5 hours)
	Online conversations	July 2022 to March 2024	written texts (4 conversations)
Nancy	WeChat postings	July 2022 to March 2024	visual (5 screenshots)
	Narrative frames	June 2022	written text
	Narrative interviews	1 st Round: July 2022	audio (~1.5 hours)
		2 nd Round: March 2024	audio (~1.5 hours)
Cara	Online conversations	July 2022 to March 2024	written texts (4 conversations)
	WeChat postings	July 2022 to March 2024	visual (0 screenshots)
	Narrative frames	June 2022	written text
	Narrative interviews	1 st Round: July 2022	audio (~2 hours)
2 nd Round: January 2024		audio (~2.5 hours)	
	Online conversations	July 2022 to March 2024	written texts (7 conversations)
	WeChat postings	July 2022 to March 2024	visual (3 screenshots)

* Narrative frames were sent to all the ELTs (i.e., 20) in the college in June 2022.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis is “the most common method of narrative analysis” (Riessman, 2008, p. 53). It “involves the searching *across* a data set to find repeated patterns of meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). Nineteen participants' written narrative frames form the initial data

set. Clustering and counting were adopted for generating patterns from narrative frames data (Miles et al., 2014). I used clustering to inductively form categories from teachers' responses. Aligning with the focuses of the narrative frames, this data set were clustered at the levels of participants' motivation, expectation, problems, actions, emotions, aspects of doing well, and an imagined teacher self. I made a "clustered matrix" (ibid., p. 170) (Appendix C) to display the relevant responses and identify patterns of participants' experiences by counting. Findings from the narrative frames and the interviewed participants' in-depth case analysis complement each other to provide a fuller and richer picture of VE ELTs' experiences (Xu, 2014).

Each focal participant's narrative data was considered as a whole and coded thematically. I transcribed and translated the selected online conversations and WeChat sharing into textual forms, integrating into the big narrative data set of each participant (Liu & Li, 2023). The narrative frames of the interviewed participants were used as a portal to understand the contours of their VE ELT experiences and corroborate the stories shared in follow-up interviews or online conversations. WeChat sharing was used as auxiliary data, given that not all interviewed participants had WeChat postings.

Within each case, I used "a short story analytical approach" (Barkhuizen, 2016, p. 655) to analyze the selected short stories from the interviews or online conversations. Short stories are the "storied extracts from a larger data set analyzed for both content and context," indexing time and including teachers' reflective or evaluative comments on their experiences (Barkhuizen, 2016, p. 656). Regarding content, focuses are on the interconnected dimensions of narrative: who, where, and when, aligning with the dimensions of temporality, place, and sociality proposed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Turning to context, attention is on the three "scales of context" (or levels of stories) (Barkhuizen, 2016, p. 663) at which the content is produced and interpreted. They expand outward from the '*story*' level (e.g., classrooms) to the '*Story*' level (e.g., institutions) and then to the macro '*STORY*' level (e.g., societies/policies). This three-dimensional and three-scaled short story analysis matrix (Table 3) provides the "structure and rigor to the thematic analysis" of narrative data, preventing "a

cursory scanning of the story in search of (often vague) themes” (ibid., p. 661).

The short story analysis is informed by the positioning lens that underpins the theoretical framework of this inquiry (Deppermann, 2015; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999; Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Barkhuizen’s (2016) short story analysis approach reflects the fact that neither story nor positioning exists in a vacuum but is constructed in multilayered contexts and relationships over time (Jill, 2002; Van Langenhove & Harre, 1999). Applying the matrix (Table 3) to analyze the focal participants’ stories, their VE ELT identity construction by positioning can be unpacked in “a three-dimensional, multiscalar narrative space” (Barkhuizen, 2016, p. 664). In addition, short story analysis is compatible with positioning analysis. As Barkhuizen (2016) states, “by considering who the characters are and their relationship — how they relate to and position themselves vis-à-vis each other” in power relationships, teacher identities emerge in the short stories (p. 670). It resonates with Bamberg’s (1997; 2020) positioning analysis framework, which examines how narrators are positioned by and position others in narrated events, as well as how they position themselves relating to dominant discourses in broader contexts. Positioning coding categories (Appendix A) were derived from the works of Van Langenhove and Harré (1991; 1999), Bamberg (1997; 2000), and Søreide (2006), as delineated in Chapter 3. To examine similarities and differences across the three participants, “a cross-case analysis” was conducted (Creswell, 2013, p. 101) (in Chapter 9: Discussion and implication).

Table 3 *Short story analysis matrix (adapted from Barkhuizen, 2016)*

Content analysis
Aim: Work through the short stories, line by line, to identify all references to each of the dimensions.
Who: Characters in the stories, their relationships and their positions vis-à-vis each other
Where: The places and sequences of places in which the story action takes place
When: The time in which the action unfolds, past, present, and future
Context analysis
Aim: Take into account the meso and macro-level social structures, discourses, and ideologies.
story: Inner thoughts, emotions, and views in teachers’ psychological and interpersonal contexts
Story: Wider scale interactions with others in the work environment or communities
STORY: The broader sociocultural and ideological contexts where teachers unfold their stories

Taken together, there is a four-step data analysis procedure:

(1) Code for themes from 19 participants’ written narrative frames

- (2) Apply short story analysis approach to analyze each focal participant's data thematically
- (3) Compare and contrast stories and themes across three focal participants
- (4) Interpret the themes and stories of the participants.

Research validity and ethical consideration

Polkinghorne (2007) suggests two main validity threats in narrative research: the disjunction between participants' "actual experienced meaning" and their "storied description" (p. 480) and "connections between storied texts and the interpretations of those texts" (p. 471). It relates to narrative inquirers' ethical commitment to participants, which is central to narrative inquiries (Creswell, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Apart from disclosing my researcher-as-insider positionality and stories, I used the following strategies to enhance research validity, meliorate ethical implications, and avoid insider bias.

First, participant selection. Participants are my colleagues having the same institutional position (frontline VE ELT) and good rapport with me. This trusting relationship minimizes the resistance or hesitancy on the part of participants to reveal their stories and emotions fully (Polkinghorne, 2007). Before data collection, I informed participants of the purposes and use of their stories in this study and asked them to sign the consent form that protects their complete confidentiality and freedom to decline participation at any stage (Creswell, 2013) (Appendix D). Second, data collection. Before the interviews, the narrative frames had helped the focal participants generate storied snapshots of their experiences and triggered initial reflection, leading to deeper aspects and richer descriptions of their lived experiences in the follow-up interviews (Barkhuizen, 2014). Following Polkinghorne's advice (2007), while interviewed participants were allowed time to further recall, reflect on, and tell their stories, I, as the interviewer, assumed an "open listening stance" to ask open and probing questions (p. 482). Further, I collected stories from the teachers online via the WeChat over the research period (July 2022-March 2024). The participants got more in touch with the meanings of their experiences and brought to the fore their situation in flux as the storytelling continued. Third, data analysis. I employed "member checking" (Creswell, 2013, p. 252) to "ensure the

representations of participants' experiences are ones that are resonate with their participants" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 483). After the initial data analysis, I invited participants to comment on my tentative interpretation of their stories. Their responses were built into the data analysis and final discussion for a closer, deeper, and fuller display of their voices, meanings, and experiences. Data analysis occurred in a recursive and iterative manner as I had moved between the theories and collected narrative data for understanding the VE ELTs' identity construction. Ultimately, to enhance researcher-self-awareness and reflexivity, I have kept a research journal (Appendix E) from the outset of the research to document my thoughts, inspiration, and changing perspectives throughout the research endeavor.

Chapter 5: Findings from the Narrative Frames Data

Introduction

According to Barkhuizen (2014), the sentence prompts in narrative frames elicit responses that are already categorized under some themes. As listed below, there are seven pre-existing themes in the narrative frames used for the present research. Guided by the themes, narrative frames data were analyzed thematically to give an overview of the VE ELTs' experiences and working contexts. The findings are presented chronologically, demonstrating the progression of their VE ELT experiences and the changes in their environment. The findings are organized under three subheadings: "became a VE ELT," "becoming and being a VE ELT", and "imagined VE ELTs".

The frames cover seven main themes in the sentence prompts:

1. motivations for becoming a VE ELT;
2. expectations for being a VE ELT;
3. problems confronted;
4. actions taken to solve the problems;
5. aspects of doing well;
6. emotions;
7. imagined-self as an excellent VE ELT.

Became a VE ELT: motivation and expectation

Table 4 and Table 5 demonstrate the participants' motivation for becoming VE ELTs and their expectation for being VE ELTs. Motivation and expectation are interconnected in some way because the participants' motives were shaped by and shape their expectation of being a VE teacher (whether correct or not). For example, 12 teachers expected that teaching in VE was "undemanding work," the most frequent response when asked how they felt about VE teachers before joining this profession. With such an expectation, some participants chose to become a VE ELT because it is of "less stress" or "lower requirements" compared with working in K12 schools or universities.

Participants' motives fall into three categories: extrinsic reasons relate to their perception

of the profession, policies, or others (11 teachers); intrinsic reason concerns their interest in teaching or English (5 teachers); altruistic reason reveals their desire to help the imagined students (1 teacher). Two participants became VE ELTs by accident and had no expectations for the job.

Table 4 *Motivation for becoming a VE ELT*

Categories	Frequency (n=19)	Examples from the teachers' written text
extrinsic reasons		
less stress	5	T16: "VE teachers are less stressed than school teachers. There is no pressure from preparing students for tests for further studies ..." T17: "... I spent four years in a junior high school, and teaching in junior schools was hard work because of the pressure from high school entrance examinations."
lower requirements	2	T2: "I used to teach undergraduates in a university, but I found that I was not willing to pursue a PhD degree or do research ... the requirements for teaching in VE were relatively lower."
VE-related policies	2	T4: "... the state attached great importance to VE, and many policies are favorable to VE development" T18: "The national policy that turned colleges into vocational schools or colleges"
status of the teaching profession	1	T5: "I have been attracted to the teaching profession, feeling that this career is noble and respected."
influenced by others	1	T9: "My parents are teachers ... their love and dedication to education have deeply affected me."
intrinsic reasons		
interest in teaching (English)	5	T8: "I graduated from a Normal university, so teaching is a suitable job for me. I am very interested in English." T7: "I am willing to engage in student-related work, transmitting wisdom, imparting knowledge, and resolving students' doubts." T14: "English has been my favorite subject ... I want to make more people love English language through my work..."
altruistic reasons		
desire to help students	1	T3: "I want to let VE students master practical workplace English by using my experience in companies."

Table 5 *Expectation for being a VE ELT*

Categories	Frequency (n=19)	Examples from the teachers' written text
undemanding work	12	T13: "It is easy. After all, there is no pressure from preparing students for tests for further studies, no need to face parents, and no strict research requirements." T16: "It is easy. The main task is teaching ... I will have more free time."
difficult-to teach students	2	T5: "VE teachers may face students with low English proficiency and low cooperation ..."
low work	1	T18: "... a bit low, low social recognition."
honorable work	1	T9: "VE teachers were honorable."
fulfilling work	1	T11: "VE teachers can have a sense of gain and identification."

Motivated by diverse reasons, the participants' expectations imply their positioning of VE teachers and VE students (e.g., Teacher 10: "I felt VE teachers were relaxed"; Teacher 18: "I felt VE teachers were a bit low"; Teacher 5: "VE teachers may face students with low English proficiency and low cooperation"). These expectations might be influenced by the stereotypical societal discourses about VE that is inferior to its academic counterparts and "positioned at the bottom of the education hierarchy" with "leftover" students with low academic grades" (Wang, 2021^a, p. 1). Participants thus conjectured that teaching in VE was easy, less stressful, and required lower qualifications, though VE students may be difficult to teach. However, two teachers (Teacher 9 and Teacher 11) had high expectation for VE ELTs. Witnessing her father's dedication and love for teaching, teacher 9 expected that teaching in VE was also "honorable". Teacher 11 had enduring love for teaching, anticipating fulfillment through teaching.

The narrative frames data demonstrate that their expectations were further reinforced or completely violated when enacting their roles in VE classroom and institution. Their VE ELT identity construction turned out to be an uneasy journey full of struggles, adjustment, learning, and emotional ups and downs, not as "undemanding" as expected.

**Becoming and being a VE ELT:
struggling, adjusting, learning, and emotionally complex**

Problems confronted

Table 6 presents the VE ELTs' problems in four categories: student-related, teaching-related, teacher-related, and institution-related. At the early stage, aligning with certain participants' expectation, ELTs in VE struggled with students with low English proficiency, diverse levels, low participation, low interest, and poor discipline. The participants identified students' *low English proficiency* as the primary issue they encountered soon after commencing teaching. VE students were essentially positioned as weak in English from the outset. The problems the participants faced changed and became more complex with increased teaching years against national VE reforms and the institution's performative reform. Expansive reforms in VE and curriculum reforms, coupled with institution's discourses on performativity (Ball, 2003), have permeated and influenced participants' professional life, causing new struggles.

At the sociopolitical level, the initiative of one-million enrollment expansion in higher VE (MoE et al., 2019) has aggravated the heterogeneity of VE students' English levels and backgrounds. Teacher 9 wrote: "more and more students of diverse backgrounds are enrolled, and their English levels vary considerably ... some are equivalent to primary school students". Furthermore, multiple national curriculum reform guidelines assign new positions to VE teachers of all disciplines, such as fulfilling the duty to integrate moral and value education in teaching (MoE., 2014). Problems of how to innovate and adjust teaching to align with reform trends and accommodate VE students' varied needs and levels thus foregrounded.

Institutionally, teacher-related and institution-related problems are tightly connected to the increasingly rigid performance appraisal on the VE teachers. Institutional discourses of performativity embedded in the substantial VE reforms impose multiple positions on the VE ELTs who are expected to be both versatile and dedicated. Teacher 5 identified the problems confronted, writing "not only teaching, but we also have other assigned administrative tasks, and the pressure from annual teacher performance appraisal, such as partaking in teaching competitions, instructing students for contests, and doing research ...". Tension arises when individual's perceived competence failed the imposed positions. The problems confronted by the participants manifest the increasingly demanding socio-institutional environment VE

ELTs found themselves in, the contexts against which their teacher identities are constructed.

Table 6 *Problems confronted*

Categories	Frequency (n=19)	Examples from the teachers' written text
student-related		
low English proficiency	13	T9: "Students had low English proficiency, and all English instruction was unacceptable to them..." T13: "Students' English proficiency was much lower than I had expected ... they seemed completely unable to keep up with my pace."
low class participation	4	T6: "I prepared my lesson carefully, but I found that students' participation in classes was low..."
mixed levels	3	T5: "... large classes with students of diverse levels ..."
low interest in learning	1	T4: "Students' thirst for knowledge wasn't as strong as that of undergraduates."
poor discipline	1	T1: "Students had the habit of being late for classes."
students' matters	1	T10: "I spent more time dealing with students' matters than solving the teaching problems."
past		
teaching-related		
teaching methods	3	T3: "It was difficult to find way to stimulate students..."
teaching content	2	T7: "English seemed useless to VE students." T8: "The English knowledge I learnt in university was not suitable for VE students."
teacher-related		
lack of competence and knowledge	2	T16: "My qualification wasn't up to the requirements of the position, and my education background was lower than other teachers in the department."
<hr/>		
teaching-related		
teaching methods	8	T1: "How to enhance students' interest in class ..." T3: "How to integrate moral and value elements into teaching, a hot topic nowadays ..." T4: "My teaching approaches need innovated" T14: "How to improve students oral English."
teaching goals	1	T17: "Teaching for exam isn't useful for students who are not willing to further their studies..."
student-related		
heterogeneity	2	T9: "more and more students of diverse backgrounds are enrolled, and their English levels vary considerably ..."
low engagement	1	T12: "... only a handful of students engage in learning"
now		
teacher-related		
lack of competence	3	T8: "(I) don't know enough about industries, especially the English that students will use in the industries." T13: "I lack research abilities, for example, I haven't been the principal investigator of any research project."

other personal constraints	2	T11: “constrained by energy and time” T15: “too many family chores”
institution-related	2	T2: “rigid institutional regulations have restricted teachers’ creativity”

Actions taken to solve the problems

The narrative frames elicited participants’ various actions taken to solve the problems (See Table 7). Eleven participants (58%) reported that they had adjusted teaching to cater for VE students’ low English proficiency by reducing the difficulty level of the taught content and increasing encouragement to support students. This adjustment in teacher practices implies teachers’ repositioning of the VE students. Teacher 2 wrote, “I began to regard the students as beginners, teaching them patiently and giving more encouragement to them ...” This finding resonates with the studies that highlight teachers’ (re)positioning of their students profoundly shaped their teaching approaches and teacher identities (Arvaja, 2016; Barak & Shoshana, 2022; Tran & Nguyen, 2015).

Participants’ adjustment in teaching, positioning of the VE students, or priorities resulted from their contextual teacher learning that “distributed across persons, tools, and activities” (Johnson, 2006, p. 243) and depended on their social interactions and relationships in specific contexts. Teacher learning links to identities because it changes teacher “emotion, motivation, belief, and agency”, allowing them to reposition themselves and construct new Teacher identities (e.g., a more capable VE ELT) (Jiang & Zhang, 2017, p. 272). The participants were engaged in “self-directed, collaborative, inquiry-based learning” (Johnson, 2006, p. 243) relevant to the problems they met in classrooms and professional lives. For example, some participants did research and upgraded their knowledge to solve the problems and meet the needs in teaching English in VE (e.g., Teacher 6: “I keep participating in training to learn interesting teaching methods to arose students’ interest”; Teacher 8: “I practiced in industries and investigated the English needs of students and industries.”). Moreover, others, including colleagues and VE students, play a crucial role in the participants’ problem-solving.

Specifically, communicating with their colleagues and students about the problems, observing lessons, collaborating with colleagues in research projects, compiling textbooks, or teaching

competitions scaffolded the VE ELTs to overcome the problems. This finding reveals that the participants positioned their colleagues and students in the local context as supportive, valuable, and trusted resources, which enabled their agency (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^d). These agentic actions in turn resulted in their enhanced competence, a process of repositioning themselves as more capable VE ELTs.

Table 7 *Actions taken to solve the problems*

Categories	Frequency (n=19)	Examples from the teachers' written text
adjust teaching	11	T6: "I reduced the difficulty level to cater for students' abilities ..." T9: "I tried to solve this problem by explaining the (content) both in English and Chinese ..." T12: "I am trying to solve this problem by adding various kinds of teaching-assisted technology ..."
priorities	4	T5: "I improve my work efficiency... screen the important work every year and give priority to teaching ..." T10: "... made a schedule and prioritized them ... urgent and non-urgent ..."
repositioning VE students	2	T2: "I regarded students as beginners ..." T3: "I lowered my expectation (of VE students) ..."
communicate with colleagues and students	5	T1: "I solved this problem by communicating with my colleagues ..." T5: "I asked for advice from the colleagues ..." T14: "I communicated with students, then reflected on my teaching ..."
cooperate with colleagues	3	T4: "I compiled textbooks on occupational English with my colleagues ..." T7: "I formed a teaching team with excellent colleagues, learning from each other ..."
observe colleagues' lessons	2	T3: "I kept observing experienced teachers' lessons and learning different teaching methods to improve my classes ..."
upgrade knowledge		
attend training or seminars	4	T6: "I keep participating in training to learn interesting teaching methods..." T7: "I participated in ELT seminars..."
self-learning	3	T15: "I learnt some interdisciplinary knowledge ..."
advance qualification	1	T16: "I did a Master degree in TESOL..."
do relevant research	5	T7: "I investigated the English needs of VE graduates ..." T8: "I practice in industries and investigate the English needs of VE students and industries ..." T13: "I sent questionnaires to my students ..."

Aspects of doing well

Table 8 shows the aspects where the teachers currently demonstrate competence, correlating with the actions they have taken to solve the problems (Lasky, 2005). Their agency exerted in resolving the problems enhances their ELT identities with greater awareness, competence, and self-efficacy. The participants narrated that they do well in bringing positive changes in students' language abilities, behavior, or attitude (8 teachers), treating their VE students well (4 teachers), or catering for students' needs in English teaching (3 teachers). Their awareness of the problems, followed by agentic actions to address them, resulted in more confident practices and Teacher identities. For instance, Teacher 4 faced the problem of students' lacking thirst for English learning. After cooperating with her colleagues in designing English textbooks that tailored to the VE students' specialty, she gained confidence and faith in her teaching. As she wrote, "my teaching aligns with the needs and development of VE." Keeping learning and dedicating to teaching — what some participants had been practising — are what they currently value and sustain.

Table 8 *Aspects of doing well*

Categories	Frequency (n=19)	Examples from the teachers' written text
bring positive changes in students	8	T7: "I enhance their sense of identity ... make them able to tell Chinese stories well in English and spread the Chinese culture..." T8: "I arouse students' learning interest ..." T14: "I improve students' competence in using the English language ..."
treat students well	4	
equal	2	T10: "I treat students equally, no matter how poor their learning ability is ..."
appreciating	1	T2: "I am able to appreciate VE students and find their strengths"
caring	1	T9: "I care about students, treating them like my own children."
cater for students	3	T4: "I adjust teaching methods and content, catering for students of different English levels ..." T6: "I adjust the teaching content and difficulty level accommodating to students' learning situation." T12: "I design the curriculum in accordance with students' situation."
keep learning	3	T5: "I keep pursuing progress in my professional abilities and learning..." T18: "I keep following changes in the society, industries ..."

dedicate to teaching	3	<p>T19: “I keep renewing my knowledge to improve my teaching strategies.”</p> <p>T11: “My love for students and teaching has not decreased with the passage of time...”</p> <p>T13: “I treat every class seriously, and strive to innovate my teaching and pursue excellence...”</p> <p>T15: “I am relatively dedicated to teaching.”</p>
-----------------------------	---	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Emotions

Table 9 demonstrates the participants’ complex emotions in their professional lives, including positive, negative, and blended emotions. Such categorization is for presenting the findings in a structured manner. Poststructural emotions are not neatly dividable, but recognizing the potentials in all emotions in activating individuals’ agency (Benesch, 2018).

Negative emotions, in particular ‘frustration’ expressed by the words such as “upset,” “distressed,” “sense of loss,” “helpless,” and “frustrated,” were evoked when the participants encountered problems. Three teachers experienced blended negative emotions (i.e., “anger and guilt,” “frustration, antipathy, and no pride,” “misery and no pride”) when confronting the student-related problems. Teacher 2 had mixed emotions (i.e., “ease and frustration”), enjoying reduced pressure of lesson preparation in VE and feeling frustrated by VE students’ poor learning attitude.

Positive emotions (i.e., faith, joy, pride, and serenity) were elicited resulting from the participants’ strenuous efforts to learn, adjust, and practise within the VE context until they made progress and did well in certain aspects. Eight teachers expressed ‘faith’, a deep feeling of trust in the value of their teaching and the potential and goodness in VE students. Teacher 8 experienced “pride and joy” when doing well in his teaching life.

Narrative frames data highlight the complexity of participants’ emotions that are part of their teacher identities. Positive emotions sustain or bolster particular VE ELT identities and actions eliciting positive emotions (Shahri, 2018). Besides, echoing growing studies’ findings (Huang & Guo, 2019; Yang et al., 2021), the narrative frames data confirm that teachers took actions to tackle the problems despite negative emotions, repositioning themselves as more competent VE ELTs over time. As such, in-depth case analysis is needed to further unpack

the relationships among VE ELTs' identity construction, emotions, agency, and positioning in the VE context.

Table 9 *Emotions*

Categories	Frequency (n=19)	Examples from the teachers' written text
		negative emotions
frustration	11	<p>T1: "This problem (students' late for classes) made me feel upset because it disturbed the pace of classes."</p> <p>T5: "I felt a sense of loss and at a loss, especially when I found the students were left behind, lazy or unmotivated as I couldn't push them well, making me even more frustrated"</p> <p>T9: "Students' mixed levels made me feel frustrated."</p> <p>T10: "Students' trivial affairs took up most of the time, and I felt exhausted and frustrated."</p> <p>T13: "This (students' low English) level made me feel frustrated and at a loss... I had a sense of loss..."</p> <p>T16: "This problem (low qualification) made me feel distressed..."</p>
confronting problems		<p>T7: "anxious about my future development ..."</p> <p>T8: "This problem made me feel that I lacked relevant professional knowledge about VE and had no insight into the learning situation of VE students"</p>
anxiety	4	
		positive emotions
faith	8	<p>T4: "This (catering for VE students) makes me feel that my teaching philosophy aligns with the development and needs of VE ..."</p> <p>T5: "This (bringing positive changes in VE students) makes me feel that it is worthwhile to spend time preparing lessons ..."</p> <p>T6: "(catering for VE students) makes me feel as long as I keep every student in mind, every student can make progress ..."</p> <p>T10: "They are excellent children ... they just lack love and affirmation ..."</p> <p>T11: "This (dedicating to teaching) makes me feel I don't idle the time away..."</p> <p>T14: "This (bringing positive changes in VE students) makes me feel that I don't waste my students' time..."</p>
doing well		
joy	6	<p>T1: "Treating students equally makes me feel happy."</p> <p>T2: "I enjoyed my work as I can appreciate and find the goodness in VE students..."</p> <p>T13: "Dedicating to teaching is motivating"</p>

			because I enhance my teaching innovation abilities ...”
	pride	3	T9: “Caring about students... makes me feel a sense of achievement.” T16: “This (bringing positive changes in students) makes me feel a sense of fulfilment” T19: “This (keeping learning) makes me feel a sense of pride as a VE teacher...”
	serenity	1	T12: “This (catering for students) makes me feel serenity and relatively confident in giving classes”
			blended emotions
	ease and frustration	1	T2: “... I didn’t need to prepare a lot for classes due to students’ low English proficiency, which made me feel relaxed; meanwhile, their poor learning attitude made me very frustrated and doubted whether my decision (to be a VE ELT) was a mistake”
confronting problems	anger and guilt	1	T3: “I lose temper and got angry when the students didn’t perform and behave well in classes. But I lacked teaching experience ... punishment made students ‘lose face”
	frustration, antipathy, and no pride	1	T12: “Students’ mixed levels and low English proficiency made me feel very frustrated and antipathetic towards giving classes to them because I couldn’t get senses of fulfilment.”
	miserable and no pride	1	T18: “I felt miserable and had less and less sense of fulfilment from teaching”
doing well	pride and joy	1	T8: “This (bringing positive changes in VE students) makes me feel a sense of fulfilment and happiness ...”

Imagined VE ELTs:

of value to students, enhanced competence, and external recognition

Imagined excellent VE ELTs direct the teachers’ actions to certain facets of their professional lives which “nourished and energized those visions’ (Kubanyiova, 2016, p. 102). Their responses are strikingly similar when describing the future image of excellent VE ELTs: 15 participants (79%) will consider themselves excellent VE ELTs when they can help, guide, influence, or change students in a positive way. This imagined excellent teacher-self directs, informs, and is shaped by their actions and emotions over time. Their endeavors to grapple with the student- and teaching-related problems, which were consequential to the growth of both VE students and themselves, agree with their imagined excellent teacher-self who is of value to students. Their agentic actions elicited positive emotions that in turn sustain agency.

Besides, their imagined excellent teacher-self with enhanced competence in teaching and research closely relates to the institutional discourses that assign or impose certain positions to them, as Teacher 5 wrote, “the college policy has rigid criteria for faculty performance in terms of teaching and research.” The external discourses shaped participants’ understanding and positioning of “successful VE ELTs”—teachers who excel in both teaching and research, directing their actions. Participants purposefully engaged in activities beneficial to actualize this imagined excellent teacher identity, such as “attended seminars” (Teacher 5), “learned to do research from colleagues” (Teacher 16), and “cooperated with colleagues in research projects” (Teacher 13). Ultimately, gaining recognition from students and authorities forms a part of three teachers’ imagined excellent VE ELTs, implying that others’ positive positioning exerts influence on their teacher identity construction. As evident from the data, participants’ imagined excellent VE ELT is subject to the institutional and others’ discourses. However, their morals (i.e., “of value to students”) intertwined with and developed from the dominant sociocultural and sociopolitical discourses of teachers (i.e., having the duty of educating and nurturing people) remarkably shape their positioning of excellent teachers.

Table 10 *Imagined-self as an excellent VE ELT*

Categories	Frequency (n=19)	Examples from the teachers’ written text
of value to students	15	<p>T3: “When my students further their study in universities by using the learning methods I teach; pass English interviews; pass English tests...”</p> <p>T4: “When I can solve students’ puzzles and help them achieve in college”</p> <p>T7: “When I can exert positive influence on students”</p> <p>T8: “When students can apply the learnt...”</p> <p>T9: “When students can learn and master knowledge in my class happily and easily, develop their welfare...”</p> <p>T10: “When I see my students get along well in their jobs and know the English when they need to use...”</p> <p>T11: “When I see positive changes in students’ interest, attitude, and behavior in learning English”</p> <p>T19: “When I instruct my students to win the first prizes in vocational skill competition ... and help them pass the university entrance exams...”</p>
enhanced competence	6	<p>T5: “When I don’t feel headache about teaching, preparing lessons and competitions, writing papers and other tasks...”</p> <p>T13: “When I can teach students of mixed levels with</p>

		ease, truly cater for their abilities, and make great progress in teaching and research ...”
		T14: “When I can make great progress in teaching and research...”
		T16: “When I can do a good job in teaching and research”
		T17: “When I have systematic ways to improve myself”
external recognition	3	T9: “When students love my lessons...”
		T13: “When I can get prizes in teaching competitions...”
		T19: “When I get good results in teaching competitions...”

Narrative frames analysis so far has generated an introductory yet revealing picture of VE ELTs’ teaching and working environment. Yet, three participants are unable to extrapolate their VE ELT identity. Teacher 2 felt “caught in the whirlpool of teacher performance review” while struggling with identifying the uniqueness and value of VE ELTs. Teacher 12 is still in a quandary— “aspires to be loved by VE students but has difficulties in accepting their poor learning state and building connection with them”. Teacher 18 has severe burnout due to the lack of senses of fulfillment from teaching VE students.

Other stories: emotion-charged stories between teachers and students

Five participants shared additional stories in the free-writing section. A salient theme in those stories is VE students’ positive transformation that elicited strong teacher emotions. Four VE ELTs reminisced about the experiences where they witnessed students’ growth resulting from their teaching and daily interaction with the students.

Teacher 9 provided emotional and humane support for a poor and rebellious VE student from a dysfunctional family who often skipped class. Positioned by the student as a “trusted confidant”, Teacher 9 was able to talk to and learn more about the “troubled” girl. In other words, Teacher 9’s agency was enabled because of the ascribed position (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a). Teacher 9 positioned the student as “starving for love”, showing her empathy for the student’s challenging situation. Hence, she offered motherly care and guidance for her, “as if she were my child, fearing that she may go astray”. Teacher 9’s self-positioning as a caring and loving teacher is evident in her actions committing to such position. Her caring teacher identity was strengthened by repositioning the student from “a rebellious outsider” to “a normal student” in class. Teacher 9 felt “immensely gratified and joyful,” fostering her emotional attachment

to the discourses of love and care in education and consistent positions. A study conducted by Barak and Shoshana (2022) on VE teachers in Israel corroborates Teacher 9's story. Their research highlights the significance of the caring discourse in VE teachers' identities, as they "strive to assume the role of a parent or older sibling to compensate the students for what they perceive as family deprivation" (p. 5).

Teacher 10 and teacher 13 recalled their first-year teaching, during which they adopted effective strategies such as individual tutoring and designing mini-projects to help their VE student(s) with low English proficiency build confidence and competence in English learning. Seeing students' "evident progress" filled them with pride (Teacher 10) and an overwhelming feeling of gratification and emotional connection (Teacher 13). Teacher 14 told a story of how her teaching on protecting environment had positively influenced student behaviors: a student ran back to the classroom to collect the left garbage from his drawer after class, making her filled with "gratification and joy."

Teacher 12 chosen for the follow-up interviews, nevertheless, wrote a story of the rough patch she had gone through as a VE ELT. Her stories were presented and analyzed in-depth in Chapter 7.

In a word, the findings from the participants' stories shared in the free-writing sections echo the limited literature on VE teachers, which indicates that student is a crucial dimension in VE ELT identity construction (Barak & Shoshana, 2022; Köpsén, 2014). Notably, students' development and progress associated with teacher agency led to fulfilled VE ELT identities. Yet, difficult-to-teach students potentially languish the VE ELTs, especially when "students' English level keeps declining" under the enrollment expansion initiative in VE (Teacher 18). Therefore, the interaction between VE students and VE ELTs maintains an important role in the construction of the participants' teacher identities.

Conclusion

Narrative frames data reveal that participants' VE ELT identities are constructed in relation to others and constantly *becoming* in the shifting VE and institutional contexts. The participants exerted agency to tackle the problems and challenges arising from teaching and professional

development, enabling them to reposition themselves as more competent VE ELTs doing well in certain aspects. Further, most participants invested in their aspiring and imagined excellent teacher-self that is shaped by personal morals and the endorsed or imposed positions within the social and institutional discourses.

Positioning that shapes participants' Teacher identities is evident in participants' narrative frames data. Their first-order positioning of VE teachers as "undemanding" has been modified or refused by themselves after becoming a VE ELT, which was a journey filled with struggles, learning, adjustment, and emotional ups and downs. These elements interplay and intertwine with their positioning of themselves, VE students, colleagues, and institutional discourses, shaping who they are as VE ELTs (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a). Teacher agency was enabled and observed within the participants' immediate context, such as adjusting their teaching to cater for VE students in classroom and cooperating with their colleagues in research projects. Dominant discourses in institutions shaped participants' actions and imagination, becoming part of their identity work and narratives. In addition, the emotions expressed and experienced by teachers enable them to position themselves, others, and the master narratives in certain ways, manifesting their VE ELT identities (Kayi-Aydar, 2021^a) (e.g., Teacher 9's story discussed above).

To capture the complexity of VE ELT identity construction through positioning, in the ensuing three chapters (Chapters 6, 7, and 8), I used each focal participant's narrative frame data as a portal to gain the contours of their VE ELT experiences and corroborate the stories they narrated in the interviews and online conversations. Three "reifying, endorsable and significant" short stories were extracted from each participant's narrative data set, which was an iterative process (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 16). I selected those short stories because they exemplify salient positioning, which notably contributes to the participants' VE ELT identity construction across different spatial-temporal scenarios, trace the changes in how they saw and developed themselves as VE ELTs, and embody their agency and emotions.

Addressing the research question, I analyzed each extracted story's "three-dimensional, multiscalar narrative space" (Barkhuizen, 2016, p. 664) before examining how the

participants engaged in positioning in the constructed narrative spaces. Also, the interaction among their agency, emotion, and positioning was delved into and discussed. All the analysis was grounded in the extracted short stories but enriched and deepened by integrating relevant narrative texts/stories pertaining to the prominent themes of each story (e.g., anxiety, classroom conflicts, vulnerability, empathy, morals, connection, performativity) across their narrative data set (Table 2), including the participants' useful comments collected in member checking (Barkhuizen, 2016). The integration and triangulation of the narrative texts from multiple sources enable a thicker description and deeper understanding of the participants' "accumulations of positions across the data" (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a, p. 107) and their VE ELT identity construction process.

Chapter 6: Tina: A Novice VE ELT's Stories of Empathy, Devotion, and Anxiety

Tina's experiences as a VE ELT in the narrative frame

Tina felt frustrated soon after becoming a VE ELT because students' English proficiency was much lower than she expected. She felt the need and challenge to understand VE students' cognition and learning habits and has made considerable effort to accommodate them. With enhanced teaching competence, Tina still easily gets anxious by the lax or unfriendly attitudes of some students or classes. Expanding much time on lesson preparation, Tina feels restrained for not having extra time to develop other key capacities, such as research. Tina imagines and aspires to be recognized by her students' progress and winning teaching awards. According to Tina, "lacking resilience and stress management skills", her reflexive position pertaining to personal attributes (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) is the major hindrance to becoming an excellent VE ELT. She wrote that she often experiences anxiety when a lesson does not achieve the desired outcome.

Tina shared a memorable story in the free-writing section in the frames:

"In the first semester of the 2021-2022 academic year, I took on the role as an English teacher teaching General English to the students from Software Engineering Department. Initially, they were not responsive, and they couldn't answer the questions I asked. Then, I realized they couldn't even comprehend the simplest sentences, and they seemed clueless when asked. This came as a significant shock to me. Later, I tried to slow down the pace and simplified the content to the level they could understand. I implemented many strategies, such as checking students' reflection, conducting questionnaire surveys, organizing interactive activities, requiring independent mind-map drawing, and mini-projects. Fortunately, the students were cooperative and well-behaved. With our joint efforts, they made significant progress. When I taught them again this semester, I found it less challenging. They improved vocabulary retention, grammar understanding, and reading comprehension skills. Sometimes, they performed better than the higher-level classes, which brought me great joy. Carrying this sense of inspiration and hope, I wish that the new classes I teach could make progress under my guidance. Although the difficulty and pressure are substantial, and I occasionally feel

discouraged, I believe that making the effort will prevent any regrets. May I have no regrets in my heart.”

Tina recalled her teaching experiences in the very first term when taking up the position as a VE ELT. Tina’s initial shock at the students’ low English proficiency indicated a misalignment between her expectations and VE students’ English levels. Confronting this shock, Tina took up and enacted the position as a responsive and adaptable teacher by actively adjusting and exploring the teaching methods catering to her students. Describing the students as “cooperative” and making “joint efforts” to achieve the progress, Tina positioned her students as partners in the teaching and learning journey. The “great joy” elicited by her students’ progress kindled her passion and hope to teach a new batch of students in the future. Her practices, aspiration, and identities as a committed teacher striving for students’ progress are reinforced and developed. The statements —“making the effort will prevent any regrets” and “May I have no regrets in my heart”—are “anticipatory expressions of demands for action” by Tina herself (Harré & Slocum, 2003, p. 105). This signals her future agency to fulfill the duty of guiding and scaffolding VE students to make progress in English learning.

The three short stories extracted from Tina’s interviews traced her VE ELT identity construction through positioning in different spatial-temporal contexts. Specifically, Tina’s stories demonstrate her agency in adopting and enacting the positions as an empathetic and devoted VE ELT, while grappling with feelings of anxiety. The intricate interaction between her agency and emotion is evident across the short stories, wherein Tina was both positioned by others (e.g., former school teacher, students, and family) and actively (re)positioned others and herself.

Findings from Tina’s short stories

Short Story 1: ‘You’ve got lots of pimples’

- (1) During my junior year in high school, our homeroom teacher (班主任)
- (2) perhaps because it was her first time to be a homeroom teacher
- (3) she was under immense pressure
- (4) and since our class was a key class in the school, her anxiety seemed heightened

- (5) at that time, she had high expectations for me
 (6) and believed I should achieve a high ranking in exams
 (7) but my exam results were not good
 (8) during a grade meeting where teachers discussed students' exam performance together
 (9) she stood next to me saying,
 (10) "your grades haven't got improved, but you've got lots of pimples"
 (11) I felt deeply hurt at that moment
 (12) and when I went home that evening, I cried secretly
 (13) I can't fathom out how a teacher could say something like that, 'attacked' me personally
 (14) I could never forget what she said to me
 (15) and have disliked that teacher ever since
 (16) she claimed that she was not anxious about our grades
 (17) but in reality, she gave off a vibe of extreme anxiety
 (18) she was so anxious that she resorted to 'attacking' students directly
 (19) that really hurt me a lot
 (20) so, I never felt like reaching out to her after I graduated from the high school.

(Tina's 1st interview, July 2022)

The narrative space

Tina and her former high school teacher are the main characters in the short story. It also implied the presence of other school teachers and students during "a grade meeting" (Line 8). The teacher's "immense pressure" (Line 3) might come from the unspoken yet significant others: her colleagues as potential competitors in teacher appraisal indexed to students' exam performance, the parents who cared their children's scores, and the principal who concerned the school reputation built on the enrollment rate into Chinese prestigious universities. These significant others shape the teacher as a score pursuer, which is shown in her snide remarks to Tina whose score ranking did not meet her expectation.

The story expands from the meso-Story scale at which the student-teacher interaction took place at a Chinese high school to the macro-STORY scale of Chinese society in which

“striving for scores and fighting for ranks still permeates” (Xu & Huang, 2021, p. 105). This score-oriented ideology is also evident at the micro-story scale, “a key class in the school” (Line 4). The school Tina studied at exhibited a hierarchical structure wherein classes were classified as key and non-key based on students’ scores. Tina as a student then, was fragile and powerless in all those places. She could just retreat to a more intimate space to release her emotions and vulnerability, which is “home” (Line 12).

This story happened more than ten years ago when Tina was a high school student and when the teacher was positioned as the green-hand by Tina in telling this story many years later. The teachers’ cruel remarks “deeply hurt” Tina “at that moment” (Line 11), lingered on her when she came home that evening (Line 12), and could not be forgotten since then (Line 14). This significant experience marked a shift in Tina’s perception of and relationships with that teacher, as evidenced by her enduring dislike (Line 15) and subsequent unwillingness to initiate contact with the teacher after graduation (Line 20). Further, it molds Tina’s morality when she became a VE ELT.

VE ELT identity construction: the seed of Tina’s morals and empathy

Within the narrative space portrayed above, the interactive positionings between the teacher and Tina, and Tina’s negative positioning of the former teacher are salient (Søreide, 2006). The teacher’s positioning of Tina (Line 6) explains her actions when Tina’s scores fell short of expectation. Contrary to her claimed identity (Line 16), the teacher adopted the position as an “anxious” score pursuer, which was shaped or imposed by the score-oriented ideology at the school and in the Chinese society. Further, being a green-hand teacher responsible for “a key class” potentially amplified her stress level. While having little power in relation to the dominant narratives, that teacher used her agency to position and exert pressure on Tina to achieve high scores, which led to this distressing story.

Tina’s reactions to the teacher’s interactive positioning there-and-then (Line 11, 12) demonstrate her as a powerless student and victim of the teacher’s demeaning words through which the teacher’s authoritative and higher position was confirmed. In this short story, Tina

engaged in “third-order positioning” of the teacher when she retold that incident to the researcher (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). It is a deliberate process that expressed her perspective, morality, and identities vis-à-vis that teacher (ibid.). She started to position the teacher as inexperienced and anxious (Lines 2-4), which she inferred to be the main reason for the teacher’s cruel conduct (Line 18). Her empathy might be aroused in the light of her current position as a novice VE ELT who oftentimes experienced anxiety, as shown in the third story. However, Tina’s psychological (Line 13), emotional (Line 15), and physical (Line 20) distancing from the teacher heralds her VE ELT identity construction that would oppose to that inconsiderate and unkind teacher. Tina defined the teacher’s words as personal ‘attack’ (Lines 13, 18). It reflects her tacit belief that it is not the right of any teacher to utter cruel words that would hurt students. This belief was made explicit in her second interview when Tina said, “no one would judge or despise them (my students) in classes”. This captures Tina’s epistemology of the rights and duties of being a teacher and the moral stance she took and continued to uphold while becoming a VE ELT. As Tina added in the first interview (July, 2022), “That incident was a great blow to me. That is why after becoming a teacher, I made a conscious effort to avoid saying anything that could hurt my students.”

Teachers’ past learning experiences and learner identities have a direct impact on their teacher identities and practices (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^b; 2018; 2019^b). Tina’s case demonstrates that her previous positioning experience that induced pain enabled her to build empathy with the VE students, many of whom have also faced negative positionings in their past learning experience. Taking up the position as an empathetic teacher guided Tina’s teaching practice. In the second interview taken place one and half years later, Tina revisited this incident and stressed the crucial role of empathetic and supportive teachers for VE students. She shared her recent stories of encouraging her timid VE students to speak English:

“Many students told me they used to be extremely timid, lacking confidence in speaking English. One student told me that when he was in the middle school, the teacher only cared about the students with good scores, neglecting those with low levels like him. That made him even more afraid to speak English. I always tell my students not to be afraid, reminding them

we aren't native English speakers, and no one should look down on us for making mistakes in speaking English. When I was a student, I used to be like that too, scared of making mistakes and being judged by the teachers. So, I constantly reassured them that no one would judge or despise them in classes. Encouraged, they started to try to speak, and after they tried, they gained more confidence and were less fearful of making mistakes. I find these stories of my students' progress particularly memorable."

(Tina's 2nd interview, Jan. 2024)

The fact that "many students" were willing to share their stories with Tina implies the existence of trusted, harmonious, and equal teacher-student relationships Tina has devoted to cultivate. It evidently opposes to the distanced, rigid, and asymmetric relationships she had with the former school teacher. Her narratives also illustrate her empathy and understanding towards VE students' challenges and the multitude of negative discourses that VE students encountered in past learning experiences.

Tina's students were positioned as weak, neglected, and illegitimate students in English class in the past, creating their timid and powerless learner identities. Adopting the position as an empathetic and supportive teacher, Tina took up the responsibilities to encourage her timid students and repositioned them as confident English learners in a more inclusive and empowering learning environment (Wood, 2013). Her practices further highlight her teacher identity construction, which stood in stark contrast with her former high school teacher. Indeed, the formative incident happened in high school has planted the seed of Tina's morality and empathy as a teacher, shaping what she did, what she believes is right to do as a teacher, and her emotional attachment to the discourses of empathy, encouragement, and care in her future teaching (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020).

Agency, emotions, and positioning within asymmetrical power relations at school

In the story, layers of stresses from the broader contexts of the school and the society befell the school teacher who was observed to conform discursively, practically and emotionally to the position as a score pursuer (Line 8, 10, 16, 17). She had little agency and power to change

the score-oriented ideology on the Story and SOTRY scale (Barkhuizen, 2016). Instead, she exerted agency, at the micro-story level, to position Tina in terms of score. Tina's teacher was thus "simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power" in contexts (Foucault, 1980, p. 98), which was the baton of exams to construct her teacher identity. The discrepancy between the teacher's initial positioning of Tina as a student with potential for high scores (Line 6) and Tina's actual performance triggered her disappointment and subsequent repositioning of Tina as academically weak (Line 10). Further, she 'attacked' Tina personally (Line 13), indicating the unequal power relations where the teacher had the (perceived) right and authority to judge the students by scores even in hurtful manner. Such behavior illustrates a lack of empathy and respect on the part of the teacher towards the students.

On Tina's side, the teacher's intentional unkind positioning evoked immense negative emotions that could have led to her actions to resist or refuse it. Nevertheless, Tina did not reposition herself by language, actions, or emotions on the spot, asserting the significant power differentials there-and-then. For Tina, this traumatic experience engendered emotional resistance to the position as an anxious, inconsiderate, and cruel score pursuer. She also distanced herself from being a teacher who prioritized students' academic performance above all else and inflicted frustration upon her students in the event of failure (Lines 13, 15, 20).

Under unequal teacher-student power relations during classes or at school, students are likely to occupy negative and powerless positions implicitly ascribed or imposed by teachers, especially for the VE students under dominant academic culture in China (Woronov, 2016), as mentioned in the story shared by Tina's 'timid' students. Within rigid and asymmetrical relationships in class, when students are consistently positioned as underachievers and weak by their teachers, it can lead to their negative emotion and hinder their motivation and agency ("afraid to speak English") (Yoon, 2008). Tina's case also demonstrates the detrimental effect of teachers' malicious positioning of students on teacher-student relationships (Line 20: "I never felt like reaching out to her after I graduated from high school"). Tina experienced the negative positioning by her teacher, perhaps occasionally or once. Yet, her overwhelming feeling of distress and helplessness shaped her moral and allowed her to build empathy with

the VE students, creating a more inclusive and empowering English learning environment for them. Instead of asserting the stereotypical and low positioning of VE students in the wider sociocultural context, Tina used her agency and emotions to (re)position them as “teachable,” “essentially good,” and “having potential,” as she repeatedly emphasized in both interviews, taking up the position as an empathetic and devoted VE ELT.

Stories are interlinking in people’s lives. This past “victimic plot” in which Tina was “passive and receptive” confronting the teacher’s “personal attack” becomes her significant “autobiographical fragments,” which lingered in memory and helped to interpret her future interactional episodes with the students, as revealed in the next story (Deppermann, 2015, p. 372; Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 302).

Short Story 2: A student was reading a Chinese novel in my class

- (1) When I was doing a Master degree in Education in Hong Kong
- (2) the professor stressed the importance of empathy and putting ourselves in students’ shoes
- (3) I know our students lack recognition because they are not good at learning
- (4) so, I became very cautious about my words and behaviors in classes
- (5) when my students’ learning attitude or autonomy are bad
- (6) I try not to blame them right away
- (7) instead, I try to understand them and find ways to support and encourage them
- (8) this semester, there was a student reading a Chinese novel in my class
- (9) when I passed by him, I kindly reminded him (not to do that)
- (10) he responded with finality, saying that he can’t learn English and he won’t learn it
- (11) because that incident happened during class, I didn’t say much to him
- (12) other students laughed, surprised by his boldness in talking to the teacher that way
- (13) during the break, I approached him and initiated a conversation
- (14) I asked if he found English challenging and the English lessons too difficult to keep up
- (15) I suggested that he start from simple English words to build a foundation
- (16) so, he can catch up

- (17) perhaps because of my words, he immediately became very focused in the next class
 (18) and has been actively participated in my English classes since then
 (19) maybe the games I designed later aligned with their abilities, making him more engaged
 (20) I thought, “wow, his transformation was speedy”
 (21) so, I believe that education is not simply about delivering knowledge during classes
 (22) it requires a deeper understanding and empathy towards our students
 (23) considering their struggles and feelings from their perspective
 (24) for students, both encouragement and criticism from teachers impact greatly on them.

(Tina’s 1st interview, July 2022)

The narrative space

In this story, the main character is Tina as a novice VE ELT and a student reading a Chinese novel in her class. Other characters in the story include the professor who has tutored her MA study in Hong Kong (Line 2), imagined students (Line 2), and the students she was teaching (Line 12).

The values Tina learnt in postgraduate classes (story) and her interaction with the former high school teacher in the first story shaped Tina’s reflexive positions and the central actions unfolding in one of her classes (story) in the college (Story). Tina believed that VE students “lack recognition” in academically dominant social and educational culture (STORY). This belief informed and guided her actions, aligning with the professor’s teaching. Witnessing a classmate’s defiant and disruptive behaviors, other students’ laughs and surprises allude to the Chinese culture where obeying and respecting teachers are the norm (STORY). This cultural context also helps to explain why Tina put up with her school teacher’s unkind words in the first story.

The incident itself unfolded within a short time frame, spanning two successive English classes “this semester” (Line 8), but Tina recalled what she learnt as a postgraduate student before recounting this unexpected incident in class. The professor emphasized the qualities of good teachers, which Tina’s former high teacher lacked. Tina identified with and followed

what the professor taught after being a VE ELT. She was able to connect VE students' past frustrating learning experiences with their low self-efficacy and autonomy at present (Line 3, 4, 5). In the narrated incident, Tina was conscious of and empathetic towards the student's despair, conjecturing from what the student said (Line 10). Yet, she viewed the student from a developmental lens, suggesting practical ways for him to start English learning (Line 15). The student's 'speedy' transformation left a lasting impression on Tina and bolstered her identity as an emphatic and devoted VE ELT in the future (Lines 21-23).

VE ELT identity construction: an empathetic and devoted VE ELT

The positions teachers take guide their “interactive approaches with students in classroom settings” (Yoon, 2008, p. 499). Tina's course tutor, the professor, positioned good (pre-service) teachers empathetic and understanding in interacting with students. Tina took it in and took up such position, which shaped her agency (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a). In this short story, Tina's first-order positioning of the student who should focus on English learning during class positioned Tina as teacher upholding classroom rules and valuing each student's engagement. Yet, the student claimed the right to reject Tina's positioning by engaging in second-order positioning. He contested Tina's authority by refusing the moral positioning as a student and shifting to the personal positioning as an incapable and resistant English language learner. Other students' laughs and surprise confirmed the scene a disruption of the expected moral order between teachers and students inside the classroom. While embracing the position as an empathetic teacher, Tina approached the student with caution and care during the break, trying to understand his struggles in learning and providing practical advice. Ascribing the position as a student having the possibility and ability “to build a foundation” and “catch up” (Lines 15, 16) enabled the student's agency. Responsive to Tina's individualized attention and guidance, the student repositioned himself as a focused and active student in the following classes. Amazed by the student's transformation, Tina reinforced her positional identities as a teacher putting herself in students' shoes by investing in designing games matching the VE students' abilities (Line 19). This positioning work, in turn, constructed more legitimate and

powerful positions for her student(s), as she observed that the activities made “him more engaged” (Line 19). Furthermore, Tina’s beliefs and philosophy in education (Lines 21-24) took shape, grounded in her multiple stories of inspiring and scaffolding the VE students like this one. Those stories elicited “a sense of achievement and satisfaction”, as she recalled in both interviews. She expressed that she truly felt “the charm of education” from her students’ transformation and believed “her efforts were indeed meaningful”. These “identity confirming” stories ensue Tina’s positive emotions and enhance her commitments (Kaplan & Garner, 2017, p. 2039). It is expected that Tina would invest in the values she believed education represented (Lines 21-24). Hence, Tina’s VE ELT identities are constructed by committing herself “practically, emotionally, and epistemically” to the position as an empathetic and devoted VE ELT (Deppermann, 2013, p. 4).

Tina’s construction of empathetic and devoted VE ELT is tightly linked with and manifesting in her positive positioning of the VE students. She recursively positioned VE students as “teachable” and “essentially good but lacking attention, recognition, and support” in interviews (also in Line 3):

“In fact, it is quite obvious that there are many students whose autonomy and English proficiency are low. However, when you are willing to give them guidance seriously and teach them one by one, step by step, they are actually willing to learn. So sometimes even if they look as if they are unrestrained and unwilling to listen to you, in fact, as long as you give them love, they will be moved by you and willing to change his attitude.”

(Tina’s 1st interview, July 2022)

From Tina’s narratives, we can see that by ascribing more positive and powerful positions to students, teachers not only enable their agency but also their students. Tina’s interactive positioning of VE students makes her see and believe that inspiring, engaging, helping, and caring VE students are her responsibilities. Assuming such positions, Tina extended her students’ possibilities to participate in classes and build positive learner identities (Wood, 2013; Yoon, 2008). Tina constructed her VE ELT identities with a student-centered orientation over time as she described diverse strategies used to engage VE students

in learning English, including conducting questionnaire survey on the activities students enjoy, designing interesting English games, searching for and using suitable English teaching materials, and offering individualized tutoring. Tina's devoted teacher identity is therefore built on and strengthened by her deep empathy with VE students, guiding her investment in caring students' engagement in learning and improving teaching to cater to them.

Agency, emotions, and positioning within disrupted power relations in classrooms

This classroom conflict emerged because of a clash between the student's self-positioning and Tina's positioning of him, leading to the student's confrontational behaviors and resistant emotions. As a novice VE ELT, Tina successfully navigated the student's defiance. Agency and emotion intricately interact with positioning in this process, prompted by the disruption of the power dynamics between the teacher and the student inside classroom. The way Tina exercised her agency to handle the situation is guided by and aligning with her adopting positions as an empathetic and devoted teacher (Lines 3, 4, 6, 7). Besides, it is informed by her interactive positionings of VE students as "having strong sense of self" and "caring their face", as Tina described in the interview. These positionings prompt her to evaluate the risks and conceive appropriate actions in that concrete situation (Priestley et al., 2015), not hurting the student nor affecting the teaching, as she gave more details and comments in response to my analysis during the member checking:

"I felt surprised and worried that I wouldn't control the situation at that moment. It was an unexpected occurrence, and I was concerned that it would affect my class teaching. Students care their face, and I have limited experience in handling such situations. I'm afraid that if I blurt out something without thinking, it might lead to a loss of control. So, I decided to calm down first, think carefully, and avoid saying anything that could trigger strong emotional responses from that student in the class."

Self-positioning as inexperienced in handling such situation, Tina felt worried and feared. These negative emotions serve as a "valuable agentic guide" for Tina to refrain herself from any impulsive actions (Benesch, 2018, p. 61). The positive emotions elicited by the

experience of repositioning a disengaged, despaired, and defiant student, sustained and reinforced Tina's positions as an empathetic and devoted VE teacher as well as her actions aligning with them (Shahri, 2018). Feeling visible, cared, and empowered, the student enabled his agency to refocus and participate in English class. Tina regained respect from the student, as well as her power as a teacher.

Short story 3: 'Why you are so busy'

- (1) People around me think that being a teacher means having summer and winter vacations
- (2) just need to go to campus two or three days
- (3) it gives the impressions that I have lots of time and freedom
- (4) especially my sister who thought that the level of vocational college students was low
- (5) so, she wondered and asked me, "why you are so busy?"
- (6) including my mom who asked me to tutor her friend's son
- (7) but I felt so busy and overwhelmed that I really didn't have time to attend to other things
- (8) they couldn't understand why I can't do this or that?
- (9) this made me feel on the verge of a breakdown and even cried at times
- (10) in fact, they can see I spend much time before the computer working when I am home
- (11) like last semester was my first time to teach 16 classes per week
- (12) and I had to use different textbooks in different classes
- (13) I was worried about whether I could handle it at first
- (14) I took my teaching seriously and tried hard to prepare for the lessons
- (15) but the teaching quality evaluation result released yesterday
- (16) showed my teaching score of last semester was not as good as the semester before last
- (17) I care about students' evaluation of my teaching
- (18) I'm not satisfied with the result but I won't blame myself for not making efforts
- (19) I feel I need to explore and haven't reached the level of teaching with high proficiency
- (20) I experimented different teaching methods last semester
- (21) but the effects varied slightly in different classes
- (22) as the students I taught included high school graduates and vocational school graduates

- (23) you can just tell which teaching method works best only after trying them in person
- (24) students seek novelty and freshness
- (25) I introduced a recitation ranking activity last semester, which seemed to work well
- (26) but I feel that for the coming semester, I may need to try a different method
- (27) students can't sustain their motivation if I stick to the same method for too long
- (28) they crave excitement, that is, they enjoy it
- (29) so, it's really a personal choice whether you want to be busy or lazy
- (30) just as the department Dean said, "teaching is a matter of conscience"
- (31) how much effort you are willing to invest and the standards you set for yourself
- (32) ultimately depends on you
- (33) if I lower the expectations for myself, I can indeed make my life easier
- (34) but I feel that this is a crucial time for me to learn and progress
- (35) especially since I don't have a family (haven't got married nor had children)
- (36) so, I don't want to have too much free time
- (37) I definitively want to invest more in my personal and professional growth.

(Tina's 2nd interview, January 2024)

The narrative space

Tina, Tina's family, the students, and the department Dean are the main characters in the short story. Each actor plays a role in Tina's positioning and identities, as I analyzed in the next section.

Regarding the places, Tina's personal and professional boundaries got blurry (Line 10). At the story level, Tina's home which used to be the place to release her suppressed emotions in the first short story, became the place of stress when her family's positioning of Tina contradicted her reflexive positions linking to her substantial investment in teaching. Tina's positional identities as a devoted teacher continued to manifest and reinforce in her enduring endeavor to improve teaching (Lines 14, 20, 22) (story). This short story also implicates the performativity discourses that evaluate teachers in the institution (Story), where students have the assigned right and power to score teachers' teaching (Line 15). On the macro-STORY

level, Tina's sister's positioning of VE students as low level is consistent with the wider ideology and discourses on VE students of "'less desirable' academic records" in Chinese society (Wang, 2021^b, p. 1008). Besides, the initiative of one-million enrollment expansion in higher VE (MoE et al., 2019) (STORY) has changed the landscape of VE classes regarding students' backgrounds (Line 22). VE teachers have found themselves facing an increasingly heterogeneous student population. Employing the same teaching method became problematic (Line 21). As revealed in this short story, Tina was not only confronted with the positioning tensions at home, but also had to adapt to and navigate the changes and challenges arising from multilayered contexts (e.g., inside classrooms, the institution, and national educational policies). This can be overwhelming and daunting for early career VE teachers (Line 7).

This story witnessed Tina's progression as a VE ELT with growing anxiety for "personal and professional growth," particularly regarding teaching. It reflects in Tina's substantial investment of time in improving teaching, asserting and building up her position as a devoted teacher (Lines 7, 10, 14). Besides, her comparison of teaching quality scores across semesters (Line 16) implies that Tina was anxious about and tracking her teaching feedback based on students' evaluations over time. Imagining the possible burden and time constraints if she starts a family in the future (Line 35), Tina perceived the present as a critical period for her learning and growth.

VE ELT identity construction: a devoted and yet anxious VE ELT

The emotion-related words in this short story, such as "overwhelmed," "breakdown," "cried," "worried," and "not satisfied," positioned Tina as an anxious teacher during her early career stage (Kayi-Aydar, 2021). In the first interview, Tina positioned herself as a novice VE ELT without an English-related educational background. This self-positioning caused anxiety but also activated her agency from the beginning till now ("I need to invest..."; Line 19: "I still need to explore..."; Line 20: "I experimented..."; Line 25: "I introduced...") :

"Every semester is a new challenge for me as the teaching materials and the students' majors are different. Since I don't hold an English or English-related degree, there are much

for me to learn and explore whenever I teach a new class, a new course, or a new textbook. I don't feel particularly adept. I think I need to invest considerable amount of time in learning how to teach."

(Tina's 1st interview, July 2022)



Figure 1 A screenshot of Tina's WeChat posting on 20 June, 2023

Tina's WeChat posting in June 2023 (Figure 1) attests to the anxiety she experienced as a novice VE ELT. Meanwhile, it shows her consistent investment in fulfilling her teaching obligations. Tina is frequently plagued by anxiety at work, as confirmed by her WeChat posting (Figure 1), narrations in the interviews and her narrative frames: "I often feel anxious when a lesson doesn't achieve the desired effect." Tina's strong reliance on and concern for her students' positionings of her (teaching) (Line 17: "I care about students' evaluation of my teaching") to position and identify her teacher-self undermined her confidence and eventuated her anxiety (Lines 17, 19). An incident she recounted in the first interview adds evidence to this main trigger of her anxiety:

"I always thought that my students would find me approachable and kind, but at the beginning of this semester, I felt that my students were somewhat indifferent to me compared to the previous batch of students. I couldn't understand why. Despite my continuous efforts, they seemed dismissive of me. It made me feel very anxious, defeated, and hurt."

(Tina's 1st interview, July 2022)

Tina later reflected on it and gradually realized that her students could sense her anxiety, which was not beneficial for the students and her. The more Tina strove to teach well, the tighter the tension grew, and the worse the teaching effect became. Tina then decided to adopt a more relaxed position and create the classroom atmosphere desired by the students, which yielded better effects. While the anxiety positions Tina as a committed teacher concerning with students' learning and her teaching, it is also a personal characteristic that Tina has endeavored to manage and control:

“Since I was little, my mom has always said that I was too anxious and I tended to focus on the negative things. Sometimes, it's instinctual for me to have a pessimistic view. I am trying to regulate it and train myself to overcome this tendency. So, I have consciously reminded myself to stay positive, forced myself to adopt a more relaxed attitude, and avoided pushing myself too hard at work”

(Tina's 2nd interview, January 2024)

When teachers position themselves, it “always includes both a moral and a personal positioning” (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 22). Both positionings illuminate and reveal teacher identities that are interrelated with personal identities (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020; Reeves, 2018^b). Tina's identity construction is a struggling process of managing her anxiety while devoting herself to teaching, which partly explains why she is so ‘busy’ mentally and physically. Particularly, under the discourses of performativity, students assigned the power and right to score their teachers' teaching and morals position teachers. The evaluation scores and rankings inform the institution's teacher appraisal and teachers' reflexive positions. In this story, Tina positioned by her students, despite dissatisfaction and concern, exerted agency to reflect on her teaching (Lines 19-23; 25, 26), enriched her positioning of the VE students (Lines 24, 27, 28), and envisioned the direction for her future investment with determination (Lines 19; 34-37). She, in this way, engaged in repositioning herself and others, which constructs her teacher identities that align with her moral value expressed by the department Dean (Line 30) and her aspirations (Line 37). Others' positionings of Tina that caused anxiety

then became “a resource” Tina reflectively and agentively utilized to guide her actions to develop new positions in constructing stronger VE ELT identities (Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Søreide, 2006; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 22). The anxiety experienced by Tina turned out to be “useful”, in the words of Tina.

Agency, emotions, and positioning: faced the unsatisfying positioning

This story indicates that when there is a clash and gap between teachers’ reflexive positions and the positions ascribed by others, negative emotions are triggered (Line 9: “this made me feel on the verge of a breakdown and even cried at times;” Line 18: “I’m not satisfied with the result”). These emotions reflect that Tina strongly resisted her family’s positioning of her as free, identified herself as a devoted VE ELT living a busy life, and positioned her students as a valuable and trusted guide in her teaching. The positions Tina ascribed to herself and her students activated her agency (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^d). Instead of ignoring, indulging in, or being defeated by the sadness and dissatisfaction by other-positioning, Tina positioned herself as an agent: declined her mother’s request, reflected on her teaching, enriched her positioning of VE students, and set goals to pursue progress. Rejecting the optional position as a “lazy” teacher that implicates less duties and make her life easier (Lines 29, 33, 36), Tina’s agency was guided by and consistent with her self-positioning as a devoted and responsible teacher (Line 14: “I took my teaching seriously”). This optional choice implies that the actions Tina took and planned to take are not mandatory. Tina’s extra devotion to improve her teaching, responding to the students’ positioning of her and catering to their needs are “supererogatory duties”, which is important in her moral development as a teacher (Harré, 2015, p. 266). Her moral stance and position were also stressed in her first interview:

“If I choose the easier way, I genuinely feel uneasy inside, and the most direct manifestation of this is that I felt very uncomfortable when I wasn’t satisfied about the teaching. If I was satisfied with my lesson preparation and the class went well, then I would feel very pleased and content. Yes, I think it’s probably because I have some sort of obsessional personality and a sense of responsibility.”

(Tina's 1st interview, July 2022)

Tina's emotional involvement in her daily teaching further illuminates why the students' lower positioning of her (teaching) triggered the emotion swings. She indeed exerted agency to assume the duty to give 'good' lessons, which would "prevent any regrets", as she wrote in the narrative frames. Not blaming herself (Line 18: "I won't blame myself for not making efforts"), Tina's dissatisfaction with the students' positioning of her teaching significantly activated her agency and became a driving force that fueled her teacher identity development with clear goals and firm determination (Yang et al., 2021). Her positive attitudes and actions can be attributed to her embrace of the discourses and moral value that "teaching is a matter of conscience (良心活)" (Line 30). Accordingly, Tina adopted the position and practices echoing such morality and considered it her desired obligation to strive for better teaching and a better self whenever she identified areas or time for improvement or perceived a lack of proficiency from her students. Her multiple *I-statements* (Lines 33-37) further underscore her commitment and determination to good teaching, reflecting her beliefs and values as an agentive teacher (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^b),

Hence, significant others' positionings that induce negative emotions wield power to activate and regulate teacher agency. Teachers' reflexive position and morals greatly shape their responses to and navigation of the negative emotions induced by others' positioning that they do not desire or find satisfactory.

Discussion

Tina's stories corroborate the assertion that teacher identities are constructed in relation to significant others across time and settings, which is realized in teachers' actions (e.g., Arvaja, 2016; Huang & Wang, 2021; Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; 2015^b; 2018; Trent, 2012^b; Whitsed & Volet, 2013; Yoon, 2008). Tina adhered to the "agentic plot" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 301) in her VE ELT identity construction via positioning, which is visible in her approaches to manage the classroom conflicts and accommodate the VE students (short story 2), grappling with the emerging challenges in her teaching (short story 3), and reflecting and acting on the

students' positioning of her (short story 3). Tina's VE ELT identities were constructed and sharpened by positioning herself in relation to her former school teacher, her students, the university professor, the department Dean, and her family.

The three short stories connect Tina's past experiences to her current positions and practices as an empathetic and devoted VE ELT. Just like the teachers in other teacher identity studies (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; Reeves, 2009; Søreide, 2006; Sosa & Gomez, 2012), Tina's VE English teacher identity construction is in part a result of "positioning through opposition" (Søreide, 2006, p. 534). Specifically, her self-positioning as an empathetic teacher contrasted directly with the teacher identity she ascribed to her former high school teacher who 'attacked' her. The enduring negative emotions caused by that experience shaped her beliefs about the rights and duties of being a teacher (Donato, 2017).

Moreover, Tina's VE ELT identity construction entails anxiety, in particular over significant others' positioning of her, which is an important point and personal position in her identity work. Tina's "emotional intelligence" to "identify, interpret, regulate, and express" her anxiety is a crucial part of facilitating her robust teacher identities (Benesch & Prior, 2023, p. 4). Conscious of her anxiety-prone disposition, Tina regulated her emotions on the one hand, and took actions to improve her teaching on the other hand. Her agency employed to reposition the disengaged and defiant VE student (short story 2) and reposition herself (short story 3) is implicated in opportunities for advancing VE students' English language learning, their access to positive learner identities in class, and building Tina's competence (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018). During the process, Tina is becoming a more resilient and proficient VE ELT with a deeper understanding of VE education and more nuanced positionings of VE students and herself (Harré, 2015).

Positioning needs and guides agency (Deppermann, 2015; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999; Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a). The empathetic and devoted positions Tina took up and ascribed to herself guided and resonated with her actions, such as designing classroom activities catering to VE students, providing individualized care to the defiant student, and exploring effective teaching methods. Besides, Tina's positioning of VE students guided the approaches in which

she taught and interacted with them (short story 2). For example, positioning VE students as caring about face and having their struggles led to Tina's careful, caring, and encouraging acts towards the disengaged student. Positioning students as trusted and valuable feedback providers on her teaching activated Tina's agency to reflect on their evaluation and improve her teaching.

Further, the degree of teacher agency exerted in positioning varies in different contextual scales. Tina's case demonstrates that she constantly and actively positioned and repositioned herself and her students in the micro-contexts, for example, in classes. Within the immediate contexts, Tina possessed more power and agency to manipulate and potentially change her students' actions and identities, teacher-student relationships, and the teaching and learning outcome through positioning (Barkhuizen, 2016; Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; Reeves, 2009; Yoon, 2008). Tina's agentic experiences in (re)positioning her VE students as "teachable," "having potential," "more confident," or "engaged in learning" serve as her rejection and overturn of the negative positions ascribed and imposed to VE students in the wider sociocultural sphere. Interestingly, Tina did not question nor have the intention and power to shift the institutional policies that positioned her and her teaching but was observed to care much about and act on the positioning results under the institutional performative discourses in meso-scale context. Hence, teacher agency exercised in positioning is relational and contingent upon teachers' power and intention that vary in different contextual scales (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999).

Regarding the interaction between Tina's positioning, agency, and emotion, being positioned by others and positioning others or oneself elicit diverse emotions that can enable, constrain, or guide agency. For example, Tina's self-positioning as a novice VE ELT without a relevant educational background triggered anxiety but also activated her agency to learn and explore how to teach English well. Repositioning the distracted, defiant, and timid VE students as focused, active, and confident learners elicited Tina's positive emotions, strengthening her empathetic, encouraging, and supportive positions and practices. Her negative emotions (e.g., "hurt," "dislike," "fear," "anxious," "overwhelmed") were triggered when being positioned by the former teacher, family, and her defiant student. Teachers'

negative emotions might or might not lead to agentic actions, contingent on their perceived power and embedded power relations in concrete contexts. Tina's agency to counteract the school teacher's intentionally mean positioning was stifled in the unequal power relationships. Yet, she actively engaged in repositioning herself in her family and class because of her power to achieve the positioning acts in those circumstance and her feeling obliged to enhance teaching and students' learning. Confronting with the institutional performative policies that position teachers and impact emotions, Tina exhibited no intention and little power to resist or alter them. Thus, whether and how teachers exercise agency in (re)positioning others, themselves, and the external discourses depend on their (perceived) power, duties, rights, and intentions (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a).

Another prominent theme in Tina's stories is her morals as a VE ELT. Harré (2015) held that "Positioning Theory is an integral part of moral psychology, where action is to be seen more in terms of norms than of causes" (p. 265). Tina used "teaching is a matter of conscience (良心活)" to explain her effort and investment in her "personal and professional growth" (Line 37), which can be seen as her "moral agency" that encompasses a personal ideology, a personal choice, an ethical judgement, and a professional endeavor (Miller et al., 2017; Reeves, 2018^b; Rosendo, 2015, p. 87) (short story 3, Lines 33-34). In addition, in retrospect, the "victimic" plot (Polkinghorne, 1996, p. 299) in Tina's past learning experience (short story 1) enabled her to build empathy towards 'academically weak' VE students, which constitutes part of her moral vision. This reflects in and elucidates her rejection of the low positions ascribed to the VE students socioculturally, and her wholehearted reposition acts on the disengaged, defiant, and timid VE student(s). Tina's stories of empowering the VE students to adopt and build more active and confident positions in turn further shaped and developed her morality and philosophy towards education (short story 2, Line 21: "I believe that education is not simply about delivering knowledge during classes"). Therefore, Cara's morals are developed from and informing almost every aspect of her professional lives, constructing her multifaceted teacher identities through positioning over time (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020).

Chapter 7: Nancy: A Mid-Career VE ELT's Stories of Escape, Vulnerability, and Evolution

Nancy's experiences as a VE ELT in the narrative frame

Nancy is the only interviewed participant who has vocational school teaching experiences. She has taught in a vocational school in China for nine years before teaching in the vocational college that amalgamated with that school in 2021. She won prizes in some national teaching competitions between 2014 to 2016, proud moments rare for her. Despite this recognition, her narrative text is imbued with discouragement and helplessness. Nancy experienced frustration during the early years of teaching in the vocational school, as she found that the students showed little interest in learning English regardless of her earnest effort to engage them. She expressed antipathy towards teaching the vocational school students due to a lack of feelings of fulfillment. Now, with a wealth of teaching experience, she still struggles to motivate the VE students. She aspires to be liked by her students and will consider herself an excellent VE ELT when she can be more willing to communicate with her students and genuinely accept their (poor) learning state.

In the free-writing section, Nancy wrote the rough patch she has undergone as a VE ELT:

“In my first year of employment, I couldn't adapt to teaching vocational school students. When it was time for class, I would find excuses to ask for leave, avoiding classes. Ten years have elapsed in a flash. I have compromised. There has been breakdown due to students' terrible state. I couldn't help getting angry in classes and walking away from classes ... but more often than not, I didn't give up, trying to find ways to make my classes interesting to engage the students. I still appreciated and cherished the better classes I taught.”

Nancy's narrative text shows her difficulty and struggles as a VE ELT. Her avoidance of teaching obligation in the first year implied her overwhelming negative emotions that resulted in her withdrawal from taking up the position as a VE ELT in a responsible way. In retrospection, Nancy used the word “compromised” to indicate that she had made concessions and adjustments in order to continue her teaching journey in the vocational

school. Further, Nancy narrated that she “didn’t give up” and tried to improve her classes to engage her students. It demonstrates her commitment to creating an effective learning environment, positioning herself as a dedicated teacher navigating the potential strains and challenges in teaching English to the VE students.

Building on Nancy’s narrated experiences in the frame, the extracted short stories from her interviews provide a more complete picture of her VE ELT identity construction that entails a painful start and her continual navigation and evolution. Nancy’s past teaching experiences, emotions, morals, and the transition of teaching settings from the vocational school to the vocational college are implicit in her complex and evolving self-positionings. Besides, Nancy’s positioning of the VE students became more nuanced as she became the insider of their victimic stories and made connections with them.

Findings from Nancy’s short stories

Short story 1: Escaping and reminiscing

- (1) During my first year of teaching in the vocational school
- (2) the most memorable thing was that I asked for leave constantly, avoiding the classes
- (3) I had reached a point where I was almost depressed
- (4) for example, around five or six’ clock in the morning, a few hours before classes
- (5) I would experience intense anxiety and insomnia due to the upcoming classes
- (6) I would then come up with various excuses to request leave from the superiors
- (7) I had reached an extreme stage where I couldn’t face the class anymore
- (8) I was overwhelmed by a deep sense of frustration during that time
- (9) Interviewer: any specific incident that made you want to skip classes?
- (10) I can’t recall specific incidents, mostly related to students’ behaviors in the year 2012
- (11) the vocational school classes were completely different from what I had expected
- (12) when I was a postgraduate student, I worked as a part-time teacher at a university
- (13) and I later went to South Africa as a volunteer Chinese language teacher
- (14) teaching university and high school students, responsive and involved in learning
- (15) there was lots of interaction and they genuinely enjoyed my classes

- (16) that's what I believe ideal classes look like
- (17) but, in the vocational school, the students hardly cooperated with me
- (18) no matter what I taught or how well-prepared my teaching materials were
- (19) I always felt that they didn't pay attention to or engage in learning
- (20) you know how the students evaluate your teaching?
- (21) they evaluated teachers based on whether teachers talked about trivialities or personal things during classes or whether you replied to their WeChat messages after classes
- (22) students were more concerned about the relationships rather than academic things
- (23) some teachers spent lots of time talking about their personal matters or child in class
- (24) I don't like that
- (25) class is class. It should be a place for imparting and learning knowledge
- (26) so, my teaching score ranking has been low since I taught in the vocational school
- (27) students always gave me low scores
- (28) despite of that, I had a fixed idea that I could be a good teacher
- (29) I got many teaching awards when I was a volunteer teacher, always took first place
- (30) the judges were from famous Chinese universities and national institutes
- (31) strangely, every time the judges would say
- (32) "once you step on the platform, you are (look like) a good teacher"
- (33) I still remember those words clearly, great encouragement for me, you know
- (34) but after teaching vocational school students, I felt, "Ah! How did it end up like this?"
- (35) I have reflected on it many times and even talked to the principal about it
- (36) he suggested I spend time interacting and communicating with students after classes
- (37) but I really don't like that
- (38) there should be certain boundaries between teachers and students
- (39) so, I haven't made many changes in that regard.

(Nancy's 1st interview, July 2022)

The narrative space

In this story, Nancy's fond reminiscence of her past teaching experiences and the painful memory of her initial year teaching in the vocational school are tangled together. Nancy, her students—including university, high school, and VE students, the colleagues, judges or experts from the universities and national institutes, and the school principal, are the main characters in this story.

This short story references various spaces and shifts back and forth in Nancy's identity transition from a volunteer Chinese language teacher to a VE ELT practitioner. Her teaching action in these two contexts sets up contrasts that generate three main conflicts in the story. Firstly, the emotional torture Nancy experienced at home (story) directly connected to the stark contrast between the lackluster VE classes and the "ideal classes" (Line 16) (story) she had taught in non-VE contexts. The dichotomy implies the distinction among the student populations in universities, high schools, and vocational schools regarding students' learning engagement (Story), which Nancy experienced and observed in both China and South Africa. It suggests that the Chinese VE students, as observed in Woronov's research (2016), lack of interest in learning and educational achievements, acting opposing to the dominant academic-oriented culture in China (STORY). Another conflict arises when Nancy insisted to maintain the boundaries between her professional space (Story) and personal space (story), each, she believed, serving its unique purposes. It stood in sharp contrast to her colleagues' practices and conflicted with the principal's suggestion. Lastly, similar to Tina, the performativity system triggered Nancy's struggles (Story) (Lines 20-23). Her perplexity grew and deepened in comparing the low scores given by the vocational school students to "many teaching awards" and compliment bestowed on her by the judges during the period as a volunteer Chinese teacher overseas. By stressing the judges' association with "famous Chinese universities and national institutes" (Line 30), Nancy alluded to the high status of academic institutions in China that carry the true authority and power to assess her professional competence (STORY). With the endorsement from powerful others, Nancy questioned and strongly disagreed with the discourses surrounding "good teaching" and "good teachers" in the VE context (Lines 23, 35-36).

Nancy reflected on her first year of teaching in the vocational school, which intertwined with her previous successful teaching experiences. She recalled the typical and unnerving mornings plagued by “intense anxiety and insomnia” before her class. As she contemplated the reasons behind her emotional turbulence, the short story’s time scales shift back and forth between her first teaching year in the vocational school and her past teaching experiences. Specifically, Nancy contrasted the VE classes and other ‘ideal classes’ (Lines 11-19), and compared the assessment of her teaching by the VE students, her former university and high school students, and the judges (Lines 15, 26-31). These embedded storylines foreground and reinforce the contrast in terms of good teacher and teaching between the VE and non-VE discourses. Nancy’s narratives thus index time to convey her meanings, manifesting and constructing her struggling VE ELT identities at that time (Barkhuizen, 2016). It appeared that the more frustration she went through in the vocational school, the more she missed the fulfilling days as a Chinese teacher abroad. It signals her arduous journey of negotiating and reconciling her VE ELT identities, which we will hear about in the second story.

VE ELT identity construction: a painful beginning as a VE ELT

Nancy asserted in the interview, “the first-year teaching in the vocational school was a year of intense conflicts between me and students, as well as strong internal struggles”. Hebert and Worthy’s (2001) and Ruohotie-Lyhty’s (2013) studies reported that the match between the workplace realities, teacher identities, and their expectation as a major factor in determining the success of first-year teachers. On the micro-story level, Golombek and Doran (2014) identified that the contradictions between a novice language teacher’s envisioned ideal class and the realities caused negative emotions. Confirming the findings of those studies, Nancy’s frustration and depression were triggered by the disparities she experienced in the non-VE and VE classes (Line 11: “the vocational school classes were completely different from what I had expected”).

Literature on VE teachers highlight the affective and relational aspects in good VE teachers’ work and identities (Köpsén, 2014; Lippke, 2012; Smith & Yasukawab, 2017), as

some interviewed VE teachers saw themselves as students' big brothers, sisters, or parents (Barak & Shoshana, 2022). Smith and Yasukawab's (2017) study on Australian VE teachers pinpointed the relational dimension of good VE teacher who "is more a friend than a teacher" (p. 31). A quantitative study indicates that VE teachers' interpersonal behaviors "by far the most important predictor of all types of student engagement" (Van Uden et al., 2014, p. 28). These prevailing discourses suggest that the investment in interpersonal connection, love, care, and concern, rather than simply imparting knowledge, are central to VE teachers' work and "essential for teacher identity in a vocational school" (Barak & Shoshana, 2022, p. 10; *ibid.*). In this short story, the vocational school students, the colleagues, and the principal well informed of the faculty's teaching score ranking reified this view. However, Nancy failed, or rather, refused to position herself by drawing on these discourses of 'good' teachers and teaching. She did not wish to have the position the principal suggested and indeed loathed it (Line 37: "but I really don't like that"). It can be attributed to her beliefs on the good teacher derived from other non-VE contexts. Her notion of good teaching was formed in and shaped by her past teaching experiences where she was focused on teaching the language effectively and the students were "responsive and involved in learning". Nancy "positioned herself as affiliated with this image of teaching" (Shahri, 2018, p. 95). Further, her teaching competence was endorsed by the judges from powerful academic communities. Nancy thus used her past teaching experiences to legitimate her claims of what good students, good teachers, and good language teaching were like. As a result, Nancy positioned herself as a knowledge transmitter, students as the language learners, and the classroom as "a place for imparting and learning knowledge" (Line 25). With these positionings, Nancy asserted her primary duty to teach English knowledge (Line 25), claimed her right to maintain the boundaries between professional and personal spaces (Line 38), and distanced herself from the colleagues who shared personal matters in classes by emotions and actions (Lines 24-25, 37, 39), constructing her unique VE ELT identities. In Contrast to Tina's self-positioning as an educator valuing empathy and communication with her students beyond the class (Tina's story 2, Line 21), Nancy preferred and opted to committed "practically, emotionally and epistemically" to the

position as a teacher focusing on teaching English (Deppermann, 2013, p. 4). While Tina had multiple stories where her agency to reposition the disengaged student(s) was useful and rewarding in the vocational college, Nancy found few reality conditions for fulfilling herself as a popular and capable language teacher at the vocational school. In the narrative frames and interviews, Nancy highlighted that students' low English proficiency and her lack of personal charm impeded the realization of her desired identity, instead of her teaching skills or unwillingness to reach out to her VE students. It reflects Nancy's confidence in her teaching competence, which unfortunately was not highly valued and prioritized by vocational school students.

However, the students' positioning and the dominant discourses of 'good teachers' in Nancy's embedded institutional environment gradually changed and shaped her aspiration and imagination. In the narrative frames, Nancy expressed that, "I aspire to be liked by my students and I will consider myself an excellent teacher when I can be more willing to communicate with students and genuinely accept their learning state". She wrote the aspect of communication in the construction of imagined excellent VE ELT identities, which indicates the powerful influence of context and teachers' actual experiences in that context on changing their beliefs about what constitute good teachers. Yet, we can infer that Nancy still struggles with communicating with and accepting VE students, as both aspects still confined to her imagination. Besides, her negative positioning of VE students remained basically unchanged, as an online conversation with her reveals. Teachers' positioning of the students influences their classroom practices, self-positioning, and teacher identities (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; Reeves, 2009; Tran & Nguyen, 2015; Wang, 2021; Yoon, 2008). It can thus be deduced that the classroom ecology and part of Nancy's VE ELT identities has not changed much compared with her initial years in VE.

Yvonne (the researcher): May I observe your first and second classes next Friday? Coincidentally, my classes on next Friday will be canceled due to the students' practical training.

Nancy: Next week? No problem. But the cooperation level among the vocational school students is not high, in particular during the first and second periods when many of them fall sleep in classes. For Friday's classes, neither of the two classes' students are required to take English exams, so they are lackadaisical.

Agency, emotions, and positioning: the tension in refusing significant others' positioning

Zembylas (2003) states that “the construction of teacher identity is at bottom affective” (p. 213). The depression, frustration, and anxiety Nancy experienced during her initial year of teaching positioned her as a struggling and fragile VE ELT (Lines 1-8) (Kayi-Aydar, 2021), facing enormous difficulties in adapting to teaching the VE students. When Nancy found that the work reality clashed against her ideals of teaching, she sought refuge from classes by asking for leaves, evading her teaching duty. However, this agentic action did not enable her to reposition herself in a positive way and construct strong VE ELT identities, but nourishing the negative emotions (Lines 7-8) and leaving her more powerless and alienated within the VE community which she was part (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^b). The negative actions and emotions characterizing Nancy’s painful start as a VE ELT not only stem from her shock and dismay at the students’ behaviors in class (Line 10), but also from her reluctance and resistance to align or negotiate with the prevailing discourses and the significant others’ positioning of ‘good teacher’ in her working context (Line 39). However, she cared and longed for her students’ recognition deep down, as she expressed in the interviews and the narrative frame. This creates and heightens her internal tensions and anxiety.

Evidently, conflicts accompanied Nancy’s positioning as her students used the assigned power to express dislike by giving low scores to her. Teachers such as Nancy was positioned as “obliged to accept their rankings” under performative discourses (Harré & Slocum, 2003, p. 107). It violently challenged and frustrated Nancy’s self-positioning as a good ELT. There is a mismatch between the VE students’ and Nancy’s positioning of ‘good teacher’. The students declined Nancy’s positioning of them as only a language knowledge learner instead of a whole person with emotional and connection needs. Consequently, Nancy’s reflexive position as “a good teacher” (Line 28: “I had a fixed idea that I could be a good teacher”) was not legitimate anymore while transitioning to the VE circumstance, leading to her emotional suffering. Besides, the negative positions Nancy ascribed to the VE students (Lines 17, 19) reveal that her VE ELT identity became a site of struggle, devoid of a sense of fulfillment and enjoyment. This situation persists as our online conversation portrayed her unpleasant classes.

Meanwhile, it illustrates that Nancy's philosophy and practices as a VE ELT has not changed much till then, as she admitted that her scores have consistently been low since she taught in the school (Line 26). In brief, Nancy's weak VE ELT identities are constructed in the power dynamics in relation to her students, indicating the positioning clash or gap on the construction of struggling teacher identities, particularly when teachers refuse to take up or negotiate the positions the students ascribe to them (e.g., A good teacher should build good relationships with us.).

Van Langenhove and Harré (1999) opined that making choices between contradictory discourses involves a complex weaving of positions, each of which entails emotions and morals developed from individual's previous personal experiences that legitimate the choices made. Nancy's triumphant stories as a teacher in the non-VE contexts strongly anchored her emotional attachment (Line 33) and beliefs into positioning good teachers as concentrating on teaching subject knowledge effectively in classes, denying it teachers' obligation to reach out to and establish connections with students outside the classes. It also reflects in her emotional resistance to the colleagues' and the principal's discourses of 'good' VE teacher (Lines 24, 37), stifling her agency to establish rapport with her students. As Nancy frankly admitted, "I often find myself deleting students' information and messages from my phone once I finish teaching them". Thus, Nancy's positioning of herself and teaching explains and guides her actions, despite these actions evoked negative emotions. Students' rejection to cooperate with Nancy in class and acknowledge her teaching placed her in a dilemma, making her frustrated and constraining her agency to perform and construct her desired identity as a popular and recognized subject teacher.

Short story 2: They told me to just stare at the ceiling while teaching

- (1) Once, during class, I reminded a student to focus on the task
- (2) he retorted in front of the whole class, saying,
- (3) "why are you singling me out? why don't you ask other students?"
- (4) just because of that, he stormed out and slammed the door

- (5) at that moment, I felt very embarrassed, but I carried on with the lesson
- (6) to be honest, this kind of situation happens quite often
- (7) it's just that students may express their dissatisfaction in different ways
- (8) some may slouch on the desk or stop listening to your classes out of defiance
- (9) others may get into arguments with you, slam the table, and some were more intense
- (10) every time I encounter such a situation, I feel upset
- (11) I wonder, how could it be like this?
- (12) my childhood dream was to become a teacher, but then I found that I was not good at it
- (13) it's emotionally distressed, and it took a long time to pull myself together
- (14) I needed to constantly console myself and talked to other colleagues, hoping that
- (15) they share experiences and tell me that was a normal phenomenon in my future teaching
- (16) then I could become more undisturbed gradually
- (17) to be honest, the most memorable advice I received from the colleagues
- (18) was to stare at the ceiling while teaching
- (19) [seeing the interviewer's shock] it's true, more than one colleague has suggested it to me
- (20) perhaps, because I often sought their help, their most common words of comfort were
- (21) "don't worry, you'll get used to it with time
- (22) students are like that. One day,
- (23) when you can stare at the ceiling while teaching without caring about their behaviors
- (24) that's when you're completely fine"
- (25) but the truth is, I can't do that
- (26) even now, I still can't just stare at the ceiling while giving lessons.
- (Nancy's 1st interview, July 2022)

The narrative space

The characters in this short story are Nancy, her students, and fellow colleagues as more experienced vocational school teachers. Similar to the first story, the students and colleagues, significant others in Nancy's immediate context, play important roles in her teacher identity negotiation and construction.

A conflict took place in Nancy's class in the vocational school (story). She narrated that such conflict "happens quite often" and listed varied forms of resistance and confrontation by her students (story) (Lines 8, 9). On this micro-story level, we learned Nancy's emotional responses to those embarrassing situations, including her sadness ("upset", "distressed") and doubts ("how could it be like this?", "I was not good at it"). Nancy "often" turned to her colleagues for help (Story) (Line 20). Disturbing classes were experienced by many VE teachers as her colleagues deemed "students are like that" (Line 22). Positioning the students collectively, rather than individually or by classes, Nancy's colleagues have stereotyped VE students' identities negatively. Nancy initiated agency to talk to the experienced colleagues in the hope of gaining more peace and wisdom when facing students' disruptive behaviors. It aligns with the narrative frames data from the 19 VE ELTs who inclined to turn to and communicate with their colleagues in problem-solving (Story). Those situated interactions informed Nancy of other colleagues' strategies drawn from their past experiences. Her actions, or lack thereof, in response to the colleagues' advice that implied certain values expressed Nancy's beliefs, agency, morals, and identities (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020).

The narrated conflict that impressed Nancy much happened in 2019, her seventh year as an ELT in the vocational school. After the painful first year when she resorted to the escape strategy, Nancy began to seek help from the colleagues and learn to regulate her emotions (Lines 13, 14). It indicates her initiation of agency in the immediate spaces (Story and story) to develop herself as a stronger and "more undistributed" teacher in a more responsible way. Over her nine-year vocational school teaching, Nancy's struggles with dreadful classes have become normality. Her emotional suffering is recurrent (Line 10: "every time I encounter such a situation, I feel upset") and enduring (Line 13: "took a long time to pull myself together"; Line 14: "constantly console myself"). The intense negative emotions took Nancy

back to her childhood dream that disillusioned in the harsh teaching reality. Furthermore, they instilled self-doubt in her regarding her competence as a teacher (Line 12). To overcome inner emotional turmoil, both Nancy and her colleagues counted on ‘time’ to dilute and desensitize the adverse impact of woeful classes (Line 15: “was a normal phenomenon in my future teaching”; Line 16: “gradually”; Line 21: “you’ll get used to it with time”). The story then brings the timeline back to the present till which the colleagues’ advice (Line 18: “to stare at the ceiling while teaching”) has not been adopted and practised by Nancy.

VE ELT identity construction: keeping the spirits and morals as a teacher

This story starts with a student’s defiance towards Nancy that disrupted the power relations in classes. Nancy positioned herself as a responsible teacher in classes who had the duty and right to maintain students’ concentration and engagement, and positioned the student as a troublemaker who upset her enacted position by languages and acts (Lines 3, 4). The student protested his perceived ‘unfairness’ of Nancy (Line 3) and refused the distributed obligation to be focused. The student’s intense physical reactions (Line 4: “stormed out and slammed the door”) had great and lasting impact on Nancy, as she revisited this incident twice in the first interview and explained her perceptions of the conflict:

“The most crushing incident for me, perhaps, was the conflict I told you earlier, when a student challenged me directly. Yes, that’s something I care about a lot because when a student openly defies a teacher, it puts the teacher in an awkward position. I also fear that other students may imitate this behavior, thinking that they can challenge and disrespect me. I personally dislike such behavior.”

(Nancy’s 1st interview, July 2022)

This interview excerpt expressed Nancy’s wish to attain and maintain an identity as a respected teacher. She implicitly positioned students as having the duty to respect teachers, “the acts that one is expected to perform” (Harré & Slocum, 2003, p. 106). However, the defiant student in Tina’s class adopted contrary positions, shifting the power dynamics in classrooms. Nancy’s imagined stories of orderly classes were frequently disrupted by her

students (Lines 3, 4, 8, 9). Classroom conflicts were recalled and recounted by all the interviewed participants, which are a prominent theme and the significant stories that articulated and shaped their VE ELT identities. It may relate to their strong impact on teachers' emotions and cognition about teaching VE students. Further, the unpredictability of conflicts and the intense emotions elicited force teachers to revise positioning of students, work out strategies of power and mechanism of defense to keep their classes and emotions in check. In Nancy's case, the students' defiant and disruptive behaviors triggered her negative emotions, such as "fear", "embarrassed", "upset", "distressed" and "dislike". Confronting conflicts during classes, both Nancy and Tina feared of losing their power and control over the class, eroding their authoritative identities. Unlike Tina who grappled to reposition the defiant student, Nancy's student literally left her no room for further discursive negotiation there-and-then. Nancy "continued with the class" out of her mandatory duty defined by her role as a teacher to teach (Harré & Slocum, 2003). This process entails Nancy's emotional labor when she was "obliged to follow particular display rules", specifically suppressing her unpleasant felt emotions and avoiding breakdown inside the classes (Schutz & Lee, 2014, p. 173). This imposed position with feeling rules guided Nancy to repress the embarrassment and fear, keeping her spirits up to finish her class (Benesch & Prior, 2023). Since classroom conflict "happens quite often", we can infer the great work and effort Nancy used to display and enact her position as a responsible, undisturbed, and in control teacher (Lines 10, 13, 14). Classroom conflicts and the emotional labor induced by them significantly shape how Nancy perceive and develop herself as a VE ELT, as discussed further in the next section.

While Nancy's initial year of escape got her nowhere in VE ELT identity development, in this story, she began to negotiate and navigate her emotions and teacher identities in her intimate spaces. It demonstrated her awareness and desire to build stronger and more resilient teacher identities (Line 14: "I needed ..."). First, experiencing frequent emotional episodes in class, she made conscious effort to pull herself together and console herself. Furthermore, although Nancy disliked her colleagues' practices of blurring their personal and professional boundary, she positioned them as experienced, trusted, and resource for curing her emotional

sufferings in teaching. However, she made an ethical judgment to reject their suggestion (Lines 25, 26)—“staring at the ceiling while teaching without caring about their behaviors” (Line 23). It became the “most memorable” advice for Nancy perhaps because it is strongly against her moral stance. Despite their willingness to build rapport with students inside and outside classes, the colleagues suggested that Nancy reposition herself as emotionally and physically detached towards disruptive students as they did. Interestingly, Nancy considered it not her duty to build personal connections with her students outside classrooms, but she asserted and maintained her duty to pay attention to their behaviors and engagement in classes. By rejecting the prevalent feeling rule by the experienced colleagues and expressing her inability to be blind to students’ behaviors while teaching, Nancy implicitly but strongly positioned herself as a responsible VE ELT who cared about her teaching and her students’ learning. Nancy’s recurrent “upset” induced by the students’ disruptive behaviors (Lines 7, 10) demonstrates the emotional suffering in upholding this moral. She nonetheless believed that was the right thing to do. Rejecting the strategy of emotional detachment, Nancy, instead, strove for pedagogical solutions to involve the VE students, minimizing their chances for distraction. In the narrative frames and the interviews, she described at length how she had deployed the educational technology, diversified classroom activities, and designed games to enrich her classes. Although overwhelmed by frustration in teaching the VE students, Nancy still recounted cherished moments in which she observed slow but positive changes in some students’ progress, classroom interactions, and the classroom atmosphere:

“One day, out of the blue, a couple of students who had never paid attention in classes suddenly raised their hands, eager to express their thoughts and interact with me in English. That made me feel very very very grateful.”

(Nancy’s 1st interview, July 2022)

Contrasting to her first year as a VE ELT (short story 1), Nancy came to position herself as an agent: regulated her emotions, kept spirits up despite the classroom conflict, consulted the colleagues, made an ethical judgement to reject their advice, and actively explored and implemented strategies to engage VE students in class. Her “moral agency” (Rosendo, 2015,

p. 87) contributed to her ongoing construction of VE ELT identities who remains committed to her morality and spirits of the teaching profession.

Agency, emotions, and positioning: striving for serenity in vulnerability

Lasky (2005) conceptualized vulnerability as “a multidimensional, multifaceted emotional experience”, a fluid and fluctuating state of being (p. 901). Critical incidents acting as triggers can intensify or alter an individual’s existing state of vulnerability. It is intricately linked to teacher identities (Lasky, 2005; Song, 2016; 2022). Extant studies demonstrate that vulnerabilities often arise under specific contexts where teachers have no direct control or believe they lack control, such as educational reform and online teaching (Huang & Guo, 2019; Song, 2022). This study reveals that classroom conflicts, characterized as “situations of high anxiety and fear” (Lasky, 2005, p. 901), are the major trigger for the VE ELTs’ vulnerability, including Nancy and Tina. Positioning theory helps illuminate the reasons for the classroom conflicts that contribute to teachers’ vulnerability in VE context. The conflicts stem from the clash between the teacher and the students’ positionings on each other in the classroom settings. When Nancy’s first-order positioning of the students was rejected, her negative emotions were evoked. This frustrating experience reflects Nancy’s commitment to the position as a responsible ELT caring about students’ behaviors and learning. However, it also demands strong agency to insist on taking up that position as Nancy needed to manage or control the negative emotions arising therefrom to fulfil her duty. As a teacher, Nancy was positioned to abide by the dominant emotional rules in teaching profession: keeping stable in classroom and leaving negative emotions to oneself outside the classroom, if a teacher wants to maintain professional in the job (Zembylas, 2003). The emotional labor provoked in the classroom conflicts was also documented in White’s study contextualized in New Zealand (2018). An ELT teaching immigrant and/or refugee learners “carried on with the lesson” and “was trying hard not to cry” in an emergent conflict during class. Rejecting the colleagues’ advice of detachment, Nancy had to engage in immense emotional labor in multiple situations where her students challenged or denied her right to discipline, involve, or help them during

class (Lines 5-11). Her vulnerability was “a fluctuating state of being” (Lasky, 2005, p. 901) and became a cycle, as described by Nancy in the first interview:

“Actually, I didn’t have a single phase in which I felt completely uplifted or recovered because these conflicts kept happening. Just when you thought you have fixed one, something else came along that made me feel frustrated. It’s like a continuous cycle. Initially, there were lots of sadness, then I was in a continuous process of repairing myself. Eventually, I became calmer. A process roundly like this.”

(Nancy’s 1st interview, July 2022)

Since Nancy found emotional and physical detachment from her students’ behaviors in class are undesirable morally, she aimed to become “calmer” and “more undisturbed” (Line 16) when she encountered classroom conflicts. This emotional goal facilitated and oriented her VE ELT identity development. Describing the strategies and actions she took to alleviate her negative emotions by students’ disruptive behaviors (Lines 13,14), Nancy positioned herself as a responsible and growing VE ELT who faced and kept navigating disturbing class situations with accumulative emotional resilience and stability. Besides, in the narrative frame filled out in 2022, Nancy looked back on her past ten-year VE teaching experience with a clear conscience because she felt that she had not given up improving her teaching to maximize students’ interest and engagement in learning. That made her feel peace inside:

“As an English language teacher in vocational education for ten years, one area where I’m now good at is tailoring my classes to suit the levels of my students, striving to make the course design as diverse as possible. This gives me a sense of inner peace and confidence during my classes because I have put in the effort to prepare my classes thoroughly.”

This quote makes explicit Nancy’s ethical and professional obligations that she never loses sight to students’ learning. The intensive emotional labor and negative emotions Nancy suffered did not stifle her agency, but became the site of her agency (Bowen, 2021; Song, 2022). Choosing emotional detachment as many of her colleagues did or avoiding the classes as she did in the initial year would have deprived her of this transformative experience. Thus, engaging in positioning and repositioning students in classes bring emotional experiences

which are somewhat unpredictable as positioning is fluid and defeasible (Harré & Slocum, 2003). However, those emotions, actions, and experiences can revise or reinforce VE ELTs' positionings of the students and themselves, which informs their future classroom practices. In addition, opportunities to reflect, express, contest, and negotiate what kind of teachers they are and they desire to be can then emerge and be provided.

This short story witnesses Nancy's shift from the closed vulnerability in the first year when she escaped class to withdraw herself "in a defensive or protective stance" (short story 1) to the open vulnerability when she was willing to be openly vulnerable to her colleagues several years later and the researcher during the project (Lasky, 2005, p. 901; Song, 2016). It embodies Nancy's effort to reposition herself as a part of the VE communities who valued the colleges' experiences and thoughts. Although Nancy did not accept their advice, she might have found solace in knowing that she was not alone in facing the troubling students or classes (Lines 21, 22).

As the interview progressed, Nancy revealed a deeper sense-making of her frustrating teaching experiences. Elicited by the question: "Have you observed any changes in each cohort of vocational school students over the past ten years?", Nancy denied and disclosed the underlying reason for her eventually being more serene and 'undisturbed' confronting the disengaged and disruptive students. Being assigned the position as a homeroom teacher some years ago, Nancy had to fulfil the imposed duty to communicate with her students outside the classroom. Because of her homeroom teacher experiences, she got to know multiple "victimic life stories" of her students in which their weak, powerless, and negative identities are "shaped by conditions beyond his or her control" (Polkinghorne, 1996, p. 302). "It's not their fault", in the words of Nancy. The students' life stories elicited her empathy, prompting Nancy to reposition the students as 'children' from various disadvantaged backgrounds who had their own vulnerability and struggles:

"I have learned not to place excessively high demands on them (in study). I believe that most children' behaviors mirror the upbringing of their original families. I feel that every child has issues, but it's not their fault. Some of their parents are divorced, some come from

single-parent families, some are orphans, and some have parents who are completely negligent, always telling me, 'I can't handle it, you take care of them.' Besides, most of them come from rural areas or families with many children where they didn't receive adequate care and guidance. The children have to do a lot of household chores and other tasks. Their world is limited and confined, unlike children in cities who have easy opportunities to experience many things. For example, English is truly a big challenge for vocational school students. They are from impoverished or remote areas where they haven't had much exposure to English. So, they rarely have a strong interest in learning English ... Most children are extremely introverted. They reside in their own little world, playing games on their phones."

(Nancy's 1st interview, July 2022)

In the above narrative, Nancy used “child” and “children” to refer to and position her students. She implicitly positioned herself as a teacher adopting a maternal perspective and exuding personal care towards her students. This shift in positioning occurred during the first interview when Nancy began to connect her frustrating teaching experiences to the wider political dimension, expanding her discourses beyond the isolated classrooms (story) to consider the issues of power and structures (STORY). In China, like many other countries, VE schools/track that have low societal standing tend to attract the students from lower socioeconomic family backgrounds with limited choices and resources (Barak, & Shoshana, 2022; Hao & Pilz, 2021; Li, 2017; Ling, 2015; Wang & Guo, 2019; Woronov, 2016). In this narrative, Nancy not only validated this fact, but also positioned herself as an insider of the VE students' miserable and victimic stories where they were deprived of sufficient care, guidance, and freedom to develop themselves in terms of studies, visions, and characters. Repositioning the disengaged, defiant, and difficult students as a person with unchangeable 'victimic' stories behind, Nancy lowered demands on her students and maintained peaceful and composure despite conflictual or unsatisfactory class. This finding resonates with Barak and Shoshana's (2022) study on Israeli VE teachers who positioned VE students as “at-risk youth” from the “dysfunctional” families, thereby adopting “a pedagogy of low expectations” and the discourses of care (p. 10). In Nancy's case, her transformed actions and emotions lie

in her realization that the VE students' lack of interest and engagement in learning English was not (solely) a problem of her teaching skills or abilities, but also related to their past personal stories, factors beyond her control. This awareness and repositioning of the VE students allowed Nancy to reposition herself with reduced vulnerability and approach her teaching and students with enhanced compassion and tranquility.

Short story 3: “What courage led you to become a military wife?”

(1) Interviewer: Have you had any memorable stories since you taught in the college?

(2) I feel what's quite memorable is that my teaching evaluation scores for last semester (September-December, 2023) was much better than last year' (September 2022-July 2023)

(3) in the past, I found myself always at the bottom of the student evaluations

(4) in the vocational school, I didn't care at all because I was a bit of an old hand (老油条)

(5) when I came here, I contemplated whether I should pour more of my heart into teaching

(6) so, I feel I've adjusted a lot in the past six months or so

(7) Interviewer: How did you adjust? What did you do?

(8) in the vocational school, I might have just left after finishing the class

(9) I wouldn't have too much communication with the students

(10) even when our principal talked to me at that time

(11) he said, “your teaching is fine, but you need to connect with your students after class”

(12) I clearly separated life and work

(13) I felt that I should leave after I finished work

(14) and students shouldn't bother me too much with their things

(15) that was my attitude

(16) so, when students wanted to add me on WeChat, I rarely agreed

(17) even if they added me, I wouldn't reply to their messages unless it was an urgent matter

(18) now I've completely changed

(19) I feel I should get along with my students harmoniously besides the time in class

(20) there should also be some connections with them after class

(21) Interviewer: how did you build connections with your students?

- (22) after class, if they wanted to added me on WeChat, that's certainly no problem
- (23) if they chatted with me, I also replied to them, using their way of speaking or emojis
- (24) trying my best to blend into them
- (25) I think this is very important
- (26) this change seems to be very effective
- (27) making everyone feel I am an approachable teacher
- (28) not just the figure they see in the classroom
- (29) Interviewer: em yes...I read some studies suggesting that the students in vocational schools and colleges value relationships with their teachers
- (30) oh, your words remind me of a very interesting thing that happened a couple of days ago
- (31) I gave English classes to the Food Testing classes at the GZ campus, a total of 3 classes
- (32) I asked every student to use one or two English words to describe how they felt about and how they spent the Chinese New Year
- (33) I briefly shared my feelings
- (34) I said if I use two words to describe my feelings, it would be "relaxing and special"
- (35) I explained that my husband is a serviceman and I spent the holiday in a military camp
- (36) I just said that, and the reactions of the three classes were completely different
- (37) by the time I got to the third class, their reaction made me feel even more amused
- (38) it's like what you mentioned about the importance of relationships
- (39) at the end of the class, about 5 minutes left, I asked, "do you have any more questions?"
- (40) then a student said, "we have a question, but we're a bit embarrassed to ask"
- (41) she said, "teacher, you're so elegant"
- (42) I asked, "what's the question?"
- (43) she said, "You're a military wife. What courage led you to become a military wife?"
- (44) Oh! what I said at the start of the class, they were thinking about it throughout the class
- (45) probably they were interested in this matter, their point of interest
- (46) so, at the end of the class, they were still thinking about it, you know?
- (47) so, in fact, they are not really that interested in learning or knowledge

- (48) they might be more interested in things related to you as a person, or your private life
 (49) so, I was actually quite shocked at the time
 (50) I said that I actually rarely share my personal life
 (51) but I also said I could tell them a bit, as someone who has gone through it
 (52) I told them a little, and they were very interested.

(Nancy's 2nd Interview, March, 2024)

The narrative space

The characters in this short story are Nancy, her vocational college students, the principal introduced in the first story, and her husband, an army officer. The students' positioning of Nancy and Nancy's agency devoted to connecting with her students play an important role in her VE ELT identity construction. Her husband, seemingly a minor character in the narrative, catalyzes the story's progression and adds a layer of rich detail to Nancy's new experience of building rapport with her students.

This short story encompasses a transition and an expansion of spaces where Nancy's VE ELT identities were evolving. Nancy started teaching English in the vocational college (Story) after the first interview. Her practice and attitudes as a VE ELT changed massively (Line 18: "now I've completely changed") after transitioning from the vocational school to the college (Lines 5-7). Nancy positioned herself differently under two settings: "a bit of an old hand" (Line 4) in the vocational school and an agentive teacher of changes in the vocational college (Lines 5, 6). Additionally, her relationships with the students and her teacher identities were constructed beyond the physical classroom (story) to the virtual space of the WeChat platform (Story) (Lines 22-24). This signifies a notable shift in Nancy's perspectives on the boundaries between her personal and professional spaces and her investment in establishing connections with her students outside the classrooms (Lines 12, 22-24; 50-52). The "Chinese New Year," a significant and shared cultural experience of Chinese (STORY), was utilized by Nancy to enrich the class and relate to her students. Interestingly, Nancy initiated to share her personal feelings (story) and experiences (Story), allowing the students to know her as a more

multidimensional individual beyond her role as a teacher in the classroom. In sum, the shift in the institutional environment, the broadening of the interaction spaces, and the integration of the shared cultural element and personal experiences in the classroom suggest that Nancy's identities are evolving and constructed both inside her and outside in the situated institutional, technological, and sociocultural world (story/Story/STORY) (Barkhuizen, 2017).

In the first half of the story (Lines 1-28), Nancy compared her teaching evaluation scores across semesters/years (when) (Lines 2, 3) and distanced her present positions from her past identities (Line 18: "now I've completely changed"). The better evaluation results impressed Nancy the most. She has a persistent care about students' assessment of her teaching, despite her stating that she did not care about it at the vocational school perhaps due to her stubborn low ranking (Line 3: "always at the bottom"). Nancy used "when I came here" (Line 5) to mark a divide between her drastically different teacher identities in the vocational school and the vocational college settings regarding her desire to change (Lines 4, 5), interaction patterns with the students (Lines 8, 9, 16, 17, 22-24), and her views about building a rapport with them (Lines 12-15; 18-20; 25-28). She stressed the adjustment of her attitudes "in the past six months" that might contribute to her "much better" evaluation scores in the previous semester. Over that period, she agentively practised her new philosophy of getting along with her students "harmoniously" (Lines 19, 20).

Pulling the story timeline closer, Nancy told a story in a recent class, which corroborated her practice in loosening the rigid boundaries between personal and professional boundaries (Lines 29-52). Although the story in the micro-story scale spanned a short time, the small discursive interaction with the students prompted Nancy to feel further and negotiate the process of building relationships with VE students (Lines 49-52). Nancy "briefly" (Line 33) shared her feelings hinted that she was being very reserved in the personal disclosure during class, still distancing herself from the vocational school teachers/colleagues who "spent lots of time talking about their personal matters or child in class" (short story 1, Line 23). She was exploring and negotiating the best balance between teaching the language and relating to her students as an "approachable" teacher (Line 27) by revealing parts of her personal life.

Analyzing this short story's narrative space, we positioned a transformed and evolving Nancy as a VE teacher in the intersection of changing who-where-when dimensions, who continued to experience, negotiate, and construct her teacher identities in the emerging events. The following part examine her teacher identity construction through the lens of positioning.

VE ELT identity construction: connecting with the students

Through positioning, teachers invest in particular identity-categories “practically, emotionally and epistemically” (Deppermann, 2013, p. 4). In this story, Nancy invested in the identity as an “approachable” teacher (Line 27). She believed that reaching out the VE students after class is an “effective” way to realize such identity (Lines 26). Her narration of “I’ve adjusted a lot” (Line 6) and “I’ve completely changed” (Line 18) underscored her agency and transformation over the past year. Nancy’s acceptance and undertaking the duty to connect with her students were guided by her aspired VE ELT identities expressed in the narrative frames, including “being liked by my students” and “willing to communicate with them.” Connecting with her students is a duty Nancy felt she should fulfil to achieve her goal, rather than a mandatory obligation, as expressed in the second interview (Line 19: “I feel I should get along with...;” Line 20: “there should be some connections with them after class.”). In enacting the position as an approachable teacher who was responsive and friendly to her students online (Lines 22-24) and sharing personal feelings and experiences in classroom (Lines 33-35), Nancy gradually acquired her pursued VE ELT identities. During the process, Nancy purposefully and slightly blurred her personal and professional boundaries (Lines 50-52) and bridged the distance between herself and students (e.g., Line 23: “using their way of speaking or emojis”).

In the first half of the story (Lines 1-28), Nancy juxtaposed her contrasting positioning within two different institutional settings. Positioning herself as “an old hand” but “always at the bottom of the student evaluations” in the vocational school (Lines 3, 4), Nancy exuded a sense of helplessness and adopted a detached attitude to her score ranking (Line 4: “I didn’t care at all”). Transitioning to the vocational college for a while, Nancy’s attitudes and practice evolved, especially “in the past six months or so” (Line 6). Her agency was geared

towards eliciting more favorable positioning from her students, as she revealed later in the second interview:

“I want to make the students’ evaluation of me slightly better, not be at the bottom every year. Last year, the vocational school students gave me 89 points which were very very low. Um, I want to do a little better, to give myself a slight sense of fulfillment. I also learned from other excellent vocational college colleagues, adding some interesting contents in classes. So, students feel that my class is also fun, at least to make their evaluation of me slightly better in that regard. It’s a sense of mission as a teacher. If the students’ scores for me are always very low, I feel very frustrated and have no sense of fulfillment. Even if you do very well in other aspects, but the students give you very low scores, it means that they may not really recognize you in their hearts.”

(Nancy’s 2nd Interview, March, 2024)

Teacher identities are shifting and mutable with fluid positioning embedded in power dynamics. This interview excerpt disclosed the underlying incentives that led Nancy to adapt her actions and views. Although Nancy verbally claimed of not caring the scores in the short story, deep down, she consistently positioned her students as the most crucial indicator of recognizing her as a good teacher. Frustrated by the “very low” scores last year, she exerted her agency in two aspects—improving her classroom teaching and connecting with her students outside the classroom (Lines 22-24; 32-35), repositioning herself as a multifaceted, and approachable VE ELT (Line 27: “making everyone feel I am an approachable teacher”; Line 28: “not just a figure they see in the classroom”). Her agency devoted in these facets worked, as she uttered with contentment and joy that her score ranking “was much better than previous years” (Line 2). By indexing her view on establishing connections with the students as “important” and stressing her agency to achieve it as “effective” (Lines 25, 26), Nancy strengthened her position as an approachable VE ELT and shaped her practise to relate to the students inside and outside classroom (Lines 22, 23; 32-35). The small-scale discursive interaction in her recent class (Lines 31-52) reinforced her positioning of the VE students as “interested in things related to you as a person” (Lines 45-48) and implied her ongoing

negotiation in connecting with the students once adopted the new position as an approachable teacher.

By offering a glimpse into her personal stories to encourage the students to share their Chinese New Year story, Nancy positioned herself as a teacher who valued and promoted the students' participation during class. She adopted the strategy of opening and connecting herself to the students, which she refused and disliked in the past (short story 1, Lines 24: "I don't like that"). The student initiated agency to ask a question (Line 43) positioned Nancy as a friend-like teacher, although it was asked with some hesitation (Line 40: "but we're a bit embarrassed to ask"). This move symbolized that the student has repositioned Nancy from an authority teacher inside the classroom to a multifaceted and approachable person with rich life experience and wisdom to share. The student's hesitation confirmed that sharing personal experiences was not yet a frequent practice in Nancy's class, and Nancy was still navigating to assume and display the new position as an approachable teacher inside the classroom, as she mentioned in the second interview:

"At least, I try to chat with them about some unrelated things a little bit. Before, I didn't know how to chat with the students. I taught the class strictly according to lesson plans. But no matter how well I prepared the learning and teaching materials, they wouldn't feel interested. They actually prefer to communicate with you, to have a chat with you. Hmm, my mindset has changed a bit."

(Nancy's 2nd Interview, March 2024)

This interview excerpt further confirmed Nancy's changing practices and perspectives in and after adopting the position as an approachable teacher. On this occasion, the student was unsure if it was appropriate to ask the question and aware of the possible boundaries. It implies that in Nancy's classes, students were rarely assigned the position to inquire about her personal life. Complimenting Nancy as an "elegant" teacher (Line 41), the student was also trying to bridge the distance between her and Nancy and connect with her personally. "Shocked" by the question occupying the student's mind "throughout the class" (Lines 44, 49), Nancy solidified her previous positioning of the VE students as "interested in things

related to you as a person,” rather than learning the knowledge (Lines 47, 48; echoed in short story 1, Lines 21, 22; Köpsén, 2014). This discursive interaction with the student prompted Nancy to further negotiate her approachable position inside the classroom. By articulating “I actually rarely share my personal life,” (Line 50), she implicitly asserted her right to maintain personal privacy as a teacher, positioning herself as a teacher who prioritized instructional delivery during class. This ascribed position constrained Nancy’s agency to connect with the students by means of talking about personal matters much (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a), even when she has realized the importance of teacher-student connections (Line 25). It aligns with her belief articulated in the first short story: “Class is class. It should be a place for imparting and learning knowledge” (Line 25). Hence, she adopted the position of an approachable teacher with reservation and caution during class, reflecting in her two conscious acts: “briefly” (Line 33) mentioned personal feelings and experiences, and answered the student’s question with “a bit”/ “a little” more detail (Lines 51, 52).

The importance of teacher-student relationships in VE has been well-documented in the literature (Barak & Shoshana, 2022; Köpsén, 2014; Lippke, 2012; Smith & Yasukawab, 2017). VE teachers invested in relating and connecting to their students, which is “central to their teaching work and essential for teacher identity” (Barak & Shoshana, 2022, p. 10; Köpsén, 2014; Lippke, 2012). However, it is essential to critically engage in relation-building with students, especially in terms of whether the ways to achieve it would ignore or sacrifice VE students’ academic needs and aspirations by turning the classroom into the casual space for (inter)personal sharing as some vocational school teachers did (short story 1, Line 23: “spent lots of time talking about their personal matters or child in class.”). Nancy was acutely aware of this dynamic and distanced herself from such kind of teachers. Instead, she adopted a nuanced approach: connect with her students via the online platform after class, fostering a sense of closeness and accessibility outside the classroom; engage them with “interesting” tasks and contents in class, focusing primarily on language skill acquisition and development inside the classroom.

Agency, emotion, and positioning: pursuing a slight sense of fulfillment

Teacher emotions are constructed in relationships and discourses (Benesch, 2018; Zembylas, 2005). As revealed in the interview extract above, pursuing “a slight sense of fulfillment” amid her ongoing frustration induced by consistently low evaluation scores is the driving force behind Nancy’s teacher identity evolution by repositioning herself as an “approachable” teacher. The sources and direction of her agency are intertwined with the performative system that assigns power for students to position ‘good’ or ‘bad’ teachers by scoring, the result of which in part reveals the prevailing and powerful discourses of ‘good teacher/teaching’ in VE (Line 10). The low positions imposed by her students deviate from her aspired identities (i.e., “liked by the students;” “recognized by the students in their heart”), leading to her frustration. Positioning herself “an old hand” in the old environment (the vocational school) squelched her agency to make changes despite the negative emotions.

Immersed in the new environment, the vocational college, for a while and inspired by the college colleagues whose teaching approaches and attitudes impressed her deeply, she positioned herself as a learner relating to the new colleagues in the second interview (“I also learned from other excellent vocational college colleagues”). As such, Nancy engaged in self-positioning by bridging the distance between her and the colleagues, implicitly enabling her to assume a more active and positive identities in the new setting. The variety of evidence she offered regarding her changed perspectives and actions in connecting with and relating to the students in and after classes (Lines 22-28; Lines 32-35; 52, 53) supported her claim that “I’ve completely changed” (Line 18). Driven by gaining “a slight sense of fulfillment” and positioning her new colleagues as models, Nancy devoted her agency in repositioning herself as an ‘approachable’ teacher in the discourses that valued teacher-student connection. In addition, the positions Nancy ascribed to others (i.e., the college colleagues, the students) and imposed on her by others (Line 3: “... always at the bottom: line 11: the principal said, “...” informed and enabled her agency, shaping and constructing Nancy’s teacher identities.

The micro-scale classroom interaction in the second half of the story (Lines 30-52) shows how Nancy negotiated her position as an approachable teacher inside the classroom, exemplifying the fluid and situational nature of positioning (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999).

The emotion expression, “amused” (Line 37) and “shocked” (Line 49), positioned Nancy as a teacher who did not typically perform a duty for personal sharing inside the classroom in order to build her approachable identity. This is corroborated by her assertion, “I said that I actually rarely share my personal life” (Line 50). Furthermore, Nancy’s emotion reaction connected her “thoughts, judgments, and beliefs”, solidifying her positioning of VE students as “interested in things related to you as a person” (Line 48; echoed in short story 1, Lines 21, 22) (Zembylas, 2003, p. 222). As “sense of fulfillment” that came from students’ recognition was pursued by her as “a mission”, it can be inferred that Nancy will continue to negotiate and navigate the adopting position as an approachable teacher in diverse moment-to-moment interactions with her students within the discourse where teacher-student relationships are pivotal in defining good teachers. This inference is substantiated as Nancy at last decided to ‘compromised’ to share “a bit”/ “a little” in response to the student’s inquiry.

Discussion

Teachers’ discursive, agentive, and recursive self-positioning expresses and constructs their teacher identities (Deppermann, 2013; Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1991). When teachers are “engaged in a deliberate self-positioning process this often will imply that they try to achieve specific goals” by stressing agency (e.g., short story 3, Line 23: “I also replied to them, using their way of speaking or emojis”) and indexing viewpoints (e.g., short story 3, Line 20: “there should be some connections with them after class”) (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, p. 25). Throughout Nancy’s narratives, two prominent goals appeared to guide her VE ELT identity construction through positioning: the identity goal of becoming a recognized and popular teacher and the emotional goal of attaining serenity in vulnerability (short story 2) and “a slight sense of fulfillment” amid frustration (short story 3). Both goals need to be achieved in Nancy’s situated VE context; thus, her agency in positioning was subject to and informed by the prevailing discourses of ‘good teacher’ in VE context and the institutional performativity system, the positions imposed or ascribed to her by others, and the positions Nancy ascribed to others.

In Nancy's stories, her VE ELT identities were evolved and "negotiated across internal and external values, between competing beliefs about good teaching and effective teachers" (Reeves, 2018^b, p. 104). The conflicting discourses on good teachers and effective teaching in Nancy's past teaching experiences in non-VE settings and her situated VE setting endangered severe struggles in her first year of teaching in the vocational school. The caring discourses foregrounding the affective and relational aspects of good VE teacher identities delimit the expected duties of VE teacher (Barak & Shoshana, 2022; Köpsén, 2014; Lippke, 2012; Smith & Yasukawab, 2017), which were strongly resisted and rejected by Nancy in the first short story. Her fulfilling teaching experiences in non-VE contexts and the 'ideal classes' she had taught (short story 1, Line 16) shaped her beliefs on teachers' work and good teachers who focused on effectively engaging students in learning the language itself, denying it as her obligation to build connections with students after or outside class. These beliefs, central to Nancy's initial VE ELT identities, guide her "engagement, commitment and actions in and out of the classroom," including how she positioned herself, her students, and the dominant discourse on good teachers (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017, p. 178). Driven by the two goals stated above, Nancy gradually assumed the duty to establish rapport with her students after class and endeavor to relate herself to the students in and after class, repositioning herself as an "approachable" teacher. Through implicitly aligning with the dominant discourses on good VE teachers, Nancy reshaped her beliefs and invested her agency in relating to and building connections with her VE students.

Besides, Kayi-Aydar (2015^a) argued that others' voices or practices can be "bought into the narratives to reject, construct, or negotiate identities" (p. 101). Similar to the teachers in other studies who constructed teacher identities through distancing themselves from other teachers (e.g., mentor teachers; colleagues) (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; Reeves, 2009; Søreide, 2006; Sosa & Gomez, 2012), Nancy made an ethical judgement to reject her colleagues' practices of emotional and physical detachment from students' disruptive and troubling behaviors in classes. Instead, she used "moral agency" to commit themselves to better teaching to engage

her students, constructing her responsible and dedicated teacher identities (Rosendo, 2015, p. 87).

In brief, the evolution process of Nancy's identities foregrounds the powerful influence of dominant discourses on teacher agency in positioning, and the fluidity and complexity of VE ELT identity construction, which is mediated by both internal beliefs, aspirations and morals, and the dominant external discourses in her environment (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020; Beijaard & Meijer, 2017; Reeves, 2018^b).

Regarding the interaction among agency, emotions, and positioning, the clash between self- and other-positioning triggered Nancy's negative emotion, especially when she declined to negotiate with or reconcile herself to the ascribed position. Evading teaching responsibility in the first year nourished Nancy's negative emotions and hindered her robust teacher identity construction in the situated context. Her persistent frustration induced by the low evaluation scores and classroom conflicts positioned her as a struggling teacher. To survive and continue her teaching journey in VE, Nancy progressively exercised her agency to seek advice from her colleagues, regulate her emotional distress, enrich teaching, reposition the VE students by making sense of their stories in broader sociopolitical scales, and reposition herself as an approachable teacher, constructing more resilient VE ELT identities. During the process, her pursuit of "a slight sense of fulfillment" drove and activated her agency to take up the duty to connect with her students in the new vocational college setting, shaping her beliefs about the teacher attributes needed by the VE students and directing her investment in an approachable teacher identity. Thus, the positioning clash that triggers teachers' negative emotions (e.g., during classroom conflict) can turn into opportunities for constructing more resilient and understanding teacher identities, provided that teachers reflectively and agentively engage in repositioning themselves and others in harmoniously ways.

Chapter 8: Cara: A Veteran VE ELT’s Stories of Modification, Tension, and Reconciliation

Cara’s experiences as a VE ELT in the narrative frame

Having decided against pursuing a doctoral degree, Cara resigned from the university where she had taught English for six years, instead joining the vocational college. In contrast to teaching English to university students, Cara initially felt relaxed teaching her VE students due to their lower English levels. A simple language point could be taught for a long time because Cara needed to explain it repeatedly. However, the enormous contrast regarding the learning attitudes between university and vocational college students made Cara doubt whether her decision to be a VE ELT was a mistake. After running in for a year, Cara adjusted her mindset and teaching methods. Repositioning VE students as beginners who needed to be encouraged and equipped with English learning strategies, Cara felt her improvement as a VE ELT. She seemed to enjoy this profession when she positioned the VE students as “kind and lovely children,” and “having high EQ and knowing how to get along with their teachers and classmates.” Yet, Cara is annoyed by the rigid performativity reform that positions teachers as all-around, feeling “lost, running wearily in the whirlpool of teacher evaluation, class preparation, and teaching competitions”. Besides, she is confused about the value of ELT in VE. In the narrative frame, Cara expressed her desire to distance herself from the “whirlpool” of heavy workload and stringent performative policies, observing the VE communities from outside and searching for the direction for her future development.

Cara shared a story that impressed her most in the free-writing section in the frames:

“I vividly remembered a student majoring in the Mold Manufacturing. There were lots of male students in that class. Their English level was particularly low. An oppressive atmosphere permeated in the classroom. There was a male student from a vocational school. Every time he came into the classroom, he would immediately sleep on his desk till the end of the class, never lifting his head. One day, during the preliminary round of an English-speaking competition, I was surprised to see him dressing in a shining white shirt and actively involved in organizing the event. A big contrast between his positive image and his

disengaged behaviors in classroom. It was at that moment that I realized my own problems. I understood that I should explore students' strengths from multiple angles, not to equate their failures in English learning with their overall capabilities as a person. Students have things they love and things they don't love. There is no need to force it so much."

Throughout the narratives, Cara emerged as an observant, reflective, student-centered, and empathetic teacher. Her positioning of VE students was holistic, encompassing their personal attributes ("kind and lovely"; "having high EQ ..."; having diverse interests and good points), their academic challenges (e.g., "lower English proficiency"; "English level was particularly low"), and the contextual factors that may shape their learning experiences (an "oppressive" atmosphere). The nuanced positioning of her students informed Cara to claim and undertake her responsibilities which entail guiding, appreciating, and encouraging VE students, and equipping them with English learning strategies. Besides, in the narrative frames, Cara positioned herself against the rigid and demanding performative discourses by describing her feelings of "lost" and exhaustion.

The extracted short stories from Cara's interviews and online conversations mapped her VE ELT identity construction through her constant (re)positioning of the VE students, vocational course teachers, university professors and her mentor, the performative reform, and herself in multilayered contexts. The multiple positions Cara revealed and ascribed to herself in the narrative frames were adopted, modified, or reconciled in the stories, shaping and constructing her multifaceted and dynamic VE ELT identities. The fluid positioning process marks her ongoing identity negotiation in relation to others and master discourses, influenced by her agency, emotions, and other contextual factors.

Findings from Cara's short stories

Short story 1: Not many students ended up becoming chefs

- (1) I don't know since when
- (2) I began to feel that English only occupies a very small part of the students' lives
- (3) so now, I feel that I don't treat students as strict as before ... what year was it
- (4) last year (the year of 2021), I taught *Culinary English*

- (5) because that's a specialized English course, I was very strict with the students
- (6) there were some students graduated from the vocational school living in the same dorm
- (7) they didn't come to the class
- (8) when they came occasionally, I chased after them asking why they didn't attend the class
- (9) I kept attendance record, asked all students to take notes and finish a project for each unit
- (10) I taught two classes, in one class, the overall class atmosphere was quite good
- (11) those female students were very cooperative and responsive
- (12) and they felt they gained and learnt a lot in my classes
- (13) in the other class, the overall class atmosphere was always dissonant and depressing
- (14) at that time, I just stubbornly pushed through teaching the whole course
- (15) without doing any survey to ask for their feedback during the term
- (16) at the end of the semester, I had them write a final feedback or reflection
- (17) naturally, the class with good atmosphere gave positive comments
- (18) saying they felt the course was good
- (19) I could feel it
- (20) but for the other class where the atmosphere didn't feel right
- (21) after reading their feedback, I realized that many of their opinions converged
- (22) their main points were ... they felt very annoying
- (23) too many notes, tests, projects, and assignments for three consecutive lessons each week
- (24) especially the female students having very strong opinions about these
- (25) I felt that I should have identified this problem earlier during the term
- (26) oh, but because I didn't do that (got student reflections/feedback)
- (27) that semester, my teaching evaluation score was the lowest ever in my career
- (28) normally I got scores of 92 or 93, but that semester I just barely passed 91
- (29) I felt an overwhelming sense of loss
- (30) so, then I reflected on this
- (31) realizing that not many of them actually stayed in the culinary industry after graduating
- (32) it seemed they didn't love it either

- (33) being a chef isn't really a prestigious profession, is it?
- (34) then I started reflecting
- (35) I started thinking that English is really just a small part of their lives
- (36) and there's no need to push them so hard or drag them all the way in learning English
- (37) I should give them more freedom to explore what they want to do
- (38) so, this semester, this year, teaching the class of 2022
- (39) previously, I always required the students to upload the scanned notes for checking, right?
- (40) but this time, they need to take notes, but I don't require them to upload them anymore
- (41) I just randomly spot-check a few students' notes
- (42) If I find someone who hasn't taken notes
- (43) I'll just say, "no problem, I won't record your name this time. Please do better next time"
- (44) I've loosened up a bit, letting them explore what they want to do
- (45) I feel the interactions have been better this way, and they don't resist English as much.

(Cara's 1st interview, July 2022)

The narrative space

Cara and her students are the main characters in this story. Cara conjectured her students' future position that is not likely taken in the "culinary industry" (Line 31) after graduation. This supposition in part altered Cara's beliefs in her English teaching and her interaction with the students.

This story unfolds in Cara's classes (story) during a semester last year (the year of 2021) (when) and became significant due to the "lowest ever" score Cara have received within the performative system (Story). On the micro-scale level, we learnt Cara's reflexive position as a "strict" (Line 5) VE ELT by her various actions inside the classroom (Line 8: "I chased after them asking why they didn't attend the class"; Line 9: "I kept attendance records, asked all the students to take notes and finish a project for each unit"). In addition, she adopted the position as a reflective teacher in analyzing the reasons for the students' collective resistance (Line 21) to her teaching approaches and adjusting her teaching accordingly (Lines 36-42). In reflection, Cara expanded her discourses from English subject to the students' future career

choices and paths in a longer and broader temporal-spatial frame (Story/*when*) (Lines 31). Her inferences (Lines 30-32) are supported by the statistics showing that in China, vocational graduates in “a marginalised labour market position” tend to face higher job precariousness and do blue-collar and low-skilled work compared to their academic counterparts (STORY) (Geng & Huang, 2023, p. 421). It implies that Cara’s students might position the academic subjects such as English and Math as largely irrelevant for their intended jobs, deeming those academic subjects unworthy of substantial investment (story/Story). It partly explains why the students in one class resisted and disliked Cara’s demanding teaching methods. It is noteworthy that Cara painted a markedly different picture for the other class as “good,” “cooperative and responsive,” and fruitful (story) (Lines 10-13). It hints that English learning still holds appeal and value for portions of VE students who considered teachers’ strict and responsible teaching beneficial and “positive” (Line 17). This comparison between classes highlights the challenges faced by VE ELTs, including Cara and Tina (short story 3, Line 21), in catering to the diverse needs, aspirations, perspectives, and English levels of the VE students from heterogeneous backgrounds (e.g., vocational school graduates; social personnel; veteran; high school graduates) enrolled under the national initiative of enrollment expansion in higher VE (STORY) (MoE et al., 2019). Applying the identical teaching method to the same course yields starkly different outcomes and evaluation from the students.

At the beginning of the story, Cara attempted to trace back to when her view of the peripheral role of English in VE first took root. This idea seems to have lingered in her mind over some time. Cara then recalled ‘the lowest score’ incident last year, which cemented and supported her beliefs about the limited role English in VE students’ lives. She restated her perspective with greater conviction that “English is *really* just a small part of their lives” (Line 35). Cara described her strict and responsible conduct in classes last year (Lines 8, 9) as a tough and unpleasant time (Line 13). Her act of “stubbornly push(ing) through teaching the whole course” (Line 14) implied the underlying tension between Cara and her students over “that semester” (Line 27). The “lowest ever” teaching evaluation score Cara got evidenced the tension, triggering her “overwhelming sense of loss” (Line 29), reflection, reposition of

the English subject and the students (Lines 30-37), and adjustment in teaching “this year” (Lines 38-44).

VE ELT identity construction: repositioning the students at broader scales

Positioning and identity construction are relational (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a; Reeves, 2018). How teachers teach and what kind of relationships they have with their students are tightly linked with how teachers position their students and themselves (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018). The accumulation of teachers’ adopting and enacting positions construct their teacher identities over time (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; 2018; 2019^a; Reeves, 2009; Sosa, & Gomez, 2012; Tran & Nguyen, 2015). In this story, Cara enacted multiple positions. Significantly, by comparing her nuanced note-checking approaches (Lines 38-43), Cara modified her position as a rigid and demanding teacher who pushed and dragged the students “so hard” and “all the way in learning English” (Line 36). Indexing her viewpoint twice that English is “a small part” of the students’ lives and stressing her agency in repositioning herself as a facilitator who cared about the students’ learning (Line 40: “they still need to ...”) but allowed them to take more responsibilities for their learning process (Line 44: “I’ve loosened up a bit, letting them explore what they want to do”), Cara redistributed the power, rights, and duties between her and her students. This change relates to her repositioning of the students within a future orientation and an expanded context, an evolution further analyzed later.

In this story, Cara ascribed multiple positions to herself. Firstly, she positioned herself as a “strict” and responsible teacher (Line 5) by describing what she did to ensure students’ attendance and maximize their learning by notes and many projects (Lines 8, 9). Moreover, stressing *Culinary English* as a “specialized English course” (Line 5), she justified her rigorous teaching approach and her duty to discipline the students. Implicitly, she positioned the taught subject of great relevance and value to the students’ future occupation. Therefore, teachers’ pedagogical decisions and adopting positions for particular course are linked with how they position the course/subject in relation to the students. Secondly, she displayed and enacted the reflective and agentive positions by gathering the students’ comments, critically examining her assumptions, modifying her classroom practices, and evaluating the teaching

effect (Lines 16; 30-37; 39-44. Expressing the regret of not getting students' feedback earlier (Lines 25, 26), Cara persistently positioned her students as valuable and essential sources of insights that could inform and enhance her teaching. Ascribing the students such position enabled Cara's evidence-based reflective process, resulting in her adoption of a new position as a facilitator.

In reflection, Cara repositioned the students from *Culinary English* learners in classroom (story) to individuals with diverse aspirations and trajectories after graduation, which are likely to extend beyond the culinary industry with perceived lower status in Chinese society (Lines 30-32) (Story/STORY). Further, in the first interview, Cara positioned the VE students relating to their vocational course teachers in the college (Story):

“In a meeting with the vocational course teachers from the Design Department, basically, what the vocational course teachers and the Director meant, beating around the bush, was that, in reality, they believed they didn't need English, so there's no need to design an English textbook tailoring to their specialty. They all subtly expressed their opinion that their students didn't need English. So, if the teachers all think that way, what do you think the students would feel ...”

(Cara's 1st interview, July 2022)

At the meso-scale level, the vocational course teachers and the Director's positioning of English as irrelevant and useless marginalized the role of English and VE ELTs, potentially leading to a more entrenched devaluation and periphery of academic subjects like English in VE context. Such ascribed position also inhibited the VE ELTs from performing certain agentive acts such as designing a specialized English textbook (Harré, 2012; Huang & Wang, 2021). Given vocational course teachers' industry credibility and close relationships with the students (Köpsén, 2014), Cara believed these dismissive discourses as significantly shaping VE students' beliefs in a way that undermined their willingness and investment in acquiring English skills. It helps to explain one class students' collective resistance to her demanding and rigorous teaching (Lines 20-23). Her rhetorical question, “So, if the teachers all think that way, what do you think the students would feel ...” implied an escalation of impact where the

students were likely to be influenced by or internalized the belief even more firmly, as they would perceive it as a validation from the authority figures within their specialty. Being positioned by the significant others (both the vocational course teachers and her students) unfavorably, Cara sought, modified, and created positions that she considered helpful to her VE students and teacher-student relationships in the long run.

Cara's future-oriented repositioning of the VE students within wider socio-institutional scales led to new meanings, beliefs, as well as rights, duties, and responsibilities on the part of Cara, shaping how she positioned the students in classroom and how she saw herself as a VE ELT (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a). Cara modified her positions by redistributing the right, duties, and responsibilities between her and the students and adjusting classroom practices. Adopting more "loosened", respectful, and facilitative attitude and approaches (Lines 39-43), Cara assigned a more autonomous and self-regulated position to her students. In other words, the students were placed in a position of taking more responsibilities for their English learning and Cara assumed the position as a facilitator in the students' learning journey. Cara further emphasized and explained this adopting position in the interview by comparing two students' distinct interests, goals, and trajectories: one was interested and excelled in English, pursuing an academic path; the other struggled with and failed the English courses, yet possessing outstanding programming talents.

"Anyway, I'm increasingly feeling that teaching students is similar to raising children. Perhaps it's because I've gotten older and realized this truth: as you (the students) move forward in your lives, I will try to influence you, meaning bringing about positive changes in you. However, I will do so while respecting you. I can only influence you as much as possible, but I won't insist that you must be a certain way. Yes, that's the feeling I have."

(Cara's 1st interview, July 2022)

The repositioning of herself as a facilitator are borne out of her awareness that VE students are multifaceted, independent, and growing individuals influenced by their situated external discourses and with their learning experiences, interests, and career/life plans. Cara dismissed an imposing stance ("I won't insist that you must be a certain way"; Line 34:

“there’s no need to push them so hard or drag them all the way in learning English”), maintained a responsible position with flexibility (Lines 39-44; “bringing about positive changes in you;” “I will do so while respecting you”), and distributed more autonomy and responsibilities to the students to explore what and how they want to learn (English) (Line 43). Aligning with Tina and Nancy’s stories where their classroom practices and pedagogical decisions changed with repositioning of their VE students, Cara went beyond the prescribed curriculum and content, endeavoring to create more cooperative, fun, and meaningful English learning experiences for students:

“I let them collaborate to complete some reading tasks, make English posters ... various group activities and games. I lectured less and gave them more opportunities to share. This year, the students wrote in the feedback that they feel my teaching wasn’t just confined to the English textbook but with lots of supplementary content that allowed them to know and get in touch with the outside world through English language. I was not so strict with them ... I just told them you have to come (to classes) and meet the required class hours. If you skip classes, I definitely won’t let you pass. They agreed ... I feel that at least during our weekly classes, we interacted happily and harmoniously, and they feel that learning English can be fun. I think that’s enough.”

(Cara’s 1st interview, July 2022)

This interview excerpt further indicated that Cara’s responsibilities as a VE ELT have shifted from impacting prescribed English knowledge to creating better interaction, better connection, better emotions, and better cooperation in her English class. She diversified the content and tasks to engage the students but loosened up the rules in dictating prescriptive ways for students to learn (Lines 39-43), although she still clung on her duty of ensuring the attendance which was imposed by the institution policy. This reframing of her responsibilities reflects a transition towards a learner-centered, flexible, holistic, collaborative, and affective pedagogies. Hence, although the students were assigned more self-directed positions, their onus of responsibilities and desire to learn were still tempered and supported by Cara’s position as a facilitator and providers of materials and guidance (Sosa & Gomez, 2012). More

importantly, these positions enabled Cara to establish more positive relationships with the students, encountering less resistance from them (Line 45).

Agency, emotions, and positioning:

mitigate the resistance and construct rapport in teaching

Teacher emotion is constructed in relationships and “a complex dynamic system of teachers’ feelings of their students, the teaching context, the effectiveness of their own practices, and themselves as professionals” (Benesch, 2018; Yang et al., 2021, p. 2; Zembylas, 2005). In this short story, enacting the position as a rigid and demanding VE ELT, Cara experienced “an overwhelming sense of loss” (Line 29) and emotional labor in “stubbornly push(ing) through teaching the whole course” (Line 14) in an “always dissonant and depressing” (Line 13) classroom atmosphere. Tension and resistance engendered when the students positioned Cara’s teaching “annoying” (Lines 22), implying strained teacher-student relationships.

Positive teacher-student relationships have been shown as “a prerequisite for learning to occur” and important for teachers’ well-being and identities (Mercer & Gkonou, 2020; Lasky, 2005, p. 907). The intense negative emotions (Line 29: “an overwhelming sense of loss”) informed Cara of the ineffectiveness of her adopted approaches and position, and guided the way Cara modified her rigid position to mitigate the students’ resistance and build rapport with them. Aligning with Nancy’s stories, empathy is the key in ameliorating Cara’s internal tension and moderating teacher-student relationships. Cara’s affective reaction to the students’ resistance and modification of her rigid practice (Lines 38-44) positioned Cara as an empathetic, reflective, and agentive VE ELT. The following interview excerpt further substantiates her reflective and empathetic positions foregrounded in the ‘lowest score’ incident that triggered her immense “sense of loss” (Line 28):

“I felt really disheartened because I hadn’t scored that low in many years. After reflecting on it, I realized that I was too strict with my students. The students probably felt that English wasn’t that important to them, but I had set the bar too high, which led them to develop resistance and rejection towards my approach.”

(Cara's 1st interview, July 2022)

As evidenced, positionings are relational and dynamic, allowing teachers to modify and strategically employ them to navigate the emerging challenges and situations they encounter (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Cara exercised her agency in repositioning the students in broader scales, affording them greater degrees of freedom and responsibility. Concurrently, Cara moved away from her initial authoritarian and overly strict self-positioning to a more facilitator and supporter self-positioning that prioritized rapport establishment, empathy, and collaborative learning while maintaining her duty to enforce attendance. This repositioning created more harmonious teacher-student relationships and better classroom interaction that elicited her feeling of contentment, consolidating her new position as an encouraging and flexible guide (Line 45; interview excerpt: “we interacted happily and harmoniously, and they feel that learning English can be fun. I think that’s enough.”). Under the lens of positioning, teacher identities are constructed by “a sequence of positioning activity” and teachers’ recursive and durable positions accumulated across various discourses over time (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a, p. 106). Given the fact that positioning is always relational and fluid (Harré & Slocum, 2003; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), the positions Cara assumed and modified in this story could strengthen or undergo further evolution in future scenarios, as revealed by the following story Cara shared with me online nearly two years later.

Short story 2: “I need to apologize to the student”

- (1) Last semester, I taught English to a class from the Engineering Department
- (2) they gave me very low score at the end of the term
- (3) during yesterday’s class, on Thursday
- (4) I mentioned in the class that it’s OK they gave me low scores, but
- (5) I didn’t understand why they gave me such a low score
- (6) I felt that my teaching was satisfactory
- (7) so, I really wanted to know the reasons behind their evaluation
- (8) I handed out a piece of paper to each student and told them it would be anonymous

- (9) they could write anything they wanted, as long as it wasn't insulting to me
- (10) most of the students didn't know why the score was so low either
- (11) they felt that the English classes were fine
- (12) however, one student wrote something
- (13) I think I know who he was, because
- (14) in the previous semester, the students in a dormitory were frequently late for my classes
- (15) they wouldn't listen to you no matter what I said
- (16) I simply couldn't do anything with them
- (17) on one occasion, they were a few minutes late for the classes
- (18) I locked the door and didn't let them in, even when they knocked
- (19) yesterday, a student wrote on the paper, saying that it was their fault for being late
- (20) but they asked me not to lock them out anymore
- (21) it's heartbreaking
- (22) I realized teachers' drastic actions can indeed make students feel uncomfortable
- (23) so, you just asked me how to cope with the indiscipline students
- (24) basically, through communication and dialogue
- (25) I usually ask them why they are late or why you sleep during classes first
- (26) I tried to guide them, but there are some students who won't listen no matter what
- (27) if I noticed a hostile attitude towards me, I usually stopped intervening
- (28) but if the students listened to me and followed my advice, I continued to guide them
- (29) actually, I was quite moved after reading the note from that student
- (30) because he had been always late and sleeping during the classes throughout the semester
- (31) no matter how I tried to communicate with him, encourage him, or motivate him
- (32) yesterday, I jokingly mentioned to a few of them that
- (33) they did good in the first week of this term, not being late nor sleeping during classes
- (34) one student replied that it was because the last semester was too hot, so they felt sleepy
- (35) but this semester is a bit colder, so they couldn't sleep in
- (36) anyway, I believe this little note was written by one of them. I have an idea who he was

(37) he used words like “heart-chilling” and “extremely disheartening”

(38) it struck me because these words sounded quite serious

(39) so, I plan to bring it up in the coming class and apologize to them

(40) I need to apologize to the students

(41) it was indeed my mistake and I lacked consideration.

(Story from an online conversation on 8th March, 2024)

The narrative space

Cara and her students are the main characters in this short story. Both Cara and her students actively positioned each other inside and outside classrooms, the acts of which convey their identities. This story highlights the dynamic power relations between Cara and her students, as well as their (re)interpretation of respective duties and rights.

The interactions and conflict between Cara and her students took place in the classrooms (story). Like Tina and Nancy, Cara’s concern and anxiety were aroused again due to the low scores from her taught class within the institutional performative discourses (Story) (Line 7: “so I really wanted to know the reasons behind their evaluation). It resulted in her actions to seek out the reasons (Lines 8, 9). On this micro-story scale, Cara firstly positioned herself as a “satisfactory” teacher, which was supported by most students (Line 11). We gleaned more evidence of the positive effect of Cara’s improved teaching methods in the first short story. However, dissenting voices were heard from the undisciplined students. They were alienated in or excluded from the classroom space either by choice (Line 30: “always late and sleeping during the classes throughout the semester”) or by the teacher (Line 18: “I locked the door and didn’t let them in”). While the students believed it is their “fault” but also their right to be late for class, they felt “heart-chilling” and “extremely disheartening” when being locked out from entering. The classroom (story) became a place of conflicts when the students claimed their right to be physically present without any commitment to timekeeping and engagement. It relates to the college’s attendance system that compelled students to fulfill the participation obligation measured by students’ physical presence rather than their learning engagement or punctuality (Story). In the first interview, Cara corroborated that fulfilling “required class

hours” was the non-negotiable baseline. Students gaining credit for attendance is a prevalent pattern of presenteeism in higher education worldwide, and students depend on institutions that hold the power of certification (STORY) (Benesch, 2017; Macfarlane, 2013). Obviously, students’ attendance by no means guarantees their respect, engagement, and timekeeping. Cara’s attempt to enforce punctuality by locking the late students out created the subsequent tension described in the narrative.

This short story reveals the interactions between Cara and her students in the immediate context within a short but continuous time frame. Over the course of two consecutive terms, Cara exercised power and agency to manage the classes in her own way, depending on the concrete situations. For example, “I locked the door and didn’t let them in” (Line 18); “I tried to guide them” (Line 26), “I usually stopped intervening” (Line 27), “I would continue to guide them” (Line 28). These nuanced actions positioned Cara as a responsible and strict teacher with degrees of flexibility, aligning with her modified positions in the first story. Her actions in each class were in the students’ memory and constituted an important part of her VE ELT identities constructed in the ongoing narrative between her and her students. She recounted incidents of some students’ persistent failure to be punctual despite her repeated guidance and encouragement, which justified her actions of locking them out (Line 16: “I simply couldn’t do anything with them”). The tension was generated as the students gave Cara low scores last term, the reason of which Cara had not known then. Cara opted to communicate with the students at the start of the new semester, and upon uncovering the ‘truth,’ she decided to apologize to some students “in the coming class.” In the midst of this content-context space, Cara negotiated and constructed her VE ELT identities through (re)positioning the students and herself as a teacher.

VE ELT identity construction: to lock or to open the ‘door’

This story revealed Cara’s multifaceted and dynamic VE ELT identities constantly negotiated and becoming in relation to her students. The construction of her VE ELT identities entailed taking up the position as a strict and responsible disciplinarian, which generated unexpected and unaware tensions that prompted her to reflect, negotiate, and grow.

The story began with Cara's bafflement over the low teaching evaluation scores, as her teaching has improved since the 'lowest score' incident. Rather than becoming defensive or dismissive, she adopted a resilient stance by acknowledging the misalignment between her perception of teaching as "satisfactory" (Line 6) and the students' negative evaluation (Line 5: "such a low score"), expressing a willingness to understand it (Line 7), and collecting the students' comments (Lines 8, 9). Her decision to gather comments from them reflects her persistent positioning of the students as trusted and valuable feedback providers. By handing out the anonymous paper and encouraging the students to communicate with her without fear, Nancy tried to minimize the power differentials between the teacher and the students and assigned equally powerful positions to them (Kayi-Aydar, 2021^a). This act created a safe and open dialogue space between her and the students as potential critics, enabling the students to voice their authentic feelings and comments. Positioning locates identities in "what people observably do" (Deppermann, 2015, p. 370). Cara's moves to appreciate and seek genuine feedback from students positioned her as an open-minded, proactive, reflective, and sensitive VE ELT. She understood the relational nature of teaching and the potential power asymmetry in the classroom, and she was willing to gain insights from her students to diagnose and improve her teaching. Further, by specifying that the comments should not be "insulting," Cara (Line 9: "as long as it wasn't") assigned the duty on her students to remain respectful in their expressions. So far, Cara has opened a door to invite her students for a meaningful and honest dialogue.

As the story unfolded, the notes from some students prompted Cara to revisit an incident from the previous semester when she had locked out a group of tardy students (Line 18). Throughout her narratives, Cara has positioned herself as having and deploying agency in assuming the duty to maintain students' engagement and punctuality in classes (Lines 24-28; 31). Her agency to fulfil the duty positioned Cara as a strict disciplinarian and responsible teacher who aspired to build orderly and focused class environment. Further, her adoption of different approaches and strategies based on students' reactions demonstrate her rich experiences, sensitivity, and perseverance in dealing with the difficult students (Lines 25-28).

Adopting and enacting the position as a responsible VE ELT caring about her student's engagement and timekeeping, Cara seemed to prioritize keeping the peace with the students and constrained her agency to guide and discipline the students when sensing resistance from them (Line 27: "if I noticed a hostile attitude towards me, I usually stopped intervening").

This practice was developed in the first story and further explained in her first interview:

"I feel it's similar to interacting with children. If you put too much pressure on them, they tend to rebel even more. As for those who don't show up, I tease them a bit each time. Last week, I said to a student, 'Ah, you finally made it to class. You've come to your senses, won't be late anymore, and won't leave early anymore.' And then they felt a bit embarrassed themselves. It's better to give them some space. Give each other some space, as they're all grown-ups too. I think about my daughter. If I nag her too much, she gets annoyed. It's the same with students. They're just like that."

(Cara's 1st interview, July 2022)

Cara turned to the relationship with her daughter as background to account for her practice and positioning of the students. Positioning her students as "children" who may rebel and as "grown-ups" who need space, Cara drew on her parental experiences to guide her interaction with the VE students. Being aware of students' power to resist and counteract her interactive positioning, Cara tended to address students' disruptive behaviors in a soft way, such as sly humor ("I tease them a bit each time"; Lines 32, 33). By indexing her view ("It's better to give them some space") and stressing her nuanced and situational actions (Lines 25-28), Cara undertook the responsibilities of engaging and disciplining the students' agentively but conditionally, depending on students' responses to her positioning acts. As such, through positioning, Cara attached and committed to the identities as a responsible, agentive, and persevering teacher who in the meantime tried to prevent class conflicts (Line 27). However, conflicts can emerge in unanticipated moments or from teachers' actions whose consequences or potential to harm students are unintended or unaware (White, 2018), as exemplified in the case of Tina's former school teacher.

In this short story, Cara locked out the late students, taking what she later realized were

“drastic actions” to discipline the latecomers (Line 22). This agentic act, coupled with her previous relentless effort to reposition them (Line 31: “... I tried to communicate with him, encourage him, or motivate him”) aligns with her self-positioning as a responsible, agentic, and persevering VE ELT caring about students’ punctuality and engagement. At the moment Cara claimed her right to lock the door, she enacted this position with “retrospective justifications” for her move (Lines 14, 15, 16) (Harré & Slocum, 2003, p. 105). The students described Cara’s act, and by implication, her position as a teacher, as “heart-chilling” and “extremely disheartening”. Cara remained unaware until she received the notes (Line 22: “I realized...”; Line 38: “it struck me...”). Admitting that “it was their fault for being late”, the students implicitly recognized its their duty to be punctual for class and apologized for their behavior. Meanwhile, they maintained their right to be present in classrooms by “knocking” the door, which was denied by Cara. This intentional denial may impact students’ attendance record (Story) and make them lose face in front of other classmates (Tina positioned the VE students as “caring about their face”). Thus, those students positioned Cara as a cold and rigid disciplinarian oblivious to their feelings, giving Cara low scores with assigned power. Being ascribed such position prompted Cara to reflect upon the boundaries and consequences of teachers’ actions on students, even when she believed and justified that she had the right to do so (Lines 22, 41). By stressing her intention and duty to apologize to the students (Lines 39, 40) and revealing her moral concern and views on her “drastic” act (Line 22: “make the students feel uncomfortable”; Line 41: “it was indeed my mistake and I lacked consideration”), Cara positioned herself as an empathetic, responsive, and reflective teacher, consistent with the positions she performed in the first story. This tension and the way Cara addressed it thus shaped her VE ELT identities in gaining a deeper insight of the impact of teachers’ acts on students who might be vulnerable to them (Line 22).

In this incident, Cara consciously used humor again to repair the relationships with the students by “jokingly” praised the students for staying awake during classes (Lines 32, 33). It was reported in other studies that school teachers used humor consciously to develop trust and build relationships with their students (Mercer & Gkonou, 2020; Lasky, 2005; Søreide,

2006). Because of Cara's sincere moves (e.g., exposed her puzzle and care; gathered students' feedback; initiated talks with the students), the students repositioned Cara as a compassionate and open-minded teacher as they honestly explained to her why they were late for classes last semester. Cara rebuilt trust with her students by reopening the 'door' for them.

Agency, emotions, and positioning: bridging the positioning gap

This story is laden with emotions evoked by Cara's agentive moves, in particular in enforcing discipline. Cara's agency indexed and aligned with her self-positioning as a responsible, reflective, and resilient VE ELT caring about students' timekeeping and engagement while striving to maintain harmonious relationships with them. Similar to Tina and Nancy, the gap between students' positioning of their teaching and teachers' self-perception on it induced emotional turmoil, activating Cara's agency to seek the reasons behind the low scores. Her emotions and agency in negotiating the positions students ascribed to her are tightly connected to her positioning of the students as trusted and helpful feedback providers on her teaching. Assigned this position, the students activated agency to voice true feelings and comments. During this process, Cara endeavored to balance the power between her and the students which she deemed conducive to revealing students' underlying thoughts.

Turning to the tension between Cara and the students specifically. Elements of agency, emotion, and positioning are constantly interacting with one another, the process of which conveys and constructs Cara's VE ELT identities. Her identities as a responsible teacher who cared about students' behaviors, disciplines, and engagement were constructed by repeatedly and consistently taking up the position and duty to discipline the difficult students (Lines 25-28) (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a). Clearly, Cara's act of locking the door aligns with her identities, which is also a deliberate self-positioning as a responsible teacher and strict disciplinarian. Denying the latecomers' right to enter classroom is her last resort triggered by her feelings of helplessness (Lines 15, 16). While Cara believed that it was a justifiable act to fulfil her duty, the excluded students described Cara's move "heart-chilling" and "extremely disheartening", asserting the power differentials there-and-then and signaling that imposing subordinated positions on the students that deprived their expected right inflicted frustration. The students'

challenged the power relation by exerting agency to give low score to Cara and expressing dissatisfaction in the notes. Moved and struck by the notes, Cara planned apology to those students (Lines 29, 38, 40). It indicates a shift in Cara's self-positioning where she took the accountability and balanced the power relation by acknowledging her misstep (Line 41). Therefore, Cara utilized the gap in the perception of duties and rights between her as a teacher and the students to reconstruct her perspectives, relationships, and self-positioning (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Cara's emotions and agency projected in this incident strongly positioned her as an empathetic teacher reacting to her students' emotions and adopting their perspective (Howe, 2013).

As analyzed, Cara's positioning, agency, and emotions informed and interpreted each other in the short story, manifesting and shaping her multifaceted VE ELT identities. Cara reconstructed her teacher identities in equalizing the power relations between her and the students (i.e.: allowed the students to give comments anonymously; planned to apologize to the students). Her agency was activated and guided by being negatively positioned by the students, self-positioning as a responsible and reflective teacher, positioning the students as helpful feedback providers, and repositioning the undisciplined students as vulnerable to her 'drastic actions' (Line 22). Emotions (e.g., anxiety; "extremely disheartening;" "moved") were felt and evoked in tandem with the varied positioning between Cara and the students, driving and shaping Cara's agency and the progression of her storylines.

Regardless of whether it was to gleaned comments, to discipline, or to apologize, Cara's actions and emotions were anchored in her morals and responsibilities towards students' behaviors, learning, and well-being. Her decision of locking out the late students, while questionable, stemmed from her position of taking up the responsibility to cultivate a sense of timekeeping—the value Cara believed beneficial to the whole classroom environment and the students in the long run. Her emotional and behavioral responses to the students' note further unveiled her moral commitment to empathy, her students' well-being, and the mutual understanding in educating students. Her moral fabric extended beyond mere rule keeper, but compelled her to constantly reflect and adjust her positioning and identities as a responsible

educator.

Short story 3: University professors are the same, but the students are different

- (1) Interviewer: any stories during your time as a visiting scholar at the university?
- (2) those professors from the university in BJ actually have tremendous pressure as well
- (3) they had quite a few classes to teach and supervised many Master or PhD students
- (4) the Dean of the School of Foreign Languages said
- (5) they need to publish at least one paper in the top-tier core journal every year
- (6) but you can see they're really very dedicated, truly dedicated
- (7) many professors teach three consecutive classes in a row without a break
- (8) sometimes without sitting down to rest or taking a sip of water
- (9) that's the spirit of dedication
- (10) I think it's really admirable and something I can learn from
- (11) I feel that even though they don't have the performance reform like us
- (12) there's still lots of invisible pressure on them
- (13) for us, it's more of an external pressure pushing us forward
- (14) after observing them, knowing their pressure, then looking at ourselves
- (15) I think I have become more peaceful
- (16) I was very anxious and agitated before
- (17) but not as much now after being away from the workplace for a year
- (18) my husband said it'd been good for me, not just in terms of knowledge
- (19) but really broadening my horizons
- (20) I interacted with the professors, other visiting teachers, and doctoral students
- (21) the impact from that is actually greater than the book knowledge
- (22) Interviewer: did those interactions or relationships affect you as a teacher?
- (23) yes, I attended my mentor's classes, a famous professor in the field of ELT
- (24) he was very tough on his students, displaying it directly in the classroom
- (25) you know how strict was he?
- (26) if a student's PPT didn't meet his standards, or the student was talking nonsense

- (27) he'd make them stop midway
- (28) the good point is when he stopped you, he gave you thorough reasons and explanations
- (29) he gave comments in great detail, so you fully understood why he stopped you
- (30) his students were quite scared of him, not daring to say a word in his class
- (31) but I think that approach may only work for the students at that level
- (32) if we did that to our students, we'd probably get complaints
- (33) they'd feel looked down upon by us
- (34) his students were different, postgraduate students
- (35) the students at that level have very strong self-learning abilities
- (37) they can learn a lot from this professor
- (38) something our students can't handle
- (39) for our students, we can only encourage them
- (40) if they say just two English words, we have to keep praising their effort
- (41) my mentor at the university didn't give that kind of encouragement
- (42) he guided the students how to do better
- (43) for our students, it's just encouragement, saying that "you did it, good"
- (44) not about doing better, just did it, that's good and enough
- (45) so, after this academic visit year, my teaching methods didn't change much
- (46) honestly, for our students, lots of methods just can't be applied, you know?
- (47) now I may give students more specific praise
- (48) before, it was just 'good', but now I give more concrete praise
- (49) slightly exaggerated but more sincere praises.

(Cara's 2nd Interview, January 2024)

The narrative space

As the main character, Cara narrated her experiences and changes over the one-year domestic study program in BJ (Story/when). Other characters include the university professors (Lines 2, 3), the Dean of the School of Foreign Languages (Line 4), her husband (Line 18), her mentor

(Line 23, 24), the university students (Lines 34, 35), and the VE students she taught (Lines 43, 46). By relating to and positioning the university professors (Lines 2-12), and recursively positioning and comparing the university students to the VE students (Lines 31-43), Cara's admired and performed teacher identities emerge saliently in the story.

Under the domestic visiting study program initiated by the State Education Commission of the PRC in the 1980s (STORY), recruited teachers in higher education can apply for a one-year full-time visit at leading universities in China to enhance competence in teaching and research (Bao & Feng, 2022). This story unfolded in Cara's visiting university in BJ (Story) and the impressive class she had there (Story). At the beginning of the story, Cara positioned the university professors and herself in relation to the neoliberal performative discourses in higher education in China (STORY) (Lines 2-5; 11-13). This positioning brought subtle emotional shifts in her (story) (Lines 15, 16). Zooming into the micro-scale of the university class (story), Cara was aware why her mentor's rigorous teaching style and methods were acceptable and beneficial for the postgraduate students yet unsuitable for VE students. She stressed the disparity between her mentor's students and the VE students, stifling her agency in adopting her mentor's approach. It highlights Cara's self-positioning as an encouraging teacher to the VE students and distancing herself from her mentor in this regard. This aligns with the empathetic, loosened, facilitative, and respectful positions Cara took in the first and second stories.

Cara's one-year domestic visiting experience represented a significant period for her as a veteran teacher "running wearily in the whirlpool of evaluation" (Cara's narrative frame). It allowed Cara to traverse beyond the situated VE context and legitimately access various communities at the visiting university by observing professors' classes, attending academic lectures, and using the visiting university's resources and facilities. She used the contrasting temporal markers "before" (Lines 16, 48) and "now" (Lines 17, 48) to illustrate the changes within her and her teaching after the visiting journey, as acknowledged by her husband (Lines 18-21). Cara's interactions with "the professors, other visiting teachers and doctoral students" (Line 20) imply a series of encounters over the year that contributed to her expanded horizons

and nuanced positionings.

Cara positioned the university professors required to publish papers in top-tier journals “every year” (Line 5) under intense and ongoing pressures in their academic careers. Besides, by describing their extensive teaching hours (Line 3, 7) and their conduct in fulfilling the teaching duty (Line 8), Cara positioned the university professors as “truly dedicated”. Cara indexed two time dimensions—the ‘yearly’ research output requirement and the ‘consecutive’ teaching schedule—to show her awareness and observation of the multifaceted pressures placed on the university professors and the pervasive neoliberal discourses of performativity that imposed positions on higher education teachers (STORY) (Huang & Guo, 2019; Tight, 2019). At the micro-scale level, in her mentor’s class, Cara recalled the scenes where her mentor stopped the postgraduate students’ presentation “midway” (Line 27), portraying a rigorous and tough ELT professor. Presumably, the mentor halted the subpar presentations to safeguard and optimize the limited class time, spending it on detailed comments deemed helpful for his students (Lines 26, 29).

Throughout the story, Cara critically evaluated the university professors’ practices and conducts, and actively positioned them, herself, the performative reform, university students, and VE students. Her VE ELT identities were shaped and reconstructed through positioning in the new environment.

VE ELT identity construction: positioning in the new community

New positions are interwoven with and “best facilitated by beginning to live a story line that entails new positions” with new rights and duties, shaping individual identities (Harré & Slocum, 2003, p, 117). In China, the domestic visiting study programs entitle the recruited teachers in higher education to apply for being visiting scholars at leading Chinese universities. The assigned new position in new communities potentially reconstruct teacher identities through (re)positioning themselves and others with new stories and lens (Bao & Feng, 2022). The practices and voices of others in the new settings can be brought into teachers’ narratives to reject, express, construct, or negotiate their teacher identities through fluid positioning (Arvaja, 2016; Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a). Yet, teachers “differ in their willingness

or intention to position and be positioned” (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 30). Cara, a veteran teacher, experienced confusion and burnout in her teaching career, prompting her to seek and live new positions and alternative storylines to develop herself as a VE ELT by applying for being a visiting scholar. This was confided in her narrative frames:

“In the future, I want to return to university campus to allow myself some time to learn and think carefully about my future direction. Always being caught in the whirlpool of lesson preparation and teaching, competitions, and performance evaluations has left me feeling really exhausted and lost. I wanted to improve my course design, but I found a significant gap between reality and my wishes, leaving me feeling helpless. Although I have been dreaming of being promoted to associate professor, the result is not really important. The scenery along the way is far more beautiful than the destination itself. It’s just that the process along the way sometimes leaves me too exhausted, and I want to take a break. This is the feeling that education gives teachers – it’s always chasing you to keep running. Actually, I feel that I haven’t really grasped the essence of being a vocational English teacher. I feel a bit lost.”

(Cara’s narrative frames, June, 2022)

Ascribing herself “being caught” in the web of performative indicators, “exhausted,” “lost,” and “helpless”, Cara positioned herself powerless with attrition in the broader socio-institutional context (Story/STORY), different from her adopted and displayed positions inside the classroom (story) (e.g., resilient, agentic, empathetic, and strict teacher). Cara applied for and was assigned the position as a visiting scholar between September 2022 and September 2023, positioning her as an agentic teacher in exercising her right to professional development, endorsed and supported by the policy (STORY). The assigned position as a visiting scholar enabled her engagement with new narratives, facilitating her identity negotiation.

In this story, Cara positioned the professors in the visiting university as “truly dedicated” (Lines 2, 6) despite their “tremendous pressure” (Line 2). By describing the university professors’ practices and investment inside and outside classroom (Lines 2-12), Cara

recognized and identified with the value of dedication (Line 9, 10). She thereby implicitly positioned herself as being or aspiring to become such kind of teachers (Søreide, 2006). Further, giving evidence of the university professors' intense teaching workload and stringent research norms (Lines 3-5), Cara positioned the university professors and herself in relation to the big discourses of performativity and competition in higher education, either "invisible" or explicit (Lines 12, 13) (STORY). The affirming words of "as well" (Line 2) and "there's still" (Line 12) illustrate her observation of the pervasiveness of neoliberal discourses that impose multiple positions on higher education teachers (e.g., a teacher, researcher, supervisor, competitor), subtly changing her emotions upon recognizing teachers' shared challenges and pressure (Lines 14-17). After communicating with other visiting teachers, she even began to position the institutional performative reform favorably though still critically in relation to teachers:

"Some visiting teachers from other provinces talked about the performative reform, but their institutions haven't begun to implement. I realized that the performance reform seems to have some benefits. For example, one visiting teacher told me that when the leaders asked, 'who will be elected as the outstanding teachers this year?' Then two teachers reached out to the department head, and the department head casually agreed, 'Okay, it's you two.' It's very arbitrary. So, performance reform seems to be a bit fairer and more impartial. Everything has pros and cons."

(Cara's 2nd Interview, January, 2024)

The positioning of performative discourses as pervasive and somewhat beneficial shaped Cara's teacher identity by easing her emotional turmoil (narrative frames: "being caught;" "really exhausted and lost;" Line 16: "I was very anxious and agitated before"; Line 15: "I think I have become more peaceful"). Huang and Guo's (2019) longitudinal study found that an ELT's positive understanding of the institutional managerial reform discourses facilitated her robust teacher identity development. Cara's case proved that a critical yet slightly positive positioning of the mandated reforms alleviated her internal tension, constructing more peaceful teacher identities.

In the latter part of her narrative (Lines 22-49), Cara also engaged in positioning her mentor and the postgraduate students within the micro-context of the classroom (story). She positioned her mentor as an authoritative (Line 23: "... a famous professor in the field of ELT"), "tough," and "strict" figure (Lines 24, 25), claiming his right to stop the students mid-presentation if their work did not meet his rigorous standard (Lines 26, 27). Denying it her right to do so to the VE students (Line 32: "if we did that to our students, we'd probably get complaints"), Cara distanced herself from her mentor (his teaching approach), stressing and strengthening her "own oppositional self-positioning" as an encouraging and empathetic VE ELT (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; Reeve, 2009, p. 38; Søreide, 2006) (Lines 39, 40, 43, 44, 47-49). Her opposition to her mentor's approach is based on her critical evaluation and awareness of the learner differences in terms of emotions, needs, and learning abilities. Meanwhile, Cara captured the merit of her mentor's method when he assumed the duty to give detailed, useful, and constructive comments for the students (Lines 28, 29), allowing the students "to learn a lot from this professor" (Line 37). She justified her mentor's pedagogy of high expectations as operating at the postgraduate student level, as both she and probably her mentor positioned the postgraduate students as having "strong self-learning abilities" (Line 35) and needing to thrive in the competitive and demanding academic environment. Cara contrasted these with VE students, whom she positioned lacking the skills and proficiency to handle such intensity (Lines 38, 46), necessitating a more encouraging position from her (Lines 39, 40, 43, 44) and constraining her agency in adopting a demanding position to push her students to do better (Line 44: "not about doing better, just did it, that's good and enough"). This evidence further substantiates the findings in existing studies and the stories of two other participants, showing that teachers' positioning of their students significantly influences or determines their classroom practices and pedagogical decisions. (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; 2018; 2019^a; Reeves, 2009; Sosa, & Gomez, 2012; Tran & Nguyen, 2015). Additionally, Cara's decision was informed by her past experiences when her demanding position was strongly resisted by her students (short story 1). While distancing from her mentor's tough critic position, Cara learned to not give generic encouragement, but pointed out the specific praiseworthy aspects

(Line 47), inspired by her mentor's act of identifying the postgraduate students' areas for improvement. This enabled Cara to maintain her encouraging position while guiding the VE students more constructively in a positive way.

Throughout the story, Cara described and critically evaluated the university professors, including her mentor's duties, obligations, and rights in the institutional and class contexts, positioning herself as an observant and critical teacher and visiting scholar. She constructed encouraging and empathetic teacher identities by claiming and fulfilling her responsibilities to constantly and concretely praise her VE students of low proficiency to nurture their efforts (Deppermann, 2013). Therefore, living storylines in new communities with a new position broadened, renewed, and reinforced Cara's views and guide her agency in self-positioning, shaping her identities in the situated setting.

Agency, emotions, and positioning: reconciliation with peace and strategy

In Cara's short story, we see a complex interaction among agency, emotions, and positioning as she reconciled herself with the performative discourses with more peace (Line 15), and reconciled her mentor's rigorous approach with VE students' perceived needs (i.e., teachers' encouragement).

In the cited excerpt from her narrative frames, Cara initially positioned the performative policies as rigid and overwhelming ("always being caught in the whirlpool"), "feeling really exhausted and lost". These negative emotions drove her quest for and agency in seeking and adopting new positions for professional development (Yang et al., 2021). Following her year-long visiting scholar experience, Cara's anxiety and agitation were greatly alleviated, as she admitted in the second interview.

Cara positioned the university professors as confronting "tremendous" and "invisible pressure" (lines 2, 12), despite not undergoing the same "performance reform" (Line 11) as her in the VE institution. It allowed her to recognize the shared challenges experiencing by higher education teachers within prevailing performative discourses, rendering more peace in her (Line 15). In addition, Cara reduced her emotional resistance and implicitly positioned herself in the dominant discourses after capturing its benefits in protecting teachers' right to

compete in a relatively fair system with set indexes. More crucially, positioning the university professors “truly dedicated” despite their immense pressures, the models for her to reconcile inner anxieties and external demands, Cara tempered her emotional turmoil and ignited her enthusiasm to emulate their spirit of dedication (Line 10: “I think it’s really admirable and something I can learn from”). This finding demonstrates that Cara’s (re)positioning of the dominant performative discourses and the university professors enabled her to reconcile her turbulent emotions through a newfound perspective and purpose, shaping her agency and teacher identities. A critical yet slightly positive positioning of the mandated reform discourse was found to have a beneficial impact on Cara’s emotional well-being and identities, as also observed by Huang and Guo (2019).

Inside the classroom, Cara positioned her mentor as authoritative, tough, rigorous, and helpful in relation to the postgraduate students (Line 37). Cara’s observation of the students’ being “scared” and “not daring to say a word” (Line 30) hints the postgraduate students’ underlying emotional unease when their teacher assumed a tough position. It provided her with a window into how an overly rigorous teaching method could negatively impact student emotions, even for those at an advanced level. Extrapolating from the class observation and her teaching experience where her demanding teaching approaches incurred the VE students’ resistance (story 1), Cara speculated that implementing such a strict and uncompromising method would trigger even more intense negative emotions and acts from the VE students (Line 32). Specifically, she feared that it might undermine their self-esteem (Line 33: “they’d feel looked down upon by us”). Cara implicitly positioned the VE students as having weaker learning abilities and stronger emotional sensitivities (Lines 34, 35). Such positioning shaped her inclination to adopt a more encouraging and affirmative stance and pedagogy (Lines 39). It echoes the finding in Reeves’ (2018^b) study that an ELT Sarah denied direct correction of the error of a learner positioned as a shy newcomer because Sarah worried about the student’s confidence and “felt she needed praise more than correction” (p. 104). Likewise, providing ample praise, even for students’ modest efforts, Cara aimed to foster a supportive, affirmative, and psychologically safe environment conducive to the VE students’ skill and confidence

building (Line 40). Avoiding replicating her mentor's daunting and high-stakes approaches, Cara acknowledged and strategically reconciled VE students' academic needs and their emotional needs (Lines 37, 39). Rejecting the aspects that can be demoralizing (e.g., stopped the students' presentation midway), she astutely captured the value in providing focused and detailed feedback to facilitate students' growth. Her agency in crafting the praise in a more concrete and constructive manner positioned Cara as a critical, reflective, empathetic, and wise VE ELT. Cara's experience further verifies that teacher's positioning of their students, accounting for their emotional and cognition characteristics, profoundly informed their pedagogical choices.

Discussion

Cara's multifaceted and dynamic VE ELT identities are constructed in multilayered contexts through self-positioning, positioning others (e.g., the VE students; the university professors, her mentor), her taught subject, and the performative reform, and being positioned by others and policies (e.g., being positioned by the vocational course teachers; the domestic visiting program). Having analyzed Cara's stories across her data set, we identified her relatively consistent and stable positions as an agentive, responsible, reflective, resilient, observant, and empathetic VE ELT. Cara's actions, (re)interpretation and (re)distribution of the rights, duties, and responsibilities in diverse micro- and meso- contexts (i.e., classrooms; the college; the university) aligned with and reinforced those positions (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a), such as applying for and adopting the visiting scholar position, critically evaluating the university professors' practice, collecting the students' comments, apologizing to the hurt students, and adjusting teaching approaches to accommodate VE students' needs and levels. The recurrent adoption and accumulation of the aforementioned positions, as observed in her interactions across contexts and over time, constructed Cara's multifaceted teacher identities.

Besides, Cara's case illustrates how position changed and was modified in fluid and reciprocal positioning, embodying her teacher agency (Arvaja, 2016; Van Langenhove & Harre, 1999). In the micro-story contexts, Cara's rigid and demanding positions were

modified, informed by her students' emotional and behavioral resistance to those positions (e.g., short story 1, Line 22: "felt very annoying;" gave Cara low scores; short story 2: expressed dissatisfaction in notes), which triggered her senses of loss and guilt. Cara's identity negotiation was "manifested in active reflection" and accomplished in deploying "ethical, professional agency in reflective ways," including the (re)interpretation of her rights, duties, and responsibilities as a VE ELT (Arvaja, 2016, p. 393; Reeves, 2018^b, p. 105). In reflection, Cara repositioned the VE students in broader scales (e.g., future career trajectories; relating to the vocational course teachers) (short story 1) and subtler power/moral relations (e.g., whether late students can/should be locked out by teachers) (short story 2). Cara formed two salient beliefs during the process of repositioning the VE students: English occupies a very small part in VE students' lives (short story 1); teachers' drastic actions can emotionally harm the VE students (short story 2). Teachers' beliefs "strongly influence their professional decisions and actions," including which positions to resist, reject, modify, or undertake (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017, p. 178). The beliefs prompted Cara to modify her rigid and demanding positions, adopt encouraging, empathetic, facilitating, and flexible positions, and assign more autonomy, power, and responsibilities to the students to explore and learn (English).

Regarding the interaction among Cara's positioning, agency, and emotions, Cara's stories illustrate that those three elements are relational and collectively shaping her multifaceted VE ELT identity construction (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^d; Tao & Gao, 2021; Zembylas, 2003; 2005). Cara's teacher identities characterized an ongoing process of becoming formed through positioning in power relations between Cara, her students, and the performative discourses. The emotional and behavioral resistance from the students triggered Cara's feelings of loss and guilt, and activated her agency in reflection, initiating dialogues with the students, adjusting classroom practices, redistributing the rights and responsibilities between her and the students, and apologizing to the students. Cara's sensitivity and response to her students' emotions and assignment of right for them to express themselves positioned her as empathetic, observant, responsive, and agentive teacher. These positions facilitated the

establishment of trusted, equal, and harmonious teacher-student relationships that mended the rift between them and elicited Cara's positive emotions. Further, caring and seeing students' emotions informed Cara's ethical and professional judgments about what positions are appropriate for and needed by the VE students. As a result, Cara engaged in repositioning herself relating to her VE students, constructing her teacher identities that embody a deeper understanding of her students and commitment to facilitating them to grow and develop respectfully in the VE context.

Another theme in Cara's stories is the impact of performative discourses on her agency, emotions, and positioning. There is much reportage that mandated policies or other neoliberal policies that ascribe and impose multiple positions on teachers evoked varied emotions, such as inadequacy, uneasiness, dismay, "anxiety, suspicion, and frustration" (Trent & Liu, 2023^b, p. 18), "inferiority, depression, and alienation" (Huang & Guo, 2019, p. 7), "pride, guilt, shame and envy" (Ball, 2003, p. 221) (Buchanan, 2015; Reeves, 2018^b; Skinner et al., 2021; Xu, 2014). Cara initially positioned herself strongly opposing to the performative reform by describing her overwhelming feelings of exhaustion and lost. Yet, it is because she felt caught and burnout in the whirlpool of performativity that she was driven to deploy her agency to cross the boundary and took up a new position as a visiting scholar. She gained feelings of recharging and peace with the assumption and experience of the new position in the new communities. Positioning the university professors upholding the moral of dedication despite facing "tremendous pressure" under invisible rules, her admiration and purpose were aroused (short story 3, Line 10: "I think it's really admirable and something I can learn from"), relieving her senses of lost, agitation, and exhaustion. Besides, in interaction with other visiting scholars, Cara captured the positive facet of the performative reform in enhancing fairness, reducing her resistance to the reform and allowing her to reconcile herself to the "rigid" and demanding discourses with greater peace and understanding.

Numerous studies reveal that neoliberal and mandated reform discourses can impair teacher professionalism, emotion, agency, collegial relationships, commitment, autonomy, well-being, and identities (Ball, 2003; Buchanan, 2015; Huang & Guo, 2019; Moore &

Clarke, 2016; Skinner et al., 2021; Trent & Liu, 2023^b; Xu, 2014). Nevertheless, it is clear that for manifold pragmatic reasons, teachers who find themselves at odds with dominant educational discourses and policies often must learn to cope with the uncomfortable position ascribed to them (Moore & Clarke, 2016). Cara's experiences demonstrated that teachers trapped in the system, suffering from emotional turmoil and burnout, could regain a sense of peace and agency by assuming a new position in new communities even temporally and adopting a critical yet positive positioning of the mandated policies. This involves an awareness that they need not, and should not, sacrifice their ethical positioning (e.g., being a dedicated teacher in class; committing to educating) in relation to the powerful discourses aimed at directing teacher investment to better align with or serve the broader system that evaluate the institution's performance (Bowen et al., 2021; Huang & Guo, 2019; Miller et al., 2017; Reeves, 2018^b).

Chapter 9: Discussion and Implication

Introduction

This narrative study was conducted to attain a deeper understanding of the experiences of VE ELTs in China through the lens of positioning (Deppermann, 2013; Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1991). VE ELTs are underexplored and underrepresented within ELT and VE scholarship (Xu, 2023; Trent & Liu, 2023^a). As a VE ELT myself, I assumed the position of an insider-researcher to give voices to them while empowering myself to become more reflective and critical regarding other VE ELTs' and my VE ELT identities. This research facilitates greater understanding and empathy for the marginalized ELTs within an education section that has been stubbornly “positioned at the bottom of the post-secondary education hierarchy” (Wang, 2021^b, p. 1009).

This research examined the VE ELT identity construction of three Chinese VE ELTs at different career stages. Using Barkhuizen's short story approach (2016), chapter 6 to chapter 8 presented and analyzed the three focal participants' stories through which their multifaceted VE ELT identities were constructed via positioning, an ongoing process involving complex interaction between teacher agency and emotion within multilayered contexts. This chapter further synthesizes and discusses the observed mechanism underlying the VE ELT identity construction. The findings of this narrative study enriched the current understanding of teacher identity by positioning in four ways, as elucidated in the discussion section. Subsequently, I presented the implications for bolstering robust and resilient VE ELT identities and building positive and confident VE student identities. Then, the limitations of this study and the directions for future research are outlined. My concluding thoughts and reflections are also included in this chapter.

Discussion

The findings generally corroborate the notion that teachers construct their teacher identities through committing themselves “practically, emotionally and epistemically” to particular positions, such as an empathetic teacher (Tina), an encouraging facilitator (Cara), and an

approachable teacher (Nancy). (Deppermann, 2013, p. 4). The participants assumed and invested in these positions within a specific moral order or discourse. Since “positions are situation specific,” the participants’ stories across data sets also evidence Kayi-Aydar’s (2019^a) assertion that the “accumulations of positions lead to certain identities” through individual’s repeated positioning acts over time (p. 119). For instance, Tina’s empathetic teacher identity was formed by recursively adopting the position as a teacher who cared about VE students’ face, feelings, struggles, and levels. She deemed it not her right to say anything that would hurt her students and assumed the responsibilities to encourage students in multiple stories. Cara’s reflective teacher identity was constructed and solidified by frequently gathering comments from her students, which generated new perspectives and beliefs informing her teaching. She saw it her duty to reflect on her practices and fulfilled it by assigning the right to the students to comment on her teaching. Additionally, Søreide (2006) identified two mechanisms of narrative positioning supported by empirical studies (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; Reeves, 2009; Søreide, 2006; Sosa & Gomez, 2012): opposition and/or rejection of certain positions; identification with and recognition of certain positions. The VE English teacher identity construction in the current inquiry also reflect these two mechanisms. For example, Tina resisted to be a cruel teacher as her former school teacher and refused to be a ‘lazy’ teacher, constructing her empathetic and committed teacher identities; Nancy rejected her colleagues’ practices of detachment from students’ disruptive and distracted behaviors, manifesting her responsible teacher identity; Cara identified with the university professors’ dedicated position, shaping the direction of her identity construction.

This narrative study adds to the current literature on teacher identities and enriches the current understanding of teacher identity construction through the lens of positioning in four ways:

First, as positions are “disputed, challenged, changing, and shifting” in dynamic power relations (Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a, p. 16), classroom conflicts between the participants and their students induced identity tensions and negotiation. Classroom conflicts were found to be the main trigger for the teachers to make ethical and professional judgments about which position

to display, maintain, reject, or modify. By implication, which position to continue to invest in and commit to. Negotiation of various positions entails their (re)interpretation and (re)distribution of the rights, duties, and responsibilities between them and their students, manifesting and constructing their teacher identities. For example, Tina was convinced of her obligation not to hurt her students, displaying and enacting empathetic and encouraging positions in a class conflict (short story 2). Repositioning the defiant and disengaged student as focused and active reinforced her determination and practice of adopting such positions. In Nancy's narratives, we learn how she maintained her responsibilities to care about students' learning engagement in class despite the incurred conflicts inflicting emotional turbulence and vulnerability. Moreover, Nancy firmly rejected her colleague's suggested position as a detached VE teacher who avoids taking responsibilities for students' discipline and engagement in class. In Cara's case, responding to the students' collective resistance, she modified her positions as a rigid supervisor and disciplinarian by assigning more power and responsibilities to her students. This finding, via the lens of positioning, further illuminates the intricate and multifarious ways that teachers enact their agency in negotiating teacher identities and tackling identity tensions that arise in classroom conflicts. It echoes Hiver and Whitehead's (2018) assertion that conflicting events tightly link to teachers' meaning-making and identities. Negative events in daily teaching trigger unpleasant teacher emotions, demand deeper cognitive effort to make sense of the experiences, and require greater agency to resolve them compared to positive events (Nicholas et al., 2017; *ibid.*). This study reveals that the conflicting events can turn into an opportunity for constructing more understanding and resilient VE ELT identities when the participants reflectively and agentively engaged in repositioning themselves and the VE students.

Moreover, within the performative discourses, the clash between teachers' reflexive position and students' positioning of them become visible by quantified scores and rankings. For all participants, this gap undermined their confidence in the reflexive and adopting positions (e.g., a rigid disciplinarian), activating their agency in repositioning themselves to accommodate the students with a nuanced and enriched positioning of them (e.g., Tina:

“students seek novelty and freshness;” Nancy: VE students need connections; Cara: students can be heartbreaking by teacher’s drastic actions).

Second, Harré and Van Langenhove (1999) suggest that positioning is influenced by individual differences, naming capacity and intention, and localized power. The findings further illustrate that teachers’ positioning is profoundly influenced by their past and ongoing positioning experiences, beliefs regarding education and English teaching in VE, morals, and the external discourses indexing the desired attributes and expected practices of good teachers in their situated setting (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; 2018; Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018; Reeves, 2018^b). Agency in positioning is thus context-related and highly individualized, accounting for the participants’ diverse positioning acts and decisions. Specifically, teachers’ past and ongoing (positioning) experiences continuously shape their beliefs concerning education, teaching, and their morals. Their beliefs and morals, in turn, guide their dynamic positioning. For instance, Tina’s belief that “education is not simply about delivering knowledge during classes” derived from her experiences of repositioning the disengaged student as focused guided and sustained her agency in assuming the responsibilities to be empathetic and encouraging towards students. Her moral stance that “teaching is a matter of conscience (良心活)” aligned with and drove her self-positioning as a devoted teacher. Nancy’s belief in the classroom as “a place for imparting and learning knowledge” formed in past fulfilling stories in the non-VE contexts explains her initial reflexive position as a language knowledge transmitter without any obligation to establish rapport with her students in and after class. However, her moral commitment to her students’ engagement in learning guided her to reject the colleagues’ suggested position as a detached teacher and negotiate the expected position as an approachable teacher. Cara’s belief in the limited role of English in VE, developed in other’s positioning discourses (e.g., the vocational course teachers) and repositioning the VE students at wider contextual scales, prompted her to modify the rigid position and distribute more responsibilities to her students. Meanwhile, her moral stance of exerting positive influences on students and building harmonious relationships with them was upheld, leading her to assume and maintain encouraging and empathetic positions.

Third, applying Barkhuizen's short story approach (2016), the findings reveal how the participants' positioning manifest and achieve differently across contextual scales. Teachers differ in their capacity, willingness, and powers to position and be positioned (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). Unlike the pre-service teachers whose agency in teaching and tutoring their students was constrained by their limited capacities and micro-politics of the internship setting (Huang & Wang, 2021; Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a), the in-service VE English teachers in the current study agentively engaged in (re)positioning themselves and others (e.g., students, colleagues) in the micro-story contexts (e.g., classrooms) where they have (perceived) power, agency, and capacity (Barkhuizen, 2016; Trent & Liu, 2023^a). Besides, it is in these immediate spaces that strong teacher emotions would exude or were elicited, activating their agency to act and counteract. For instance, all the participants experienced emotional turbulence in class conflicts, but they kept exerting agency to reposition themselves and their students, creating better classes and teacher-student relationships. Expanding to the meso-story contexts (e.g., the college), the teachers' power, willingness, and capacity to (re)position themselves and others diminish (ibid.). The participants were inclined to accept, reconcile, or conform to the dominant discourses. For example, Cara abandoned 'lying flat' to meet the performative indexes, feeling exhausted and lost. Her belief in the limited role of the English subject was shaped by and congruent with the vocational course teachers' discourses that devalued English. This finding aligns with Vähäsantanen (2015) research, which reported that the teachers in a vocational institution had limited agency at organizational level, but exhibited strong agency in their teaching and working in the micro-scale context. Barkhuizen (2016) posits teachers have less power and agency in the macro-STORY contexts (e.g., sociopolitical discourses; ideology). The findings reveal two distinct manifestations regarding positioning involved on this scale. On the one hand, the participants drew upon the broader discourses (e.g., the prevailing neoliberal discourses) to reconcile and rationalize their situations and experiences, gaining more senses of equilibrium. Nancy and Cara repositioned their VE students in broader power relations and backgrounds (e.g., the inequality of resources and opportunities; VE students' potential jobs), which in turn led them

to adjust their mindset and pedagogy on the micro-story level. On the other hand, Tina constantly resisted and rejected the stereotypical low positions ascribed to the VE students socioculturally by repositioning them as “willing to learn” and “essentially good” in the micro-scaled classroom (story). These findings echo the stories of a Chinese VE ELT Selina in Trent and Liu’s (2023^a) study. Marginalized Selina leveraged the broader discourses on English to reposition herself as a ‘useful’ VE teacher by positioning her VE students as “future ambassadors of Chinese culture” in longer and broader contexts, and English as “a desirable skill” (p. 16). These findings reveal that teachers’ positioning in micro-level is connected to the macro-level discourses, illustrating the dynamic interplay between personal experiences and broader societal narratives which can be wisely leveraged for repositioning. Hence, despite occupying marginalized positions in institutions, teachers can still seek and deploy resources for development in multilayered contexts. Within dynamic power relations, there are always degrees of freedom for teachers to make decisions on how to orchestrate classroom interactions, set the educational goals, assume ethical responsibilities, and negotiating identities with their students (Cummins, 2009). Such awareness is pivotal in facilitating positive VE student identities, as I further discussed in the implication section.

Finally, the findings of this study illuminate the intricate interaction between positioning, agency, and emotions in VE ELT identity construction. Above all, it has established that positioning needs and guides agency (Deppermann, 2015; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999; Kayi-Aydar, 2019^a). Aligning with the existing research (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^a; 2015^b; Tran & Nguyen, 2015; Yoon, 2008), the three cases clearly demonstrated how the teachers positioned the students and themselves shaped their agentic classroom practices. By ascribing more positive and powerful positions to VE students, the teachers not only activate their agency to explore pedagogical innovation and adjustment, but also enable their students’ agency to learn and participate in class. This suggests that VE teachers provide their students with a greater sense of responsibility by designing activities that cater to their levels and interests. Such positioning can potentially unlock the students’ capabilities, boosting their confidence and engagement in learning. Besides, Tina and Nancy’s stories support Duff’s (2012) claim

that agency enables people to resist certain positions and practices, which may result in oppositional identities and actions. For example, Tina used her agency to resist her former high school teacher's practices of uttering words that hurt the students; Nancy exercised her agency to reject the colleague's behavior of 'staring at the ceiling while teaching,' constructing her responsible and committed teacher identities. These positioning acts involve the teachers' emotional resistance to certain positions.

The findings demonstrate that positioning, teacher agency, and emotion constitute a triad in teacher identity construction, wherein each element informs the others and serves as resources for identity development and negotiation. The functioning of the triad is predicated on the "inherently dynamic" nature of positioning within and conditioned by power relations (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, p. 28). The positioning clash can thus occur and is observed to trigger negative emotions or emotion swings on teachers, informing and activating their agency (e.g., adjusted classroom practices, invested in a new position, modified the adopting positions as a rigid disciplinarian). Meanwhile, student emotions (e.g., annoyed, "disheartening") can be seen as a signal for the teachers to judge which position is appropriate and needed in their situated context, guiding teacher agency in repositioning themselves, their students, and their taught subject. Teachers' successful (re)positioning experiences elicited positive emotions that affirmed and consolidated certain positions and sustain their agency in consistent positioning acts. For example, Cara repositioned herself from a rigid disciplinarian to a flexible facilitator, resulting in better class atmosphere and feelings of happiness. She thus believed in and continued to commit to such position. In Nancy's stories, pursuing a sense of peace and fulfillment drove and activated her agency in repositioning herself as an approachable VE ELT, taking up the duty to establish connection with students. Hence, emotion emerged as a vital force in the triad, both as a cause and a consequence of teachers' (re)positioning acts and experiences.

Yet, in unequal power relations, individual's agency can be constrained even if certain positioning evokes intense negative emotion. Teachers' experiences that involve their agency and emotion reflect and develop their emotional resistance or emotional attachment to certain

positions, shaping the direction of their teacher identities. For example, Tina emotionally resisted the position as an inconsiderate score pursuer due to the distressing pimple story; Nancy initially loathed the expected duty to build rapport with VE students after class since it contradicted her past fulfilling language teaching experiences. Poststructural teacher identities are “multifaceted, dynamic, a site of struggle, and shaped by power relations” (Kayi-Aydar, 2015^b, p. 138). Employing positioning theory, this study shows how teachers’ fluid positions change or sustain in relation to others and emotions embedded in power relations.

Implications and suggestions

Bolstering robust and resilient VE ELT identities

This study provides rich and nuanced portrait of three VE ELTs’ tension-filled identity construction, characterized by classroom conflicts, clash between teachers’ self-positioning and other’s positioning, their peripheral position inside the institution, pressures from the performative reform, heterogeneous VE student populations, their low English proficiency, and low learning engagement. In such challenging professional landscape, the participants still endeavored to care, to grow, and to pursue and capture moments of fulfillment in their teaching and professional experiences, however small they might be. Bolstering robust and resilient VE ELT identities is thus desired for them to survive, develop, thrive, and commit to educating the VE students with emotional well-being.

Teachers’ identity construction and professional development is a career-long process against the ever-changing sociopolitical and educational environment. Therefore, their action-oriented, moral, and reflective practices should be encouraged, nurtured, and developed (Bao & Feng, 2022; Buchanan, 2015; Miller et al., 2017; Reeves, 2018^b). On the one hand, it is crucial to guard against the extent to which the VE ELTs can or intend to resist the ascribed or assigned positions by the powerful and significant others, as well as the dominant discourses. As Moore and Clark (2016) pointed out, “resistance is seldom a simple or a comfortable business and that its pursuit is generally more easily talked about than put into practice” (Moore & Clark, 2016, p. 675). On the other hand, it is worthy and imperative for teachers to

uphold the morals (e.g., care, empathy, equality, dedication) to legitimate, safeguard, and drive their agency in navigating the spaces and leveraging the affordance to (re)position themselves as useful, hopeful, peaceful, and powerful teachers despite occupying a subordinated position in the socio-institutional contexts (Bowen, et al., 2021; Reeves, 2018^b; Trent & Liu, 2023^a).

Effective reflection for the in-service ELTs involves relating their quandaries and tension at the micro-story scale (e.g., inner world, classroom) to the meso-Story and macro-STORY scales and structures that “underline the distribution of power and valuable resources” (Gao, 2017, p. 195). This process allows them to gain holistic insights into the inherent relational and contextual nature of their identities and those of their students, reducing the likelihood of being too judgmental, critical, and harsh towards themselves and their students. Practically, it suggests that the VE ELTs can be asked to share their stories (Barkhuizen, 2016; Trent & Liu, 2023^a); meanwhile, VE ELTs can encourage and invite their ‘timid,’ ‘disengaged,’ or ‘defiant’ VE students to share their stories (Lippke, 2012) (e.g., Nancy listened to the stories of her students and found strong themes of VE students’ hurt and helplessness). Stories of support, comfort, empathy, and multiple meanings can thus emerge and be co-constructed among varied stakeholders. Academically, as “each story told and lived is situated and understood within larger cultural, social, and institutional narratives” (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 542), Teacher identity research needs “combining micro- and macro-analysis” when examining teachers’ stories and narratives (Reeves, 2018^b, p. 401). Otherwise, “such research can be only therapeutic and is likely to fail to empower language teachers” (Gao, 2017, p. 195). This inquiry illustrates the usefulness of Barkhuizen’s short story approach (2016) in unpacking language teacher identity construction in multilayered contextual scales.

Building positive and confident VE student identities

A valuable insight from teacher and/or learner identity research by the lens of positioning, including this inquiry, is that students do not become ‘disengaged in learning,’ ‘sensitive,’ ‘insecure,’ or ‘timid’ all of a sudden. Rather, they manifest and adopt those positional

identities because of the ways they position themselves and the ways they are positioned by their teachers, peers, parents, the embedded culture and the society over time (Kayi-Aydar, 2021^a; Wang, 2021^b; Wood, 2013; Yoon, 2008) (confirmed by Tina’s and Nancy’s narratives). However, for students with “negative academic macro-identities” such as VE students, they can “have moments of positive micro-identities which, if encouraged, might result in more learning and ultimately a more positive academic macro-identity” (Wood, 2013, p. 802) (e.g., Tina’s stories). It implies that VE teachers, including VE ELTs, should avoid locking their VE students in stereotypical and biased positions that reinforce those particular student and personal identities (Wang, 2021^b). Instead, adopting empathetic, innovative, and devoted positions, VE teachers can assign more responsibilities, power, and opportunities for students to learn, explore, and experience the joy of classroom interaction and acquiring a new skill/language, while giving them enough trust, patience, encouragement, and appreciation.

Limitations of the study and directions for future research

This narrative study contributes knowledge of VE ELT identities, which is underexplored in current ELT and VE teacher literature. Like other narrative research focusing on one or a small number of participants (Creswell, 2015), a limitation of this narrative study concerns the generalization of its findings. However, this limitation can be offset by the in-depth and “intimate study of individuals’ experiences over time and in context” (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 542). Using Barkhuizen’s (2016) short story approach, this inquiry revealed the complexities of VE ELT identity construction and enriched the understanding of teacher identity construction through positioning. Thus, the findings serve as a useful reference for further exploration of VE ELTs, as well as identity research informed by positioning.

Regarding the data collection methods, this study collected narrative frames data from a relatively small sample size, confining to the VE ELTs within the chosen vocational college. Future research can enlarge this narrative data set by collecting narrative frames data from more VE ELTs in different vocational institutions to make broader generalizations about Chinese VE ELTs’ experiences. Further, because positioning is relational and dynamic, methods such as class observation and student interviews, lacking in this inquire, would help

examine the effect of teachers' interactive positioning on students, and corroborating teachers' stories with multiple voices and views.

Lastly, this research illustrates that the VE ELTs experienced heightened anxiety, vulnerability, and disorientation, occupying a subordinated position in a challenging context where their aspiring or adopting positions are at times resisted, denied, or challenged by others (e.g., the VE students, the vocational course teachers). Hence, more studies on VE ELTs' emotions that integrate meso- and macro-contexts are needed. Further, it will be illuminating to distinguish among teachers' emotional labor, emotional intelligence, and vulnerability in research, as these interrelated concepts indeed manifested in the participants' stories and connected to their identity work (Benesch & Prior, 2023; Bowen, et al., 2021).

Concluding thoughts and reflection

About my students

I have encouraged and instructed my VE students to write reflection after classes since 2012. They occasionally shared their stories with me in reflection, allowing me to understand how they became VE students and how they transformed over the English course. At the end of last term (December 2023), a female student's story written on the online course platform touched me:

原本我是一个已经外出工作的人，但是我不甘心这样花好的年纪结束自己的学业，即使家里人不赞成我读大学，我还是擅自自主报考了离家比较近的学校，生活费跟学费也是由助学贷款支撑，上学这段时间我常常反思自己做的选择是不是正确的，一毕业就负债累累会不会pressure很大？会不会毕业了也找不到什么好工作？But, you know, gradually i got over it. 在上学期期间我的人生观价值观一直在改变，学习上也发生了变化，特别是英语课越来越积极，I believe I made the choice will not be wrong, I will continue to work hard to complete my education learn each subject seriously. 谢谢老师让我能重新对英语感兴趣，让我有学下去的欲望，让我意识到一位老师的教育方式有多么重要。The teacher is also a very beautiful girl, sometimes I will feel very cute, I like my English teacher very much(≥▽≤)

Figure 2 A screenshot of a student's reflection in Dec. 2023

"I was a person who had already been working, but I wasn't content to end my education at such a good age. Even though my family disapproved of me going to college, I took the liberty of enrolling in the college near home. My living expenses and tuition fees were supported by grants and loans. During the time I was in college, I often reflected on

whether I had made the right choice and whether it would be pressure to be in debt as soon as I graduated. Will I be unable to find a good job after graduation? 'But, you know, gradually I got over it'. During the course, my outlook on life and values have been changing, and there have been changes in my learning as well, especially in English classes where I have become more and more active. 'I believe I made the choice will not be wrong, I will continue to work hard to complete my education learn each subject seriously.' Thanks to the teacher who made me interested in English again. Let me have the desire to learn. Let me realize how important a teacher's way of educating is. 'The teacher is also a very beautiful girl, sometimes I will feel very cute, I like my English teacher very much(≅ ∇ ≅)''

(English translation of Figure 2)

Similar to the participants in this study, most of the VE students I have taught have had low English proficiency, especially since the implementation of enrollment expansion plan in higher VE in 2019 (MoE et al., 2019). Not a few students barely knew twenty-six alphabets. Meanwhile, I understand it might have already taken them great strength and determination (just) to be a VE student, sitting in the classroom in a vocational college. Therefore, I often ask myself what kind of classroom learning experience I want/aspire to co-construct with my students so that they feel that interaction and education are good. As Cummins (2009) held, there are always degrees of freedom for teachers to determine the educational and teaching goals in class with their students, even when the teachers themselves are constrained and subordinated in institutions. Students' reflection over the years has prompted me to explore the teaching methods that can arouse VE students' positive emotions in learning, which has become an important goal in my English classes (Liu, 2023).

Over the past fourteen years, some of my VE students gained admission to universities after VE, and further advanced as postgraduate students. Although these cases are few and far between, they always remind me not to abandon "the pedagogical practice of cultivating academic capital" (Barak & Shoshana, 2022, p. 2) or lose hope in them. Acknowledging the diversity of VE students, my positioning of them, as their teacher, should resist rather than reinforce the structural inequalities and the stereotypical and stigmatized positioning imposed

on VE students (Wang, 2021^b).

About narrative-based research

It is the first time I have conducted a narrative study, appreciating the relational nature inherent in this research approach. Assuming the position as a narrative researcher comes “relational responsibilities” with which my participants and I co-constructed spaces marked “by ethics and attitudes of openness, mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and care” (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 169). I composed the texts relating and attending to the lives of my participants and myself. In addition, I made my stories and positionality transparent from the beginning as I do not stand outside the research but a part of the phenomenon under study (Clandinin, 2019).

Another perception I gained regarding narrative research is its potential therapeutic effect on the participants. During the member-checking with Nancy, after sharing my initial understanding and interpretation of her experiences, Nancy was silent for a moment, then said:

“I feel like you’re here today to help me resolve my inner conflicts, just like a psychotherapist. You’re gradually analyzing my issues and problems I shared with you before, using your professional knowledge. Very captivating, you know? Because I rarely read academic papers and I had no idea my experiences could be read that way. Now I know why I was so fragile in the first teaching year. When I saw you referencing and presenting those points to me. I felt it’s very persuasive. They’re both feedback and reward for me.”

(Nancy’s comment in the member-checking, February 2024)

In every step of this narrative research, I tried to connect my experiences, feelings, and knowledge to the participants, reflecting from the positions and identities I had at different career and life phases. I may or may not have gone through the same tensions and conflicts as them. Yet, by conveying care, empathy, respect, interest, and genuineness, I seem to have facilitated their disclosure, reflection, peace, and growth to some extent.

Ultimately, experiences are always unfolding over time in diverse relationships and contexts. As Polkinghorne (1988) wrote, “we are in the middle of our stories and cannot be

sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives. Self, then, is not a static thing or a substance” (p. 150). A willingness to live with and embrace uncertainties has entered my beliefs and knowing as a person with multiple identities. I have become more open and calmer.

References

- Abu-Lughod, L., & Lutz, C. A. (1990). Introduction: Emotion, discourse, and the politics of everyday life. In C. Lutz, & L. Abu-Lughod (Eds.), *Language and the politics of emotion* (pp. 1–23). Cambridge University Press.
- Akkerman, S., & Meijer, P. C. (2011). A dialogical approach to conceptualizing teacher identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(2), 308–319. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.08.013>
- Arvaja, M. (2016). Building teacher identity through the process of positioning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 59, 392–402. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.07.024>
- Ball, S. J. (2003). The teacher’s soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093022000043065>
- Bamberg, M. (1997). Positioning between structure and performance. *Journal of Narratives and Life History*, 7(1–4), 335–342. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jnlh.7.42pos>
- Bamberg, M. (2006). Stories: Big or small. *Narrative Inquiry*, 16(1), 139–147. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.16.1.18bam>
- Bamberg, M. (2020). “Narrative analysis: An integrative approach”. In M. Järvinen & N. Mik-Meyer (Eds.), *Qualitative analysis: Eight approaches for the social sciences* (pp. 243–264). Sage Publications.
- Bao, J., & Feng, D. (2022). “Doing research is not beyond my reach”: The reconstruction of College English teachers’ professional identities through a domestic visiting program. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 112, 103648. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103648>
- Barak, M. H., & Shoshana, A. (2022). “Learning is not the most important thing; it’s to make them into human beings”: Teacher identity in vocational schools in Israel. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 117, 103794. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103794>
- Barkhuizen, G. (2007). A narrative approach to exploring context in language teaching. *ELT Journal*, 62(3), 231–239. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccm043>
- Barkhuizen, G. (2010). An extended positioning analysis of a pre-service teacher’s better life small story. *Applied Linguistics*, 31(2), 282–300. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amp027>
- Barkhuizen, G. (2014). Revisiting narrative frames: An instrument for investigating language teaching and learning. *System*, 47, 12–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2014.09.014>
- Barkhuizen, G., Benson, P., & Chik, A. (2014). *Narrative inquiry in language teaching and learning research* (Second Language Acquisition Research Series) (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Barkhuizen, G. (2016). A short story approach to analyzing teacher (Imagined) identities over time. *TESOL Quarterly*, 50(3), 655–683. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.311>
- Barkhuizen, G. (2017). “Language teacher identity research. An introduction”. In G. Barkhuizen (Ed.), *Reflections on language teacher identity research* (pp. 1–11). Routledge.
- Barkhuizen, G. (2019). Core dimensions of narrative inquiry. In J. McKinley & H. Rose

- (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of research methods in applied linguistics* (pp. 188–198). Routledge.
- Barkhuizen, G., & Mendieta, J. (2020) Teacher identity and good language teachers. In C. Griffiths & Z. Tajeddin (Eds.), *Lessons from good language teachers* (pp. 3–15). Cambridge University Press.
- Barkhuizen, G., & Consoli, S. (2021). Pushing the edge in narrative inquiry. *System*, 102, 102656. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102656>
- Beauchamp, C., & Thomas, L. (2009). Understanding teacher identity: An overview of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 39(2), 175–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640902902252>
- Beijaard, D., & Meijer, P. C. (2017). Developing the personal and professional in making a teacher identity. In D. J. Clandinin & J. Husu (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of research on teacher education* (Vol. 1, pp. 177–192). Sage.
- Benesch, S. (2017). Emotions and English language teaching. In Routledge eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315736181>
- Benesch, S. (2018). Emotions as agency: Feeling rules, emotion labor, and English language teachers’ decision-making. *System*, 79, 60–69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.03.015>
- Benesch, S., & Prior, M. T. (2023). Rescuing “emotion labor” from (and for) language teacher emotion research. *System*, 113, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2023.102995>
- Benwell, B., & Stokoe, E. (2006). *Discourse and identity*. Edinburgh University Press
- Bowen, N. E. J. A., Satienchayakorn, N., Teedaaksornsakul, M., & Thomas, N. (2021). Legitimising teacher identity: Investment and agency from an ecological perspective. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 108, 103519. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103519>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brockmeier, J. (2012). Narrative scenarios: Toward a culturally thick notion of narrative. In J. Valsiner (Ed.), *Oxford library of psychology. The Oxford handbook of culture and psychology* (pp. 439–467). Oxford University Press.
- Buchanan, R. (2015). Teacher identity and agency in an era of accountability. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(6), 700–719. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044329>
- Caves, K. M., Baumann, S., & Renold, U. (2021). Getting there from here: A literature review on vocational education and training reform implementation. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 73(1), 95–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2019.1698643>
- Clandinin, D. J. (2019). *Journeys in narrative Inquiry*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429273896>
- Clandinin, D. J., & Caine, V. (2008). Narrative inquiry. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 542–545). SAGE Publications.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry*. Jossey-Bass.

- Clandinin, D. J., & Huber, J. (2010). Narrative inquiry. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 542–545). SAGE Publications.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Murphy, M. (2009). Comments on Coulter and Smith: Relational ontological commitments in narrative research. *Educational Researcher*, 38(8), 598–602. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x09353940>
- Clarke, M. (2023). The subordination of teacher identity: Ethical risks and potential lines of flight. *Teachers and Teaching*, 241–258. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2022.2144823>
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2012). Narrative inquiry. In J. L. Green, et al. (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 477–487). Routledge.
- Cortazzi, M. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Falmer Press.
- Creswell, J. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2015). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (5th ed.). Pearson.
- Cummins, J. (2009). Pedagogies of choice: challenging coercive relations of power in classrooms and communities. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 12(3), 261–271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050903003751>
- Davies, B. (2000). *A body of writing, 1990-1999*. AltaMira Press.
- Davies, B., & Gannon, S. (2005). Feminist/poststructuralism. In C. Lewin & B. Somekh (Eds.), *Research methods in the social sciences* (pp. 318–325). Sage.
- Day, C. (2017). *Teachers' worlds and work: Understanding complexity, building quality (teacher quality and school development)* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Deppermann, A. (2013). Editorial. Positioning in narrative interaction. *Narrative Inquiry*, 23(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.23.1.01dep>
- Deppermann, A. (2015). Positioning. In A. De Fina & A. Georgakopoulou (Eds.), *The handbook of narrative analysis* (pp. 369–387). Wiley.
- Donato, R. (2017) Becoming a language teaching professional: What is identity got to do with it? In G. Barkhuizen (Ed.), *Reflections on language teacher identity research* (pp. 24–30). Routledge.
- Duff, P. (2012). Identity, agency, and SLA. In A. Mackey, & S. Gass (Eds.), *Handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 410–426). Routledge.
- Dwyer, R., & Emerald, E. (2017). Narrative research in practice: Navigating the terrain. In R. Dwyer, I. Davis, & E. Emerald (Eds.), *Narrative research in practice: Stories from the field* (pp. 1–25). Springer.
- Fang, F. G. (2018). Review of English as a medium of instruction in Chinese universities today: Current trends and future directions. *English Today*, 34(1), 32–37. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0266078417000360>
- Fejes, A., & Köpsén, S. (2012). Vocational teachers' identity formation through boundary crossing. *Journal of Education and Work*, 27(3), 265–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2012.742181>
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge*. Harvester Press.

- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), 777–795. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448181>
- Gao, X. (2017). Questioning the identity turn in language teacher (educator) research. In G. Barkhuizen (Ed.), *Reflections on language teacher identity research* (pp. 189–195). Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. (2000). Chapter 3: Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. *Review of Research in Education*, 25(1), 99–125. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x025001099>
- Geng, W., & Wang, Z. (2023). Vocational education: A poor second choice? A comparison of the labour market outcomes of academic and vocational graduates in China. *Oxford Review of Education*, 49(3), 408 – 427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2022.2096583>
- Georgakopoulou, A. (2007). *Small stories, interaction and identities*. John Benjamins Publishing Co.
- Giaxoglou, K., & Georgakopoulou A. (2021) A narrative practice approach to identities: Small stories and positioning analysis in digital contexts. In M. Bamberg, C. Demuth, & M. Watzlawik (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of identity* (pp. 241–261). Cambridge University Press
- Golombek, P. R., & Doran, M. (2014). Unifying cognition, emotion, and activity in language teacher professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 39, 102–111. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.01.002>
- Haidar, S., & Fang, F. G. (2019). English language in education and globalization: A comparative analysis of the role of English in Pakistan and China. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 39(2), 165–176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2019.1569892>
- Hao, T., & Pilz, M. (2021). Attractiveness of VET in China: A study on secondary vocational students and their parents. *Journal of Education and Work*, 34(4), 472–487. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2021.1946492>
- Harré, R., & Van Langenhove, L. (1991). Varieties of positioning. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 21(4), 393–407. <https://doi:10.1111/j.1468-5914.1991.tb00203.x>
- Harré, R., & Van Langenhove, L. (1999). *Positioning theory: Moral contexts of intentional action*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Harré, R., & Slocum, N. (2003). Disputes as complex social events: On the uses of positioning theory. In R. Harré & F. Moghaddam (Eds.), *The self and others: Positioning individuals and groups in personal, political, and cultural contexts* (pp. 100–118). Praeger.
- Harré, R. (2012). Positioning theory: Moral dimensions of social-cultural psychology. In J. Valsiner (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of culture and psychology* (pp. 191–206). Oxford University
- Harré, R. (2015). Positioning theory. In J. Martin, J. Sugarman, & K. L. Slaney (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of theoretical and philosophical psychology: Methods, approaches, and new directions for social sciences* (pp. 263–276). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

- Hayes, D. (2017). Narratives of identity: Reflections on English language teachers, teaching, and educational opportunity. In G. Barkhuizen (Ed.), *Reflections on language teacher identity research* (pp. 54–60). Routledge.
- Hazari, Z., Cass, C., & Beattie, C. (2015). Obscuring power structures in the physics classroom: Linking teacher positioning, student engagement, and physics identity development. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 52(6), 735–762. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.21214>
- Hebert, E., & Worthy, T. (2001). Does the first year of teaching have to be a bad one? A case study of success. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17(8), 897–911. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0742-051x\(01\)00039-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0742-051x(01)00039-7)
- Hiver, P., & Whitehead, G. E. (2018). Sites of struggle: Classroom practice and the complex dynamic entanglement of language teacher agency and identity. *System*, 79, 70–80. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.04.015>
- Holland, D., Lachicotte, W. Jr., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Harvard University Press.
- Holland, D., & Leander, K. M. (2004). Ethnographic studies of positioning and subjectivity: An introduction. *Ethos*, 32(2), 127–139. <https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.2004.32.2.127>
- Holland, D., & Lachicotte, W. (2007). Vygotsky, Mead, and the new sociocultural studies of identity. In H. Daniels, M. Cole, & J. V. Wertsch (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Vygotsky* (pp. 101–135). Cambridge University Press
- Howe, D. (2013). *Empathy: What it is and why it matters*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Huang, Y. T., & Guo, M. (2019). Facing disadvantages: The changing professional identities of college English teachers in a managerial context. *System*, 82, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2019.02.014>
- Huang, X., & Wang, C. (2021). Pre-service teachers' professional identity transformation: A positioning theory perspective. *Professional Development in Education*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2021.1942143>
- Huber, J., Caine, V., Huber, M., & Steeves, P. (2013). Narrative inquiry as pedagogy in education. *Review of Research in Education*, 37(1), 212–242. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x12458885>
- Jiang, A. L., & Zhang, L. J. (2021). Teacher learning as identity change: The case of EFL teachers in the context of curriculum reform. *TESOL Quarterly*, 55(1), 271–284. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3017>
- Jill, B. (2002). Narrative inquiry: More than just telling stories. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(2), 207–213. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588331>
- Johnson, K. C. (2006). The sociocultural turn and its challenges for second language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1), 235–257. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40264518>
- Josselson, R., & Hammack, P. L. (2021). *Essentials of narrative analysis*. American Psychological Association.
- Kaplan, A., & Garner, J. K. (2017). A complex dynamic systems perspective on identity and its development: The dynamic systems model of role identity. *Developmental Psychology*, 53(11), 2036–2051. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000339>

- Karimpour, S., Moradi, F., & Nazari, M. (2022). Agency in conflict with contextual idiosyncrasies: Implications for second language teacher identity construction. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2022.2112200>
- Kayi-Aydar, H. (2015a). Teacher agency, positioning, and English language learners: Voices of pre-service classroom teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 45, 94–103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.09.009>
- Kayi-Aydar, H. (2015b). Multiple identities, negotiations, and agency across time and space: A narrative inquiry of a foreign language teacher candidate. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 12(2), 137–160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2015.1032076>
- Kayi-Aydar, H. (2018). “If Carmen can analyze Shakespeare, everybody Can”: Positions, conflicts, and negotiations in the narratives of Latina pre-service teachers. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 17(2), 118–130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2017.1415759>
- Kayi-Aydar, H., & Miller, E. R. (2018). Positioning in classroom discourse studies: A state-of-the-art review. *Classroom Discourse*, 9(2), 79–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19463014.2018.1450275>
- Kayi-Aydar, H. (2019a). *Positioning theory in applied linguistics: Research design and applications*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kayi-Aydar, H. (2019b). A language teacher’s agency in the development of her professional identities: A narrative case study. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 18(1), 4–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2017.1406360>
- Kayi-Aydar, H. (2019c). Language teacher identity. *Language Teaching*, 52(3), 281–295. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0261444819000223>
- Kayi-Aydar, H. (2019d). Language teacher agency: Major theoretical considerations, conceptualizations and methodological Choices. In H. Kayi-Aydar, X. Gao, E. R. Miller, M. Varghese, & G. Vitanova (Eds.). *Theorizing and analyzing language teacher agency* (pp. 63–81). Multilingual Matters.
- Kayi-Aydar, H. (2021). A framework for positioning analysis: From identifying to analyzing (pre)positions in narrated story lines. *System*, 102, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102600>
- Kelchtermans, G. (2009). Who I am in how I teach is the message: Self-understanding, vulnerability and reflection. *Teachers and Teaching*, 15(2), 257–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540600902875332>
- Kocabaş-Gedik, P., & Hart, D. O. (2021). “It’s not like that at all”: A poststructuralist case study on language teacher identity and emotional labor. *Journal of Language Identity and Education*, 20(2), 103–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2020.1726756>
- Köpsén, S. (2014). How vocational teachers describe their vocational teacher identity. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 66(2), 194–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2014.894554>
- Kubanyiova, M. (2016). Understanding language teachers’ sense-making in action through the prism of future self guides. In G. Barkhuizen (Ed.), *Reflections on language teacher identity research* (pp. 100–106). Routledge.

- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2008). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Lasky, S. (2005). A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 21*(8), 899–916. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.06.003>
- Leigh, L. (2019). “Of course I have changed!”: A narrative inquiry of foreign teachers’ professional identities in Shenzhen, China. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 86*, 102905. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.102905>
- Li, J. (2017). What does it mean to be vocational teachers in China – Results from a survey among Chinese vocational teachers. In M. Pilz (Ed.), *Vocational education and training in times of economic crisis* (pp. 255–268). Springer.
- Ling, M. (2015). “Bad students go to vocational schools!”: Education, social reproduction and migrant youth in urban China. *China Journal, 73*, 108–131. <https://doi.org/10.1086/679271>
- Lippke, L. (2012). “Who am I supposed to let down?” The caring work and emotional practices of vocational educational training teachers working with potential drop-out students. *Journal of Workplace Learning, 24*(7/8), 461–472. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13665621211260972>
- Liu, X., (2023). 促进高职生积极情绪的教师课堂行为研究—基于学生视角的扎根分析 [A study on teacher class behaviors that promote positive emotions among vocational college students: A grounded analysis from students’ perspective]. *中国职业技术教育, 32*, 58–66.
- Liu, Y., & Xu, Y. (2011). Inclusion or exclusion?: A narrative inquiry of a language teacher’s identity experience in the ‘new work order’ of competing pedagogies. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 27*(3), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.10.013>
- Liu, Y., & Xu, Y. (2013). The trajectory of learning in a teacher community of practice: A narrative inquiry of a language teacher’s identity in the workplace. *Research Papers in Education, 28*(2), 176–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2011.610899>
- Liu, Y., & Li, X. (2023). A narrative inquiry of transnational language teachers’ professional identity construction. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education, 1–18*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2022.2160332>
- Macfarlane, B. (2013). The surveillance of learning: A critical analysis of university attendance policies. *Higher Education Quarterly, 67*(4), 358–373. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12016>
- Majumdar, S. (2017). Foreword: Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and skills at the center stage. In M. Pilz (Ed.), *Vocational education and training in times of economic crisis* (pp. vii–xii). Springer.
- Martel, J., & Wang, A. (2015). Language teacher identity. In M. Bigelow & J. Enns-Kananen (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of educational linguistics* (pp. 289–300). Routledge.
- Mercer, S., & Gkonou, C. (2020). Relationships and good language teachers. In C. Griffiths & Z. Tajeddin (Eds.), *Lessons from good language teachers* (pp. 144–174). Cambridge University Press.

- Merriam, S. B., & Grenier, R. S. (2019). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Miller, J. (2009). Teacher identity. In A. Burns & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to second language teacher education* (pp. 172–181). Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, E. R. (2010). Agency in the making: Adult immigrants' accounts of language learning and work. *TESOL Quarterly*, 44(3), 465–487. <https://doi.org/10.5054/tq.2010.226854>
- Miller, E. R., Morgan, B., & Medina, A. L. (2017). Exploring language teacher identity work as ethical self-formation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 101(S1), 91–105. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12371>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, M. A., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Ministry of Education, P. R. China. (2014). *Ministry of Education on comprehensively deepening the curriculum reform: Opinions about the implementation of the mission of moral and virtue education*. <http://www.moe.edu.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s7054/201404/167226.html>
- Ministry of Education, P. R. China. (2015). *Opinions of the Ministry of Education on deepening the group-based operation of vocational education*. https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2015/content_2937331.htm
- Ministry of Education, P. R. China. National Development and Reform Commission. Ministry of Finance, P. R. China. Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, P. R. China. Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, P. R. China. Ministry of Veteran Affairs, P. R. China. (2019). *Implementation plan for enrollment expansion in vocational education*. http://www.gov.cn/fuwu/2019-05/16/content_5392061.htm
- Ministry of Education, P. R. China. (2021). *English curriculum standards of higher vocational education*. http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A07/moe_737/s3876_qt/202104/W020210409562365459062.pdf
- Ministry of Education, P. R. China. (2022). *2022 National statistical bulletin on educational development*. http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/sjzl_fztjgb/202307/t20230705_1067278.html
- Moore, A., Edwards, G., Halpin, D., & George, R. (2002). Compliance, resistance and pragmatism: The (re)construction of schoolteacher identities in a period of intensive educational reform. *British Educational Research Journal*, 28(4), 551–565. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192022000005823>
- Moore, A., & Clarke, M. (2016). 'Cruel optimism': Teacher attachment to professionalism in an era of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 31(5), 666–677. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2016.1160293>
- Nazari, M., De Costa, P. I., & Karimpour, S. (2023). The role of institutional policy in English language teacher autonomy, agency, and identity: A poststructural

- perspective. *Language Teaching Research*, 136216882211434. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688221143476>
- Nguyen, C., Trent, J. G., & Nguyen, T. P. (2022). 'How come they struggle with such simple work?': parents' perceptions of language teacher identity and teaching practice. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 53(3), 275–292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764x.2022.2094894>
- Nichols, S. L., Schutz, P. A., Rodgers, K., & Bilica, K. (2016). Early career teachers' emotion and emerging teacher identities. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2016.1211099>
- Norton, B., & Morgan, B. (2012). Poststructuralism. In C. A. Chapelle (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics* (pp. 1–6). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- O'Keeffe, S., & Skerritt, C. (2021). Exploring teacher identity using poststructural tools. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 44(2), 179–192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727x.2020.1753691>
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2021). OECD reviews of vocational education and training. Teachers and leaders in vocational education and training (*OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training*). OECD.
- Orr, K. (2019). VET teachers and trainers. In D. Guile, & L. Unwin (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of vocational education and training* (pp. 329–348). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. State University of New York Press.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(1), 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839950080103>
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1996). Transformative narratives: From victimic to agentic life plots. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 50(4), 299–305. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.50.4.299>
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2007). Validity issues in narrative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(4), 471–486. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406297670>
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher agency: An ecological approach*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Reeves, J. (2009). Teacher investment in learner identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(1), 34–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2008.06.003>
- Reeves, J. (2018a). Teacher identity. In J. Lontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching* (1st ed.) (pp. 1–7). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Reeves, J. (2018b). Teacher identity work in neoliberal schooling spaces. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 72, 98–106. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.03.002>
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences* (1st ed). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Rodgers, C. R., & Scott, K. H. (2008). The development of the personal self and professional identity in learning to teach. In M. Cochran-Smith, S. Feiman-Nemser, D. J. McIntyre,

- & K. E. Demers (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education* (pp. 732–755). Routledge.
- Rogers, C. R., & Wetzel, M. M. (2013). Studying agency in literacy teacher education: A layered approach to positive discourse analysis. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 10(1), 62–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2013.753845>
- Rosenberg, G. R. (2015). *Portrait of a moral agent teacher*. Routledge.
- Rözer, J. J., & Bol, T. (2019). Labour market effects of general and vocational education over the life-cycle and across time: Accounting for age, period, and cohort effects. *European Sociological Review*, 35(5), 701–717. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcz031>
- Ruohotie-Lyhty, M. (2013). Struggling for a professional identity: Two newly qualified language teachers' identity narratives during the first years at work. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 30, 120–129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.11.002>
- Sarastuen, N. K. (2019). From vocational worker to vocational teacher: A study of identity transition and loss. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 72(3), 333–349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2019.1607533>
- Schutz, P. A., & Lee, M. (2014). *Teacher emotion, emotional labor, and teacher identity*. In J. de D. Martínez Agudo (Ed.), *English as a foreign language teacher education: Current perspectives and challenges* (pp. 169–186). Rodopi.
- Sfard, A., & Prusak, A. (2005). Telling Identities: In search of an analytic tool for investigating learning as a culturally shaped activity. *Educational Researcher*, 34(4), 14–22. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x034004014>
- Shahri, M. N. N. (2018). The development of teacher identity, emotions and practice: Before and after graduation from an MA TESOL program. *System*, 78, 91–103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.08.003>
- Skinner, B., Leavey, G., & Rothi, D. (2021). Managerialism and teacher professional identity: Impact on well-being among teachers in the UK. *Educational Review*, 73(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2018.1556205>
- Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2008). Contrasting perspectives on narrating selves and identities: an invitation to dialogue. *Qualitative Research*, 8(1), 5–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794107085221>
- Smith, E., & Yasukawa, K. (2017). What makes a good VET teacher? Views of Australian VET teachers and students. *International Journal of Training Research*, 15(1), 23–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14480220.2017.1355301>
- Song, J. T. (2016). Emotions and language teacher identity: Conflicts, vulnerability, and transformation. *TESOL Quarterly*, 50(3), 631–654. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.312>
- Song, J. T. (2022). The emotional landscape of online teaching: An autoethnographic exploration of vulnerability and emotional reflexivity. *System*, 106, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2022.102774>
- Sosa, T., & Gomez, K. (2012). Positioning urban teachers as effective. *Education and Urban Society*, 44(5), 590–608. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124511403995>
- Søreide, G. E. (2006). Narrative construction of teacher identity: positioning and negotiation. *Teachers and Teaching*, 12(5), 527–547.

- <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540600600832247>
- Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (2022). "Vocational education law of the People's Republic of China." http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-04/21/content_5686375.htm
- State Council. (2017). "The guidelines of promoting the cooperation of vocational school and enterprise." http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-12/19/content_5248564.htm
- State Council. (2019). "Plans on implementing national vocational education reform." http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2019-02/13/content_5365341.htm?trs=1
- State Council. (2022). "The guidelines for deepening the reform of modern vocational education system construction." http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2022-12/21/content_5732986.htm
- Tao, J., & Gao, X. (2017). Teacher agency and identity commitment in curricular reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 63, 346–355. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.01.010>
- Tao, J., & Gao, X. (2018). Identity constructions of ESP teachers in a Chinese university. *English for Specific Purposes*, 49, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2017.09.003>
- Tao, J., & Gao, X. (2021). *Language Teacher Agency*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108916943>
- Tan, H., Zhao, K., & Dervin, F. (2021). Experiences of and preparedness for intercultural teacherhood in higher education: Non-specialist English teachers' positioning, agency and sense of legitimacy in China. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 22(1), 68–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2021.1988631>
- Tight, M. (2019). The neoliberal turn in Higher Education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 73(3), 273–284. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12197>
- Tran, L. T., & Nguyen, N. T. (2015). Re-imagining teachers' identity and professionalism under the condition of international education. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(8), 958–973. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1005866>
- Trent, J. (2012a). Innovation as identity construction in language teaching and learning: Case studies from Hong Kong. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 8(1), 56–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2012.750664>
- Trent, J. (2012b). The discursive positioning of teachers: Native-speaking English teachers and educational discourse in Hong Kong. *TESOL Quarterly*, 46(1), 104–126. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.1>
- Trent, J. (2016). Discourse, agency and teacher attrition: Exploring stories to leave by amongst former early career English language teachers in Hong Kong. *Research Papers in Education*, 32(1), 84–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2016.1144215>
- Trent, J., & Nguyen, C. D. (2021). The discursive positioning of primary school English language teachers: An exploration of the perspectives of teachers in Vietnam. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 30(1), 71–81. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-020-00515-z>
- Trent, J., & Liu, X. (2023a). A 'useful' vocational education English language teacher by any

- other name. Short stories of teacher identity construction and reconstruction in vocational education in China. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2023.2169840>
- Trent, J., & Liu, X. (2023b). You better watch out, short stories of competition, surveillance, and compliance in the construction of vocational education English language teachers' professional identities in China. *Research in Post-compulsory Education*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2023.2253650>
- Tsui, A. B. M. (2007). Complexities of identity formation: A narrative inquiry of an EFL teacher. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(4), 657–680. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1545-7249.2007.tb00098.x>
- Tyler, M. A., & Dymock, D. (2021). Constructing a professional identity in VET: Teacher perspectives. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 26(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2021.1873404>
- Vähäsantanen, K. (2015). Professional agency in the stream of change: Understanding educational change and teachers' professional identities. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 47, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.11.006>
- Vähäsantanen, K., & Eteläpelto, A. (2009). Vocational teachers in the face of a major educational reform: Individual ways of negotiating professional identities. *Journal of Education and Work*, 22(1), 15–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080802709620>
- Vähäsantanen, K., & Hämäläinen, R. (2019). Professional identity in relation to vocational teachers' work: An identity-centred approach to professional development. *Learning: Research and Practice*, 5(1), 48–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23735082.2018.1487573>
- Van Langenhove, L., & Harré, R. (1999). Introducing positioning theory. In R. Harré & L. Van Langenhove (Eds.), *Positioning theory: Moral contexts of intentional action* (pp. 14–31). Blackwell.
- Van Uden, J. M., Ritzen, H., & Pieters, J. M. (2014). Engaging students: The role of teacher beliefs and interpersonal teacher behavior in fostering student engagement in vocational education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 37, 21–32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2013.08.005>
- Varghese, M., Morgan, B., Johnston, B., & Johnson, K. A. (2005). Theorizing language teacher identity: Three perspectives and beyond. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 4(1), 21–44. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327701jlie0401_2
- Viskovic, A., & Robson, J. (2001). Community and identity: Experiences and dilemmas of vocational teachers in post-school contexts. *Journal of In-service Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674580100200156>
- Wang, G. (2021a). 'Stupid and lazy' youths? Meritocratic discourse and perceptions of popular stereotyping of VET students in China. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2020.1868977>
- Wang, G. (2021b). 'They are bad seeds': Stereotyping habitus in Chinese VET colleges. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 42(7), 1008–1021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.1959299>

- Wang, G. (2022). 'A cultured man is not a tool': The impact of Confucian legacies on the standing of vocational education in China. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2021.2024590>
- Wang, A., & Guo, D. (2019). Technical and vocational education in China: Enrolment and socioeconomic status. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 71(4), 538–555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2018.1535519>
- Watson, C. J. (2006). Narratives of practice and the construction of identity in teaching. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 12(5), 509–526. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540600600832213>
- Watson C., & McLuckie C. (2020) 'Analysing narratives: The narrative construction of professional identity'. In M. R. M. Ward & S. Delamont (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research in education* (pp. 380–391). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- White, C. (2018). Agency and emotion in narrative accounts of emergent conflict in an L2 classroom. *Applied Linguistics*, 579–598. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amw026>
- Whitsed, C., & Volet, S. (2013). Positioning foreign English language teachers in the Japanese university context. *Teachers and Teaching*, 19(6), 717–735. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2013.827459>
- Wolff, D. D., & De Costa, P. I. (2017). Expanding the language teacher identity landscape: An investigation of the emotions and strategies of a NNEST. *The Modern Language Journal*, 101(S1), 76–90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12370>
- Wood, M. B. (2013). Mathematical micro-identities: Moment-to-moment positioning and learning in a fourth-grade classroom. *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, 44(5), 775 – 808. <https://doi.org/10.5951/jresmetheduc.44.5.0775>
- Woronov, T. (2016). *Class work: Vocational schools and China's urban youth*. Stanford University Press. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL29276375M/Class_Work
- Wu, X., & Ye, Y. (2018). *Technical and vocational education in China*. In Springer eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0839-0>
- Xu, Y. (2014). Becoming researchers: A narrative study of Chinese university EFL teachers' research practice and their professional identity construction. *Language Teaching Research*, 18(2), 242–259. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168813505943>
- Xu, Y. (2017). Becoming a researcher: A journey of inquiry. In G. Barkhuizen (Ed.), *Reflections on language teacher identity research* (pp. 120–125). Routledge.
- Xu, Y., & Tao, J. (2023). The pedagogical and socio-affective dimensions of identity tensions and teacher agency: Case studies of university English teachers teaching online. *Language Teaching Research*, 136216882211510. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688221151047>
- Xu, J., & Huang, Y. (2021). Identity transformation of Chinese secondary school teachers during educational reform. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 49(2), 101–108. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajss.2021.01.001>
- Xu, J. (2023). Exploring Chinese higher vocational college teachers' perceptions of reading and teaching reading in English. *Language Teaching Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688231202008>

- Yang, S., Shu, D., & Yin, H. (2021). 'Frustration drives me to grow': Unraveling EFL teachers' emotional trajectory interacting with identity development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 105, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103420>
- Yoon, B. (2008). Uninvited guests: The influence of teachers' roles and pedagogies on the positioning of English language learners in the regular classroom. *American Educational Research Journal*, 45(2), 495–522. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831208316200>
- Yuan, R., & Lee, I. (2016). 'I need to be strong and competent': A narrative inquiry of a student-teacher's emotions and identities in teaching practicum. *Teachers and Teaching*, 22(7), 819–841. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2016.1185819>
- Zembylas, M. (2003). Emotions and teacher identity: A poststructural perspective. *Teachers and Teaching*, 9(3), 213–238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540600309378>
- Zembylas, M. (2005). Discursive practices, genealogies, and emotional rules: A poststructuralist view on emotion and identity in teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(8), 935–948. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.06.005>

Appendix A: Positioning coding categories

1. The participants' reflexive positioning—assigning positions to oneself

2. Interactive positioning—assigning positions to others and external discourses

Participant's positioning of others and the dominant discourses:

2.1 The participants' positioning of their former teachers/tutors

2.2 The participants' positioning of VE students

2.3 The participants' positioning of university experts or professors

2.4 The participants' positioning of their colleagues

2.5 The participants' positioning of the VE leaders' discourses

2.6 The participants' positioning of dominant discourses (e.g., “good VE teachers”; “low positioning of VE students”; “performative reform”)

Others' positioning of VE teachers and VE students

3. First- and second-order positioning between VE ELTs and students in classroom

4. The participants' positive positioning of others and external discourses

5. The participants' negative positioning of others and external discourses

Appendix B: Narrative frames

Instruction: Please recall and reflect on your English teaching experience in the vocational college. Try to fill in the spaces in the sequence provided as detailed as you can.

IN THE PAST

I decided to become a VE English teacher because _____.

At that time, I felt VE teachers were _____.

Soon after I started working as a VE English teacher, a problem I experienced was _____.

This problem made me feel _____ because _____.

I tried to solve this problem by _____.

NOW

What I really do well as a VE English teacher is _____.

This makes me feel _____ because _____.

However, I think I still have a problem with _____.

I am trying to solve the problem by _____.

FUTURE

As a VE English teacher in the future, I would like to _____.

I will consider myself to be an excellent VE English teacher when _____.

More stories to share?

If you wish, could you please share any memorable or significant stories as a VE English teacher:

I am happy for LIU XIAOYI Yvonne to use my narrative for her research:

Name: _____ Signed: _____ Date: _____

Email address for further contact: _____

Appendix C: Clustered matrix for narrative frames analysis

	In the Past			Now		Future
	motivation	expectation	problem(s)-emotion(s)-action(s)	competence-emotion(s)	problem(s)-action(s)	imagined excellent teacher-self
T1	interest in teaching	difficult-to-teach students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' poor discipline ● Emotion(s): upset ● Action(s): communicated with colleagues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: treating every student equally ● Emotion(s): happy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): how to increase students' interest in learning ● Action(s): adjust teaching 	help VE students learn and guide their life
T2	lower requirements	undemanding work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' low English proficiency; difficult to stimulate students' interest ● Emotion(s): ease and frustration ● Action(s): reposition VE students; adjusted teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: appreciating VE students ● Emotion(s): enjoyable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): institution's rigid management towards teachers ● Action(s): do some projects 	confused and having no clear imagined teacher self
T3	desire to help students	undemanding work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' low English proficiency ● Emotion(s): anger and guilt ● Action(s): learnt from colleagues; adjusted expectation and teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: bringing positive changes in students ● Emotion(s): faith 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): how to integrate moral education into teaching ● Action(s): improve teaching content 	of value to students
T4	favorable VE policies	undemanding work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' low English proficiency and low interest in learning ● Emotion(s): frustrated ● Action(s): integrated specialty-related knowledge into teaching; complied textbooks with colleagues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: catering for VE students ● Emotion(s): faith 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): teaching methods need innovated ● Action(s): network with colleagues; attend training and lectures 	teach at ease; help students learn, achieve, and develop
T5	high status of the teaching profession	difficult-to-teach students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): large classes with mixed English levels ● Emotion(s): frustrated ● Action(s): learnt from experienced colleagues; self-learning; consulted former supervisor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: bringing positive changes in students; keeping learning ● Emotion(s): faith 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): pressure from performativity policies ● Action(s): prioritize work 	of value to students; enhanced teaching and research competence
T6	less stress	undemanding work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' low English proficiency; low class participation; mixed levels ● Emotion(s): frustrated ● Action(s): adjusted teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: catering for VE students ● Emotion(s): faith 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): how to increase students' interest in learning ● Action(s): attend training 	of value to students

T7	interest in teaching	undemanding work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' low English proficiency; low class participation; large classes with mixed levels; doubted about the value of English to VE students ● Emotion(s): anxiety ● Action(s): investigated graduates' needs and use of English; attended seminars 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: bringing positive changes in students ● Emotion(s): happy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): how to integrate moral education into teaching ● Action(s): form teams with colleagues and learn from each other 	of value to students
T8	interest in English	undemanding work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' low English proficiency; no suitable teaching content ● Emotion(s): anxiety ● Action(s): self-learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: bringing positive changes in students ● Emotion(s): pride; happy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s) lack of knowledge ● Action(s): practice in the trade; do research about graduates and industries 	of value to students
T9	influenced by parents	honorable work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' low English proficiency ● Emotion(s): distressed ● Action(s): adjusted teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: caring about students; bringing positive changes in students ● Emotion(s): pride 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' mixed levels and diverse backgrounds ● Action(s): adjust teaching 	students love my classes; of value to students
T10	less stress	undemanding work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): dealt with students' affairs ● Emotion(s): frustration ● Action(s): prioritized things 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: treating every student equally ● Emotion(s): faith 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): how to help VE students overcome a sense of inferiority ● Action(s): encourage students; individual talks with students 	of value to students
T11	interest in teaching and English	fulfilling work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' low English proficiency ● Emotion(s): frustrated ● Action(s): adjusted teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: dedicating to teaching ● Emotion(s): faith 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): limited time and energy ● Action(s): prioritize things 	of value to students
T12	by accident	no expectation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' mixed levels; low English proficiency; low class participation ● Emotion(s): frustrated, antipathy, and no pride ● Action(s): adjusted teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: catering for VE students ● Emotion(s): serenity (calm) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): how to motivate VE students ● Action(s): adjust teaching 	when I am willing to communicate more with students and accept their state
T13	lower requirements	undemanding work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' low English proficiency ● Emotion(s): frustrated ● Action(s): communicated with other teachers; collected questionnaires from students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: dedicating to teaching ● Emotion(s): joy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): lack research abilities ● Action(s): do projects with experienced teachers; attend seminars 	of value to students; win prizes in teaching; advance professional title; enhanced teaching and research competence

T14	interest in English	undemanding work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' low English proficiency; low participation in classes; how to engage students ● Emotion(s): frustrated ● Action(s): adjusted teaching; communicated with students; observed colleague's lessons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: bringing positive changes in students ● Emotion(s): faith 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): how to sustain students' interest in English ● Action(s): teacher learning; try to do some research projects 	enhanced teaching and research abilities
T15	by accident	no expectation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): lacked relevant knowledge ● Emotion(s): anxiety ● Action(s): teacher learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: dedicating to the teaching ● Emotion(s): faith 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): family chores ● Action(s): balance family and work 	of value to students
T16	less stress	undemanding work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): lacked competence and qualifications ● Emotion(s): distressed ● Action(s): advanced qualification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: bringing positive changes in students ● Emotion(s): pride 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): lack of research abilities ● Action(s): learn from excellent colleagues 	enhanced teaching and research competence
T17	less stress	undemanding work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): how to teach in the way that made VE students understand ● Emotion(s): sense of responsibility; inspired ● Action(s): adjusted teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: bringing positive changes in students ● Emotion(s): joy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): teaching for exam is of little use for students who have no plan for further studies ● Action(s): adjust teaching 	find systematic ways to improve myself
T18	policy change	low work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' low English proficiency ● Emotion(s): miserable; no pride ● Action(s): made efforts to adjust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: keeping learning ● Emotion(s): joy (no regret) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' low interest and engagement in learning ● Action(s): adjust teaching 	job burnout
T19	less stress	undemanding work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' low English proficiency ● Emotion(s): frustrated ● Action(s): adjusted teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do well in: keeping learning ● Emotion(s): pride 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Problem(s): students' diverse backgrounds ● Action(s): adjust teaching 	of value to students

Appendix D: Consent form

THE EDUCATION UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG
Department of English Language Education Faculty of Humanities
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**A narrative inquiry of English language teacher identity in
Chinese vocational education**

I hereby consent to participate in the captioned research conducted by LIU Xiaoyi, EdD student of The Education University of Hong Kong.

I understand that information obtained from this study may be used in future research and may be published. However, my right to privacy will be retained, i.e., my personal details will not be revealed.

The procedure as set out in the **attached** information sheet has been fully explained. I understand the benefits and risks involved. My participation in the project is voluntary.

I acknowledge that I have the right to question any part of the procedure and can withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

Name of participant _____

Signature of participant _____

Date _____

Appendix E: Excerpt from the research journal

Research Journal

2022年3月9日星期三

Barkhuizen's scales of context (2016). The *story* level is where teachers have more agency and power. That partly explains why the teachers interviewed in the pilot phase spend quite a lot of time establishing harmonious, positive, close relationships with students, which contribute to their identity construction (gaining a “sense of achievement,” “fulfilled,” and “useful,” thinking their teaching/job has value...). When the context scale moves outward, where teacher gradually loses control and power, they seem to adopt a ‘let it be’ ‘lie flat’ and ‘try best’ attitude... but teachers also strive to be complicit and align with the mandated policies (professional advancement regulations; national educational policy...) for pragmatic reasons. It can bring achievement and improvement, positively construct their identities or undermine their teacher identities (e.g., feeling tired and incapable, ‘fail in project application’).

2022年7月26日星期二

Participants wanted to make a difference in students' lives - regarded it as their **duties**

This assumption influences their sense of value, sense of achievements...

Teacher C changed her mindset and felt more relaxed.

“想对学生产生一些积极的影响”在很多老师的访谈都出现，似乎成为一个意义的落脚点。一方面，面对英语基础薄弱，学习动力低的高职学生，另一方面，英语在职业教育领域需求低，一定程度导致学科在高职整个课程体系的边缘化定位，使得学科教育的意义并不容易实现和构建；这会造成教师内心的冲突、失落、迷茫，而心态和信念的转变和调节可能源于经历、更多的教学实践、反思、自我调节等。

2022年12月25日星期日

目前 VET 语境下的教师身份建构研究有两个主要的结论：

- 1、一部分研究发现“双师型”教师更倾向于珍视来自行业的身份，同时进行教学上的实践；
- 2、一部分研究发现 VET 教师的教师身份不仅仅集中在知识和行为的传授上，还从人文关怀、道德方面构建起比如心理辅导师的角色，从学生的心理、生活、成长、发展各方面进行教育和培养。

2023年8月12日星期六

Tina 痘痘事件 how her personal history as a student and the enduring emotions of that experience on her beliefs and construction of teacher identities // “opposing to that identities” 过往经历的情感体验影响到现在的身份建构。

2023年11月9日星期四

Implication/ discussion

- Emotional labor (Nancy “just wanted to walk away”)

Maintaining and controlling different emotions is an integral part of teachers' identity work, which can be referred to as 'emotional labor' (Hochschild, 1983).

2023年11月17日星期五

- VE ELTs 身份建构多在教师能行使权力 having more power 较多的课堂和师生关系之中，投入在此，构建自己的身份 采访 Teacher W 后的感觉
- Assumption: 处于边缘位置的教师将身份建构至于拥有较多权力的课堂，获得幸福感较多的场域和关系（如师生关系）；但是如 Cara 的故事，由于 performativity 的关系，学生也拥有了评价教师的权力 power，会否影响教师的 emotions and teaching practices???? 和身份建构
- positive positioning of professors in universities (Cara)

2023年11月27日星期一

Cara's teaching approach mirrored her interactive positioning of VE students

对比 2023 年 VE teacher 的文章，I just want them to be human...

教师的定位对学生的参与和成长关系重大

学生如何定位自己与教师如何定位学生密切关联。

2023年12月24日星期日

Collaboration calls for a good working relationship between teachers and (researchers, an idealized situation that takes time to develop as a mutually illuminating story between the researcher and the teacher (Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997). (Creswell, 2015, p. 514). **“Mutually illuminating story”!!!** 采访完 K 后，听完她的故事，我发出一句由衷赞叹：“你真是一位宝藏老师，我学到很多”

2024年1月4日星期四

受访老师 W 回忆当年本科的教授这么多年用同一本教科书，由于当时没有严格的教师评价，学生对于上课质量较低的老师“水课”也毫无办法 - 对比现在，学生能根据教师的表现给教师打分一定程度倒逼教师改进教学，但是高职生和本科生对教师的评价指向和标准存在差异。高职生的老师太严格获差评；本科生却不喜欢老师不投入、不创新、不严格。

2024年2月18日星期五

After being a visiting scholar at a university in Beijing and knowing that university ELTs also shoulder heavy teaching and research responsibilities, Cara got some comfort and inspiration. She justifies the performativity discourses by saying, “language teachers are the same everywhere.” Reinterpreting her experiences and making sense of her situations changed her emotions and perspectives.