

Research in Progress: CLIL Teachers' Identity Construction and Negotiation

Abstract

This brief report presents preliminary findings of a qualitative investigation into five Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) academics' professional attributes and identities in China. The findings revealed that the participants possessed diverse types of capital essential to CLIL, including human, social, psychological, cultural, identity, and agentic capital, though with mixed controls. The temporality of personal experiences and the social networks surrounding the participants were deemed influential in shaping and negotiating their professional identities. The study concluded with implications for institutional administrators and leaders, who should consider teachers' development needs, especially their learning, social and psychological needs, to create an academically supportive, emotionally engaging and socially collaborative organisational climate.

Keywords: *CLIL, teacher identity, professional attributes, professional development*

Introduction

In recent years, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has gained increasing popularity in China to promote bilingual education and enhance students' proficiency in a foreign language (L2), particularly English, and content knowledge simultaneously. In the local context, the implementation of CLIL has brought about significant changes in the roles and identities of language and content teachers, especially in terms of their professional attributes (Hu, 2022; Liu & Cheng, 2019; Lo & Lin, 2021). However, little research has been conducted

to investigate the professional profiles of Chinese CLIL teachers (Hu et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2021), which is crucial for better understanding their experiences and challenges in this new educational context. To this end, this research paper focuses on the factors that shaped their professional attributes, the challenges they faced in constructing and negotiating their professional profiles, and the implications of their professional identities for CLIL implementation and teacher development. A socio-cultural approach served as the study's theoretical framework, considering the construction and negotiation of identity as a dynamic social process between oneself and others (Singh, 2020). By examining the experiences and perspectives of CLIL teachers, this study sought to contribute to the literature on teacher professional development, CLIL implementation and bilingual education. Although the study was chiefly underlain by a linguistic approach, it highlighted the concepts of identity and agency and positioned teachers at the centre of educational undertakings and institutions (Selvi et al., 2020).

Research Methodology

A qualitative research approach was taken, as it allowed for a deep exploration of the complex phenomenon of professional identities. A case study design was adopted with multiple cases to provide a thorough description and comparison of findings and produce insight into an issue (Hancock et al., 2021). Five CLIL teachers, whose demographic information was recorded in Table 1, were selected using purposive sampling, allowing for selecting participants who could provide rich and diverse data. The participants all had teaching credentials in the research context and at least three years of teaching experience in CLIL programmes offered by higher education providers, which had witnessed the boom of CLIL in the local context (Hu et al., 2023). Consent was obtained from the participants, who were also informed about the nature of the study, its purpose and the confidentiality of their responses. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews and teachers' reflective journals to answer the questions 'How do CLIL teachers evaluate their identities?' and 'What factors are important in their professional practice to shape their identities?'. The instruments were designed to explore the participants' professional attributes as CLIL teachers, including their beliefs, attitudes and experiences. The collected data were analysed thematically in NVivo, a software programme used for qualitative analyses, which allowed for identifying patterns and themes in the data. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher conducted member checking, peer debriefing and reflexivity.

Table 1. Participants' demographic information

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Years of Teaching CLIL Classes	Language Being Taught	Content Being Taught
Isabelle	Female	4	English	Chinese Culture
Sharon	Female	3	English	Literature
Candice	Female	6	English	General Science
Jerry	Male	4	English	American History
Thomas	Male	4	English	Civic Education

Results

Human capital was the first theme emerging from the study, which was principally concerned with the knowledge and skills that enabled the participants to be confident and qualified CLIL teachers. On the one hand, some teachers supposed they had high levels of human capital, including their educational qualifications, subject knowledge, pedagogical fundamentals and teaching experience. For example, as stated by Sharon, she had a “postgraduate degree in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and a bachelor’s degree in literature”, which helped her “to integrate language and content effectively in teaching”. However, quite a few participants supposed that they had considerable difficulty with CLIL, with special attention to a lack of understanding of CLIL-related fundamentals and teaching strategies. They principally attributed this issue to the absence of professional training, deemed essential for teachers, especially those without specialisation in L2 education, to implement effective CLIL. As Thomas maintained in the interview, “as a teacher specialised in an area other than language education”, he was “less sensitive to students’ linguistic needs and often unable to provide efficient and engaging language instruction”. Few participants also mentioned their weakness concerning unproficiency in the subject matters and/or languages being taught, chiefly due to their educational backgrounds. For instance, Jerry assumed himself to be an unqualified CLIL teacher in his reflective journal and further stated in the interview that he, as an English teacher, “had to learn the subject matters to be taught [by himself] before integrating them to [his] language classes”; occasionally, he “was even unaware of what [content] to teach in a CLIL lesson”.

Social capital was another theme of the study, which referred to a teacher’s awareness, value and practice of developing social relations and networks to enhance knowledge and maximise CLIL. The participants had mixed experiences

in terms of this attribute. Some maintained that they had extensive networks with other CLIL teachers, content specialists, language experts, and international educators and collaborated closely with them on curriculum development, research and experience sharing. As Isabelle believed, “working with and learning from other teachers and scholars could help [her] to better understand and implement CLIL”. Nevertheless, others faced challenges in developing such networks. Candice said, “Every teacher has a tight schedule, and we barely have any time and chance to sit down and discuss our experiences with CLIL”. According to the participant, it “could invite a teacher to stagnate in professional development”. Isabelle also mentioned the “potential challenges in building relationships with colleagues, who did not understand or support CLIL or perceived it as a threat to their subject area”.

Similarly, the participants had divergent views of their psychological capital, which involved their hope, resilience, optimism and self-efficacy. Optimism was present in most teachers, enabling them to maintain a positive attitude towards their work and their students’ potential. However, some teachers reported feeling overwhelmed by the demands of their jobs and the pressure to deliver effective instruction in an L2. Besides, hope was another prominent resource among CLIL teachers, which helped them to set goals, plan for the future and maintain motivation. However, some teachers reported feeling discouraged by limited resources and a lack of support from colleagues. Likewise, self-efficacy was also a dominant resource among CLIL teachers, which helped them to manage their classes effectively and deliver instruction in an L2. However, some teachers reported low levels of self-efficacy in specific aspects of their work, such as assessing language proficiency and providing feedback to students. A few teachers also mentioned low resilience, who reported feeling occasionally stressed, burnt-out or discouraged by challenging circumstances, such as difficult students, administrative tasks and lack of recognition. As Sharon summarised, “Conducting CLIL is more demanding than teaching a language lesson or a content lesson. Sometimes, I try to see CLIL through rose-coloured spectacles and work with it with great hope and motivation ... Sometimes, I may also feel incapable and overwhelmed by the workload coming with CLIL. However, no one in this university really cares about our emotions and feelings”.

Furthermore, some participants mentioned cultural capital, toward which they held a positive attitude. They believed they had profound intercultural understanding and knowledge, allowing them to integrate a cultural dimension into their teaching. Candice said, “I always try to understand different cultures – Chinese cultures, Western cultures, traditional and popular cultures, and even the cultures in my and my students’ lives – and use them in my teaching. This helps to make

my lessons more engaging and relevant to students' lives". In other words, CLIL teachers with good cultural capital deeply understood and appreciated different cultures, including their own and those of others. It enabled them to create a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment and effectively engage with students from diverse backgrounds. Some participants mentioned that cultural capital was accumulated through socialisation and education, enabling them to navigate diverse cultural contexts and communicate effectively with people from different communities. As Jerry stated, "It is my overseas study and work experience that has shaped my intercultural awareness". However, open-mindedness tended to be a dominant factor mentioned by the participants, with Sharon suggesting that "being inclusive of various cultures and embracing them in teaching are important for CLIL teachers".

Even though the participants had mixed views of their capabilities, they generally had good identity capital, which included their sense of identity as CLIL teachers and their understanding of their roles in promoting professional development and bilingual education. It was closely interwoven with the last theme of the study, namely agentic capital, which referred to an individual's awareness of oneself and one's environment, as well as agentic features and actions to develop strategies and use various resources available to them. Although some participants did not possess all the positive attributes mentioned above and might struggle to deliver proper CLIL classes, they were generally aware of their roles as CLIL teachers and their strengths and weaknesses. This attribute was considered essential by the participants to continuing professional development. As Candice said, "Knowing who I am as a [CLIL] teacher and what I have achieved and not achieved is necessary, as it indicates the professional stage I am at and what I need to do next". Thomas held the same view and attached importance to self-acknowledgement and self-reflection. He believed, "It is vital to reflect upon my role as a CLIL teacher so that I can recognise my merits and shortcomings. Then, I will know where my professional development should go".

Discussion and Conclusion

Generally, the participants clearly understood their roles, indicated by their identity and agentic capitals. These attributes highlighted the role of reflection in constructing and negotiating professional identities, reinforcing the view that professional practice and reflection could shape and fuel each other. Particularly, agentic capital was a highlight of the present study, suggesting the integration,

combination and recombination of resources available to individuals who could recognise their strengths and weakness in relation to other professional attributes (Pudyanti et al., 2022). This meta-reflection, which refers to the reflection on the overall reflection itself, is essential because it helps CLIL teachers to critically look at their own reflection patterns and develop approaches to reflecting in the future – an activity similar to ‘normal’ reflection aimed at assisting teachers in discovering the essence of professional situations and then finding effective ways of acting. Although meta-reflection tends to be an under-researched topic in CLIL, it does have underlain many studies featuring a reflective and critical approach to L2 teachers’ professional identities.

Through self-reflection, the participants demonstrated more detailed attributes. For instance, given that CLIL is a distinctive pedagogical approach that integrates L2 learning and content learning through the medium of culture (Khalyapina, 2020), the participants’ human capital and cultural capital could be considered important attributes for the successful implementation of CLIL. It is consistent with the integration principle proposed by Rodríguez (2020) and Xia (2019), denoting a CLIL teacher’s competence, particularly pedagogical competence and knowledge, to effectively combine language, content, and culture within CLIL and demonstrate professionalism. These two attributes were also aligned with CLIL teachers’ professional competencies, particularly with CLIL fundamentals (i.e. understanding the core features of CLIL) and language and content awareness (i.e. proficiency in the language and content being taught, the ability to connect new learning with students’ experiences and the out-of-campus world) (Spratt, 2017), which could make the participants feel more confident with CLIL implementation.

Additionally, the present study shed light on social capital and psychological capital. In particular, important findings were generated with respect to the participants’ difficulty establishing social connections with others and dealing with negative emotions arising from CLIL, indicating the challenges facing them in their professional practice. The low command of these two attributes mirrored passive teacher agency, which was considered a hindrance to the construction of positive identities as CLIL teachers and effective CLIL practice (Ivanova, 2018; Papaioannou, 2014).

The temporality of personal experiences and the social networks in which the participants had lived and worked played a significant role in shaping their professional identities, implying that a complexity of factors could influence a CLIL teacher’s professional identity and that agency development was a dynamic process with varied outcomes (Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2020). Despite the participants’ positive attributes for professional competence, they highlighted the paucity of

institutional support as the primary reason for their negative agency in developing proficiency in teaching CLIL courses, establishing cooperative networks with other CLIL stakeholders, and fostering psychological well-being. This finding carries important implications for institutional administrators and leadership teams, who should be proactive in creating a supportive climate by determining teachers' development needs, designing programmes to meet these needs and monitoring how well the programmes achieve professional development goals.

As the findings of the study overall suggested, the participating teachers were quite aware of how being agentic and reflective at work influenced the implementation of CLIL programmes and their enactment of professional responsibilities. Although this cannot be generalised to all CLIL teachers in the research context or across education because of the nature of qualitative research, it does reflect that professional agency plays a critical role in identity negotiation. While the agency could be conducive to work conditions that allow for better educational practice, it could also mean that teachers exercise their attributes to resist change and maintain situations or self-understanding as they are. Additionally, identity negotiation tends to occur at both individual and collective levels, as the research results indicated that the participants highlighted both personal experiences and socio-cultural conditions exemplified by partnerships with colleagues. These main findings further imply that the individual and the collective are interwoven and that a teacher's identity results from both.

The study's overall contribution lies in exploring professional identity in the context of CLIL, which has not received as much attention in China's academia as in other socio-educational contexts. Furthermore, the investigation of CLIL teachers' experiences is complemented by the concepts of professional capital at work, eliciting a holistic conceptualisation of professional identity as an agentic process. Although the study is not comprehensive in examining CLIL teachers' identity, it hopes to have contributed to the general discussion of teacher professional development and encouraged further investigation of CLIL teachers' experiences of the self in the profession.

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