

Article

Between Expert and Novice: Identity Transition from Teacher to Student as Sustainable Agentic Construction

Xing Xu ¹, Helena Sit ^{2,*} and Hui Li ³

¹ Department of English Studies, Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing 400031, China

² School of Education, The University of Newcastle, Newcastle, NSW 2308, Australia

³ Shanghai Institute of Early Childhood Education, Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai 200234, China

* Correspondence: helena.sit@newcastle.edu.au

Abstract: Education for sustainable development in foreign language teaching and learning impacts students' lives in their current or future endeavours. Despite a wide body of literature elucidating identity navigation of EFL teachers and international doctoral students, a relative scarcity of scholarship casts light on the in-between cohort, namely those who transit from the former to the latter. Via a holistic lens, utilising a qualitative case study based on an Australian university, this research scrutinised how a group of 10 international doctoral students who served as EFL teachers in their home countries enacted agency to navigate the identity transition. The study discusses what generally constitutes sustainable, successful language learning and teaching practices in different social, cultural, and educational contexts. The findings reveal that torn between teaching English as an expert and learning research as a novice, they negotiated the identity transition as a “doing” process subject to different positionings and structural contexts and mediated by various dynamics across a past–present–future trajectory. This study contributes to pertinent literature by shedding nuanced and holistic light on the under-researched topic of teacher-to-student identity transition. It ends with implications for attending to EFL teachers' complex lived experiences to promote sustainable development in EFL teaching and learning.

Keywords: sustainability; English as a Foreign Language (EFL); language teacher education; language and identity



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1. Introduction: Identity Construction of EFL Teachers and International Doctoral Students

Teacher identity, widely accepted as “how teachers relate to their practice in light of both social and individual perspectives” [1] (p. 1935), has become a significant research topic due to its salient role in determining teachers' advancement in their careers. Within the vast body of pertinent scholarship, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher identity has received significant attention in the past two decades, especially after Gee's [2] (pp. 99–125) influential study that inspired more related discussions. Previous scholarship has yielded fruitful insights. Attitudes, emotions and beliefs, which ostensibly appear personal, are, in fact, social constructs central to EFL teacher identity. According to Jenkins [3] (pp. 535–543), teachers' attitudes are shaped by their past experiences, factors in the present situation, and their assessment of future chances of success; a combination of which ultimately affects their construction of English as a lingua franca identity. Focusing on the dimension of emotion, Miller and Gkonou [4] (pp. 49–59) challenged the view that emotion labour derives solely from individual efforts; instead, it is a relational construct manifested in teachers' investment in their relationships with students and enacted through agentic demonstrations of caring. Huang et al. [5] (pp. 193–207) delved into teaching beliefs, positing that they are changed and reshaped in various contextual realities as teachers undergo a learner-to-teacher shift, which modifies their approach to teacher identity formation. Moreover, discourses and ideologies at a societal level also contribute to perceptions

of and access to teacher identity. For example, native-speakerism, a pervasive ideology within ELT [6] (pp. 385–387), continues to privilege teachers from the English-speaking West while marginalising others, thus respectively enabling and constraining the construction of teacher identity amongst different groups [7] (pp. 191–214). However, emerging discussions have challenged the unfavourable discourse, as non-native English teachers mobilise their multilingual and multicultural advantages in ELT to empower themselves and establish legitimacy [8] (pp. 309–316). In short, notwithstanding its complexity, EFL teacher identity is by and large conceptualised as a dynamic and fluid process, the formation and negotiation of which continues throughout a teacher's career through an ongoing experience of attending to the connection between person and context [9,10]. As a vital construct underpinning teachers' cognitive, behavioural and affective performances in the teaching ecology, it is worthy of more scholarly efforts, especially given that EFL teacher identity construction may be complicated by interruption and transition along one's professional path. One salient example of such occurrences relates to a temporary resumption of student status when the in-service cohort chooses to pursue a doctoral degree in an English-speaking country in the hope of promoting their professional development.

By virtue of this teacher-to-student transition, identity construction as international doctoral students becomes a necessary task, which is tantamount to academic socialisation of internalising standards, requirements, norms and measurements that are associated with research [11] and not teaching. Relevant literature about the identity construction of international doctoral students abounds. Previous studies focused on enablers and disablers impacting the development of doctoral identity [12,13], as well as how prototypical PhD engagements give shape to its formation [14,15]. Similar to research on EFL teachers, this branch of scholarship also accentuates the significance of heeding complex person-context factors, positing that doctoral identity is mediated in multi-layered entanglements beyond academic relationships, activities and symbols, especially for the international cohort who navigate their identity construction as an in-betweeners traversing different sociocultural spaces [16] (pp. 757–770).

Despite the above insights on the identity construction of EFL teachers and international doctoral students, little attention is paid to the transition cohort. Although burgeoning scholarly interests do emerge, they are centred around the student-to-teacher transition. A case in point is Donato et al.'s [17] (pp. 217–234) study that scrutinised the transitional experiences of doctoral students to work life as applied linguists, arguing for identity struggle in relation to tensions and conflicts incurred by the transition as the participants concurrently juggled interrelated identities that did not co-exist in a harmonious manner. Comparatively, research on teacher-to-student transition towards sustainable language teaching and learning is scarcer, with the exception of some recent works. For example, embarking on a doctoral program by an experienced foreign language teacher was evinced to lead to a researcher's identity dilemma intersecting with the participant's sense of herself as a researcher and what she plans to do about the situation [18] (pp. 358–377). Nevertheless, it appears that previous discourses on identity transition, be either direction, are limited in tending to be more challenge-focused, without delineating the navigation of identity transition as an agentic past–present–future course that may incorporate other experiences beyond conflicts and pains. It remains largely unknown how the effect of transition is subject to the shaping dynamics of the agency. To tackle this gap, this study aims to utilise a qualitative case study based on an Australian university to investigate one research question: how did a group of 10 international doctoral students who used to serve as EFL teachers in their home countries enact agency to navigate their identity transition? It is hoped that exploration into the question would contribute to a nuanced disclosure, thus addressing the above limitations. Focusing on an under-researched topic, this study is anticipated to expand the literature on sustainable, effective language learning and teaching by untangling co-shaping dynamics of human agency and social structure in forging a hyphenated language-teacher-student identity. The next sections detail the theo-

retical framework, methodology, findings, discussions, and research implications towards sustainable EFL language teaching and learning.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings: A Holistic Lens of Identity Construction as Agentic Course

In alignment with the position taken by this study that considers navigation of identity transition as an agentic course, we posit that agency is a suitable theoretical lens through which to have a deep probe. Having been consistently argued to play an important role in promoting teachers' and doctoral students' identification with professional development in the situated community [12,19], agency is generally accepted to refer to the acting capacity to control, regulate and transform the social relations in which an individual is enmeshed to pursue intentional goals [14] (pp. 1–23). Despite a multitude of relevant conceptualisations of agency from social cognitive, sociocultural, ecological and other perspectives, we found a holistic integration of key notions such as positioning, doing, structure and temporality a useful framework, given that a constellation of different facets helps to illuminate a fuller and richer picture.

The notion of positioning is concerned with discursive constructions of how individuals position themselves and are positioned by others [20] (pp. 167–187). Positioning is a useful tool to understand how meanings, possible actions, and responsibilities presumed to be associated with such positions are mediated within individuals themselves and through other individuals [21,22]. In this study, a self-positioning where the participants take on a particular stance to achieve a particular goal enables the analysis of their agency, revealed through the ways they position themselves in a given context; an ascribed positioning by others helps to disclose how they are facilitated or constrained in a correlative way by those power relations available to them. Another notion, namely doing, permeates discussions of agency, and denotes that although agency is a capacity, it is not static as if property, or competence of the individual [23]. It is dynamic and performative, involving proactive engagements to achieve the self-transformation within one's envisaged life plan [16]. A "doing" perspective allows for examining how the navigation of identity transition as a process of becoming unfolds amongst various actions. A related notion is structure, which holds that "doing" is context-contingent, and individuals' agentic actions are always mediated by the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they are situated [19]. This notion is of particular value in this study, given that it directs us to uncover those governing structures at home and host spaces that give shape to identity construction [16]. Finally, a temporal dimension is equally noteworthy. A time-based conceptualisation deems agency a temporally constructed process in which the interlocking elements of iteration (the past), practical evaluation (the present) and projectivity (the future) contribute to "a multilevel flow of nested events, radically grounded in (but not bounded by) present experience" [24] (pp. 962–1023). This notion helps explore how identity transition is a temporal achievement embedded in one's past–present–future trajectory.

To put it in a nutshell, a holistic integration of positioning, doing, structure and temporality serves as the theoretical framework underpinning the study. We analysed via a holistic lens how identity transition was negotiated with the participants' enactment of agency at different positionings and the temporal–relational interplay between individual and contextual factors, as a configuration of influences from the past, orientations towards the future and engagement with the present [25] (pp. 624–640). The study also explores what generally constitutes sustainable, successful language learning and teaching practices in different social, cultural, and educational contexts.

3. Methodology

In order to facilitate a deep probe, this study employed a qualitative methodology based on X University. The recruitment was circulated with a purposive snowballing strategy to target international doctoral students who were EFL teachers before they arrived in Australia for PhD studies. We selected X University as a case because, as one of the world's top 100 universities for the subject of Education, it has attracted a large, diverse

body of potential participants whose voices might be able to contribute to a fruitful and full picture of the concerned topic. After ethical approval was sought, the second researcher was in charge of circulating the recruitment request, considering that her benign personal connections with potential participants could facilitate rapport, a key component of qualitative studies. The invitation sought participants' informed consent regarding research aims, procedures, voluntary participation, etc. The recruitment spread via email and social networking media and lasted two months to encourage potential participants to express interest in offering a voice. In total, there were 10 volunteers who manifested diversity at different dimensions, which benefits a fuller exploration into nuances and complexities that underpin the topic. Firstly, the sample encompassed various cultural backgrounds, including students from major source countries such as China and Vietnam and emerging ones such as Indonesia and Saudi Arabia. Secondly, the participants were at different stages of their EFL profession, with lengths into teachership ranging from 8 to 21 years, which enabled a rich disclosure of teacher identity. Finally, at the time of interviews, they were newcomers, juniors and seniors at different phases of doctoral candidature that normally lasts 3–4 years in Australia, which facilitates a probe into a full doctoral trajectory. In order to protect privacy, pseudonyms were given to the participants. For detailed demographic information, please refer to Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' demographic information.

Name	Gender	Country of Origin	Years into Teachership	Years into PhD Program
Dyk	Male	Indonesia	11	4
Goya	Female	Indonesia	10	2
Hera	Female	Vietnam	8	4
Nick	Male	Vietnam	21	3
Alice	Female	Vietnam	10	4
Thi	Female	Vietnam	12	5
Jess	Female	China	18	6
Helen	Female	China	10	4
Hana	Female	China	10	3
Adam	Male	Saudi Arabia	18	1

To overcome physical constraints due to the outbreak of a global pandemic, online one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted, and each response was given between 30 to 45 min. During the interviews, the participants were encouraged to share their experiences as a previous EFL teacher and now an international doctoral student, answering questions such as, "How do you evaluate your performance as an English language teacher?"; "How do you evaluate your performance as a doctoral student?"; "You were a teacher but now are a student. What are the differences between the two?"; "What career prospects do you aspire to upon graduation in Australia?" The interviews were conducted in English, a shared foreign language spoken by the interviewer and the interviewees. Transcripts were transported into NVivo 12. For data analysis, we adopted a thematic analysis that balanced inductive and deductive coding, driven by the data and informed by the theoretical underpinnings adopted by the study [26] (pp. 80–92). Data analysis consisted of four steps. Firstly, the researchers read each transcript several times to familiarise the data. After that, data were segmented into basic meaning units, from which some topical codes emerged and were then labelled, compared and synthesised. Thirdly, themes were generated, reviewed, and defined with a cross-code examination. Finally, three themes were categorised and reported, derived from the theoretical underpinnings of the study. Throughout the analysis, an iterative cross-examination between researchers as a type of investigator triangulation was performed, which enriches multiple perspectives and conclusions, thus adding breadth to the phenomenon of interest [27] (pp. 545–547). The findings are listed in the following section.

4. Findings

4.1. Teaching English as an Expert

Most participants expressed positive perceptions of being an EFL expert before undertaking research in Australia, which was resultant of their agentic efforts to consolidate this identity with favourable positioning and intentional acts.

To begin with, they manifested strong identification with their profession as a “good teacher” due to favourable positioning, which was simultaneously assigned to them by students and embedded within their self-beliefs. For example, Hera and Jess remarked that:

As a language teacher, I evaluate my performance as a good one. It was reflected based on the feedback of the students to my teaching both formally (in terms of student surveys after each semester) and personally (the students messaged me privately). (Hera)

I think I have done a good job so far. . . . I always feel confident about my instructional performance. . . . My teaching plans, strategies and methodologies are always up to date according to students’ backgrounds and learning abilities. (Jess)

Most participants had similar views as Hera and Jess in that they valued themselves as EFL experts in their home working contexts. These views showcased how positioning, the assigning of a subject position to oneself and others, could render an individual powerful [28] (pp. 104–126). For one thing, the participants like Hera were positioned by students, via formal and personal feedback, as a legitimate language teacher, which enhanced their positive self-perception as good performers. This other-position strengthened their I-position when voices of others could be woven into what one says and as part of one’s thinking, reasoning and acting, as part of one’s identity [29]. For another, when being self-defined, narrated and presented themselves as a good teacher such as Jess, the participants constructed an affirmative self-position through characterising, representing and voicing [29] that facilitated their self-efficacy, which in turn benefits their enactment of agency to construct an ideal teacher identity.

Secondly, the study showcased that an expert teacher identity was a purposeful “doing” process, which is intentionally achieved and not merely a capacity or possession of the individual [23]. Adam and Hana remarked that:

I kept reflecting on my teaching, like what works well and what doesn’t. It benefits my teaching a lot, I think, because I can make the necessary adjustment to meet different students’ needs along the way. (Adam)

. . . so being an effective English language teacher, I consider about two important things: one is culture, and the other is change. Be aware of my students’ cultural backgrounds and understand their learning needs so that I can design my lessons and programs to accommodate their English language learning. Get ready to adapt to any changes that I have encountered or might face in the evolving, changing educational environment. (Hana)

The above views underscored that “self-reflecting” (e.g., Adam) and “self-adapting” (e.g., Hana) were key endeavours initiated by the participants to forge a successful career path. The expert teacher identity was inseparable from their goal-seeking intentionality, achieved via a set of processes embedded in their preferences and cognitions in relation to their teaching performances and students’ reception. This study thus lent weight to the conceptualisation that teacher identity was an agentic maneuver out of one’s intentional acts encompassing self-organising, proactive, self-reflective and self-regulative mechanisms [19]. With forethought, adaptation and self-development, which are the core features of agency [30] (pp. 1–26), they strategised and directed their agency towards the construction of an EFL expert identity.

4.2. Learning Research as a Novice

Compared with the EFL expert teacher identity, which was optimistically conceptualised, the majority less favourably perceived the international doctoral student identity. Although the doctoral trajectory was still believed to be manageable (e.g., Adam), acceptable (e.g., Hera), and on the right track (e.g., Nick), many participants postulated that the construction of student identity as an agentic negotiation was demanding as it was enmeshed in more complex relations, engagements and commitments that traverse cultural and operational contexts.

Firstly, the participants felt challenged by the teacher-to-student transition due to a sense of “double invalidation”. As doctoral students, on the one hand, they have not yet cultivated a confident researcher identity with their short engagements in and internalisation of various mindsets and acts that instantiate this identity; on the other hand, they felt a loss of security and self-worth embedded in their teacher expert identity as it was subordinated and even invisible in the new context. The following statements are representative views:

When I came to Australia as a student, I found myself dis-empowered in the beginning, having difficulty mastering disciplinary norms and writing academically to satisfy my supervisors’ standards. As well, I used to be needed by my students, but now no one cares about my profession. (Helen)

When I taught English in my home country, it seemed that I was the primary source of information for my students. I believed my English was adequate, but I struggled to communicate with native speakers on campus in Australia, and I discovered that my writing was poorly organised. . . . It makes me feel inferior because I was an English teacher and have found out recently that my English is not very good. (Goya)

Admittedly, the teacher-to-student transition was taxing as it entailed extra commitments, relations and activities associated with and gave substance to a new identity. It is thus hardly surprising that the participants felt “dis-empowered” (e.g., Helen) and “struggled” (e.g., Goya) when they were burdened with mastering disciplinary norms and academic writing, which were alien to their previous teacher identity. More importantly, as a result of being devoid of social relations and interdependencies within which their agency is constituted and enacted, their ontological security was partly threatened. In tandem with this identity transition was a loss of teaching interactions that gave shape to a sense of “being needed” (e.g., Helen) as “the primary source of information” (e.g., Goya). By virtue of that, their agency was deflated given that agency is relational, achieved only when individuals as interactants rather than as singular agents or actors produce particular effects through their relational connections and joint actions [31] (pp. 322–339).

Secondly, instigating challenges beyond the research domain, learning research in an alien milieu intensifies difficulties faced by international doctoral students who need to navigate different cultural spaces and juggle roles, which pose extra obstacles to their construction of student identity. Nick and Thi made comments as below:

Many challenges. Vernacular spoken by local people, travelling difficulty during the Covid 19 pandemic, culturally appropriate responses during initial interpersonal communication. (Nick)

Here, due to my husband’s limited English language proficiency, I became the primary communicator and negotiator for all family stuff. . . . I had no choice except for devoting my attention and time to help my family adapt to the new environment and using time wisely for my study. (Thi)

Except for research-specific struggles that all doctoral students confront, the participants were additionally troubled by concomitant problems and commitments arising from being transplanted from well-adapted soil conditions to an alien environment for growth [32] (pp. 2198–2217). For Nick, these extra strains encompass cross-cultural com-

munication and travelling difficulty amidst the COVID-19 pandemic; for Thi, she was burdened with facilitating her family's adaptation in order to reduce repercussions, juggling the family and study responsibilities. Given that individuals' agentic actions are always mediated by the social and cultural contexts in which they are situated [19], it stands reasonable that the participants found it demanding to enact more agency attending to the above structural needs beyond research.

4.3. Navigating an Agentic Past–Present–Future Course between Expert and Novice

The participants' relocation to Australia as international doctoral students temporarily suspended their career path as EFL teachers in their home countries. As disclosed above, their relocation to a new milieu, assuming a different identity than before, ostensibly denotes an ancestral process of identity transition from being an expert to a novice. A deeper probe, however, refutes linearity; rather, it reveals that as in-betweeners traversing different spatial–temporal dynamics, they have been negotiating intertwined complexities, which are embedded in their reflection and projection across an aspired past–present–future life course.

On the one hand, the assumption of a new identity as a researcher was bound up with and largely facilitated by a prior professional identity as a teacher. On the other hand, many participants, implicitly or explicitly, identified themselves as a teacher–researcher whose doctoral study is borne out of work experience. Further, they were better equipped to steer a challenging doctoral sojourn as they tapped knowledge and skills accumulated via their previous teachership to scaffold their research. The following statements are representative examples:

In fact, my work experience made me realise that there are issues of concern in the field, which gave me the intention to start my study. In addition, my work experience not only provided me with practical and valuable data for my study but also made me a deep thinker in discovering issues and developing strategies during my candidature. (Jess)

My teaching background and experiences help me to focus on what I am really interested in and further narrow down my research topic, questions to explore and ways to conduct my research project. (Alice)

I put myself as a teacher–researcher. . . . When I was a mentor of pre-service teaching, I used my critical thinking to give feedback and reported the phenomenon in an article. These skills helped me in my doctoral study. (Dyk)

These views exemplify how enactment of the agency was subject to influences from the past [33]. As they embarked on a new learning journey, they acted autonomously, taking the initiative in choosing and managing a course out of their own decision. In the above cases, the participants intentionally connected the doctoral sojourn with professional contexts, identifying a research topic that took advantage of previous work experience. Furthermore, they drew on resources they accumulated as an EFL teacher to enable the exercise of agency as a doctoral student. Taking various forms, such as “practical and valuable data; ways to conduct research project” (e.g., Jess) or “critical thinking . . . in an article” (Dyk), these resources were mobilised and operated to serve personal development purposes in new contexts.

On the other hand, their perceptions of doctoral student identity are future-oriented, catering to their aspirational career imagination of becoming a better EFL teacher upon graduation. Despite challenges prevailing, they manifested strong autonomy, confidence and responsibility to yield a fruitful learning journey that serves more than personal interests but also gears towards the educational development of the home country. Examples can be seen in Goya and Helen's remark:

My doctoral studies should enable me to acquire additional knowledge and skills in English language instruction, which will benefit my future career as an English lecturer. Additionally, it equips me with research skills that are critical for my

career, as lecturers in my home country have three primary job descriptions: teaching, conducting research, and performing community service. (Goya)

More importantly, I have accumulated research skills, methods and mindsets, which will help me further my research. I will apply what I learned in Australia to my future practice as a TELF teacher in China, addressing Chinese issues and keeping publishing in English so as to offer Chinese voices. (Helen)

The above views again showcase temporal orientations of human agency that highlight the relevance of orientations towards the future to the agentic engagement with the present [34] (pp. 19–40). Those future goals at the individual level (e.g., benefiting my future career as an English lecturer) and the national level (e.g., addressing Chinese issues and offering Chinese voices) were closely intertwined with their agentic choices and actions in the doctoral study. Despite being constrained contextually, as evinced by the previous section of “learning research as a novice”, by linking their engagement with the present to the imagination of and projection into an envisaged life plan, they manifested a sense of control, hope and confidence, which facilitated a stronger sense of agency.

In short, this study shows that the participants navigated an agentic past–present–future course between expert and novice, lending weight to an ecological contextualisation of the participants’ investment in asserting teacher-to-student identity, which is a negotiation process accommodating “iterational, practical–evaluative, and projective dimensions” [33] in one’s life trajectory.

5. Discussion and Implication

Focusing on teacher-to-student identity transition, this study shed light on how international students who used to serve as EFL teachers in their home countries enacted agency to navigate the identity transition as they sojourn in Australia for doctoral study. Specifically, drawing from a holistic lens, it centred around untangling how they perceived this sustainable transition as a negotiation subject to different positionings and structural contexts and as a becoming process mediating influences across a past–present–future trajectory. More insights can be gleaned from addressing the research question.

The findings demonstrate that as EFL teachers reassumed a temporary doctoral student identity, they embarked on agentic construction in which different needs, responsibilities, activities and meanings must be accommodated. This identity transition embodies strategic navigation, shaped by positioning, doing, structure and temporality that traverse sociocultural spaces. Before the sojourn, they self-identified as teacher experts, and this perception was embedded in students’ positive feedback and self-beliefs. As well, they concurred that an expert teacher identity was a “doing” process involving lots of self-reflection and self-adaptation to cater to needs in the educational landscape. To put in another way, the identity construction of teacher experts emerged from their favourable self-positioning and positioning ascribed to them by relational others, echoing the view that identity is not only forged at an intrapersonal level [35] (Wertsch et al., 1993) but also represented, enacted and constructed via interactional positioning with a broad milieu [29].

This study also makes it salient that an expert teacher identity was an intentional “doing” process, anchoring in creating “achieved” attributes that enrich the becoming process that keeps unfolding and evolving, which lent weight to the perspective that identity construction as agentic accomplishment relates to intentional participation in self-development and self-renewal [30]. As they relocated to Australia, they were burdened by negotiating the identity transition, which was circumscribed by the structure they were situated in. On the one hand, they felt threatened by a structural loss because their professional capital was largely rendered invisible, and their sense of value and authority as teacher experts was diminished in the new context. On the other hand, they are confronted with meeting new structural needs, some of which were in relation to research engagements and commitments, while others in terms of juggling family roles and navigating cross-cultural practices were non-academic. These findings also indicate that individuals’ agentic actions are always inseparable from structure [19]. This is particularly so for culture-

crossers such as international doctoral students who are concurrently circumscribed by host structure and home structure, which requires extra strenuous efforts in order to steer an aspired course of development [16]. As such, this study lent weight to a temporal perception of identity construction.

Another highlight of this research is that it has investigated, within the context of the foreign language teacher identity construction, how the teacher's sustainable career pathway and future development are connected to their identities. This is because, in the process of teaching and learning, the participants, as both language teachers and higher research degree students, actually negotiate and renegotiate their sense of self in relation to the larger social environment and reorganise that relationship across time and space [36] (pp. 349–369). As echoed by the participant, they now have a new commitment and experience a shift from a full-time teacher to a full-time student. Being a student means committing to learning, research duties, and deadlines. Such awareness changes their perspectives, attitudes, and working and living styles. In addition, as international doctoral students, they face academic pressure coping with research projects deadlines. This is encapsulated in Thi's comment that "living in an alien country, I sometimes had to cope with cultural shocks which made me sometimes isolated, lonely and uncertain in my journey and about my future prospects".

As the above findings showcase, despite born between expert and novice, the participants navigated a past–present–future course as sustainable agentic in-betweeners traversing different spatial–temporal dynamics. For one thing, utilising self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness [19] (Tao and Gao, 2021) to bridge these experiences for a smooth transition, they strategically linked the current doctoral research to previous teaching practice to harness capital accumulated via their previous teachership to facilitate their doctoral study. For another, their enactment of the agency was future-oriented, serving individual interests of promoting career prospects and national interests of boosting EFL teaching. These results reveal how present engagements were intricately intertwined with and shaped by imagination about and projection into an aspired life plan [20]. All in all, this study contributes to pertinent literature by shedding nuanced and holistic light on the under-researched topic of teacher-to-student identity transition.

Furthermore, this study offers implications for sustainable development in EFL teaching. Admittedly, foreign language education for sustainable development has received less attention in comparison to other learning areas. Yet, it still has the potential to be an important tool for addressing global issues and challenges, thus deserving more exploration. Previous research is heavily skewed towards sustainability of curriculum and pedagogy [37] and EFL learners, such as their self-directed learning experience [38] (p. 2894), imagined identities and agency [39] (p. 4659). Despite many discussions on the sustainable development of EFL teachers, they were primarily concerned with a linear progression, concentrating on factors contributing to a pre-service-to-in-service [40] (pp. 6–24) or novice-to-expert transition [41] (p. 4711). However, as the study reveals, EFL teacher identity construction has been complicated in a globalised world by an array of dynamics that may interrupt such linearity, destabilising a career pipeline that envisions a straight career path.

As an example of non-linearity, this study showcased how the participants strategically maneuvered a temporary teacher-to-student transition along the path with agentic efforts to achieve projected career sustainability, despite challenges and obstacles. While endeavours to adjust EFL teacher education [42] (pp. 423–456) and strengthen teachers' sustainability literacy [43] (pp. 66–89) are significant to sustainable development, this study offers new insight in that it manifests that sustainability should also take identity transition and its ramifications into consideration. Giving more voices to those who have such experiences to share their perceptions and performances, which is what this study has done, is the first step towards that purpose. Additionally, a sustainable identity development warrants an ecological approach, attending to dynamics across a past–present–future trajectory that not only set the at-the-moment agency in motion but also gave impetus for imagined directions. On top of that, enhancing EFL teachers' professional sustainability is also a collective

enterprise that demands facilitative forces from the ecological systems [44] (p. 6721). As revealed by the study, the agentic course of teacher-to-student transition was relational, shaped by a myriad of actors, relations and activities of which an individual is a part. An individual's sustainable development is thus beyond their navigation but is contingent upon these structural forces. This study manifests that one possibility of collective efforts is for host universities to capitalise on international doctoral students' professional capital in their respective workplaces, incorporating multicultural philosophies and pedagogies that underpin their prior professional experiences into doctoral research training and mentoring so that these hidden resources could be tapped to improve their post-sojourn EFL teaching. Another possibility is for host educators to assist international students in discussing their future professional goals [39] and facilitating their cognizance of an envisioned identity where their doctoral research sustains part of their professional purpose and practice. As well, it is essential that throughout the doctoral trajectory, the students' emotional states are constantly monitored, supported, and positively nurtured [45] so that a sustainability-oriented training within and beyond a doctoral candidature is enacted.

6. Conclusions

Despite the above findings and implications, this study is limited due to being a small-sample study that warrants neither representativeness nor generalizability. Future research efforts are thus encouraged to address the limitation based on bigger participant pools. Besides, it remains unclear how identity transition is differently experienced by individuals with different variables, such as age, gender, socio-economic condition, professional status, etc. Moreover, what practical mechanisms can be implemented to capitalise on prior working experience for sustainable EFL teaching development? These are questions left to be examined by future studies. However, compared to vast research on other topics, such as the economy or the environment, this study not only contributes to pertinent literature by shedding nuanced and holistic light on the under-researched topic of teacher-to-student identity transition but expands the literature on sustainability in English language teaching and learning. The study results are impactful for elucidating more future research directions or needs on the improvement of quality of language teaching, by the sojourning language teachers in a new social-cultural and educational context. It ends with implications for attending to EFL teachers' complex lived experiences in order to promote sustainable development in EFL teaching. Consequently, the study has addressed an urgent need for greater research in this area in the era of globalisation, where foreign language plays a crucial role in communication, negotiation, and international collaboration.

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