

## **Language use and novice teacher identity in an online Community of Practice**

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates how novice Singaporean teachers indicate their professional and personal identities through language in an online Community of Practice (CoP). The six research participants were asked to post daily about their professional experiences of teaching using a social networking site and these were analyzed by Alsagoff's (2010) Cultural Orientation Model which posits that standard and vernacular English use should not be considered as exclusive categories. The findings reveal that novice teachers shift their deployment of linguistic resources alongside a global and local orientation, expressing a multitude of identities. They index themselves as 'friends', a semi-professional identity that assumes supporting and encouraging their peers; as 'beginning teachers', recognizing the need for development, while at the same time expressing their confidence. Other identities expressed through language are 'expert' offering advice to their peers, and 'insiders', who converse in a jargon specific to their field. The data also highlights how growing professional confidence, personal emotions, and negotiations of status within a community contribute to the formation of teacher identities.

**Keywords:** novice language teachers, identity, online community of practice

### **Introduction**

In the past two decades, research on the development of teachers' professional identities (Alsup, 2006; Brown & McNamara, 2005; Cheung, Ben Said, & Park, 2015; Clarke, 2008; Danielewicz, 2001; Miller Marsh, 2003) has revealed that a major component in teachers' cultivation of a self is a socialization process which progressively introduces and initiates teachers into their communities of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). In addition to a professional socialization which entails on-site development of pedagogical know-how and practical skills, teachers are also socialized into discourse norms, communities, as well as discipline-based discursive practices (Bartels, 2003; Clarke, 2008; Gee, 2004; Gunnarsson, 2009; Hedgcock, 2002, 2009) which enable them to

employ linguistic resources effectively (Achugar, 2009) and communicate successfully with fellow professionals in their professional contexts. In fact, it is through this language-mediated socialization that teachers negotiate their position in the profession and find their own voice (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). It is therefore assumed that when teachers become part of “a community of professionals with shared goals, values, discourse, and practices” (Richards, 2008, p. 161) the acquisition of new modes of discourse shapes their professional identity; an identity negotiated, mediated, and enacted through language use. Thus, mastery of terminology, use of job-specific register, and insider jargon help to index novice teachers as members of a professional community and marks their status, power, and ideologies (Kanno, 2004).

In this paper, I will examine how Singaporean novice English language teachers participating in an online CoP construct, negotiate, and enact various professional identities through language use. As the environment examined is a multilingual one, the study explores how novice teachers use linguistic resources available to them both to (1) define themselves in relation to their school culture, peers, superiors, and students, and (2) articulate expert discourses which legitimate them within their new CoP. The novelty of this research lies in the fact that novice language teachers’ interaction takes place in an online social networking site that allows them to assume different identities – both professional and personal – and to employ various voices through language to mark which identity they take on as they grow as professionals.

## **Identity and language forms**

While language is important in the development of identity (Hall, 2000; Norton, 2000), in multilingual environments the relationship between language and identity is more complex (Blommaert, 2010). Taking Singapore’s multilingual society as the context of inquiry, I examine how the use of language, particularly the fluctuation between formal and vernacular, specialized language and professional terminology, digital communication patterns (Crystal, 2001), shapes the complex process of professional identity formation.

In Singapore, there are two varieties of English: Singapore Standard English (SSE) and Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) which is also known as 'Singlish'. While SSE has been defined as "the variety of English used by educated Singaporeans for formal purposes" (Low & Brown, 2005, p. 11), Singlish is the vernacular counterpart, used by “those who have limited proficiency in the language or (...) proficient speakers who choose to use it for informal purposes” (ibid). This categorization is problematic, since it

assumes that Singaporean speakers switch between the use of SSE and SCE as if they were completely exclusive categories. Therefore, the analysis of teachers' communicative dynamics in this paper is based on the Cultural Orientation Model (COM henceforth) (Alsagoff, 2010), which describes language use in terms of shifting orientation and norms between a local and global, or colloquial and standard use rather than code-switching between the two varieties. Alsagoff (2010) argues that for Singaporean speakers "fluidity and flux of movement rather than constancy of clear boundaries is the norm" (2010, pp. 341). This alteration can be understood in terms of an oscillation of styles in accordance with contextual factors and situational dynamics. I will expand on this model by showing that when novice teachers move towards the use of SCE, it connotes values associated with informality, homeliness, and emotional empathy. However, when they position their language use towards SSE, their language is typically co-indexed with professionalism, display of expertise, and a more serious topic and/or tone and indicates an insider status within the profession. In this regard shifts in the use of language by teachers signal alignments along with personal and professional spheres within their identity, just as Kiss, Ong & Pelly (2012) argued in their study on the professional image student teachers wish to project in terms of their communication skills.

This partition in the domains of language use is particularly relevant for teachers in multilingual contexts. While the majority of teachers in Singapore can converse using the vernacular in informal situations, Singlish is the '*lingua non grata*' in the country. In fact, as officers of the Ministry of Education (MOE), Singaporean teachers are rigorously discouraged to allow pupils to use Singlish in the classroom, let alone use it themselves. Government-sponsored programs such as the 'Speak Good English Movement' (SGEM) create a hostile climate towards SCE. It is therefore assumed that when teachers are in formal contexts, they are more self-conscious about their choice of language forms. Teachers' use of SCE, while associated with proximity and cultural belonging (Alsagoff, 2010) may draw criticism from the public who seem ready to blame teachers for the spread of SCE (and falling language standards). Surprisingly, school management "readily complied with the popular verdict on their teachers' negligent ways with language in class" (Kramer-Dahl, 2004, p. 76) and resulted in specialized courses to improve their language skills.

With this in mind, this study is aimed at exploring how teachers juggle between the vernacular as well as the standard forms of English when defining themselves personally and professionally. More specifically, the study tries to find answers to the following research questions:

1. How do beginner Singaporean teachers indicate their professional and personal identities through language in an online community of practice?
2. What social identities and functions of language are associated with the use of SSE and SCE in their online community?

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Participants***

The six participants in this research project were young Singaporean teachers (mid-20s to early 30s) of mixed ethnic background (3 Chinese, 2 Malay, and 1 Indian). All participants were born and educated in Singapore and they had a fairly similar command of both standard and vernacular varieties of Singaporean English. The teachers were fresh graduates of the Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) program of the National Institute of Education, Singapore. At the time of graduation, they had completed an eight-month teacher education course which prepared them for teaching English language and literature in Singaporean secondary schools. This shared learning experience was considered an important factor in selecting the participants as it provided two key prerequisites for the research. Firstly, participants already knew each other and therefore formed a professional learning community based on trust and collegiality. This already existing construct was shifted to a new medium – from face-to-face to an online community – in order to facilitate and ease communication among teachers who no longer shared the same physical space due to their placement to different Singaporean secondary schools.

The question is, however, whether an artificially created social media group could function as a CoP. Goos and Bennison (2008) highlight the tensions between designed and emergent communities and point out the benefits of a CoP which is allowed to grow on its own right without much influence from outside factors. The online CoP in this current study was initiated by the participants before the project when they created a closed group on an online platform to support each other during their teaching practicum and beyond. As the online group description stated, it was created "to share EL resources – our self-help to everyone's ideas and lesson plans to survive the next 3 years" (the three years mentioned in the description indicates the length of the bond these teachers need to serve with MOE). The study took this initiative further by selecting some of the most active participants of that self-organized community to join another group on the same platform. Therefore, the project was built on an already functioning online CoP rather than designing and creating one from scratch.

Participation in the project was voluntary and respondents were informed that they may withdraw from the study at any time. This actually happened when one of the participants decided to leave the group as she felt she was unable to contribute to the forum while managing several job-related responsibilities and attempting to strike a desirable work-life balance. All the participants signed an informed consent form in line with the university's requirements of ethical conduct of research, allowing the researcher to use verbatim quotes from their discussions and acknowledging that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identity. The novice teachers in the study were therefore named as Mary, Helen, Robert, Lakshana, Alfiah, and Emma.

### ***Data collection procedures***

In order to elicit teachers' online communication, a private group was set up using the popular social networking service and website, Facebook. Participants were asked to post about their teaching experiences and lives as teachers on a daily basis, keeping an 'interactive' reflective journal. The main journal entries (a.k.a. posts) were individual contributions and could be read longitudinally as one person's log of their teaching chronicle. However, they also offered the opportunity to be treated as contributions to a discussion forum, eliciting responses from other participants and evolving to a conversation among the participants (Kiss, Horvath & Kamal, 2018). The group operated on a members-only basis and as a result discussions and posts were visible exclusively to the participants and the researcher.

There are four main reasons why this social networking website was chosen as the medium of data collection. Firstly, the research participants were all young professionals who were not only computer literate, but also had an active social networking life on Facebook. Thus, participating in a research project which used this medium could be easily incorporated into their everyday online activities without the need to redirect them to other online platforms or to instruct them to keep a personal weblog on their computers. Secondly, due to the nature of social networking websites, posts were visible to every participant. In this way, they had the opportunity to comment, respond, ask for clarification, or even show their support/concurrence by using features such as the 'like' button to indicate their presence even when they did not write a textual response. Thirdly, the group followed the structure of the original support group the participants created for themselves to share resources during their practicum. Therefore, the new group was an extension of an already existing CoP. Finally, Facebook was selected because of its convenient built-in control preferences.

The researcher, being the participants' former tutor on their PGDE methodology course, had a delicate role to play. On the one hand, he had to make sure that participants contribute to the forum by facilitating discussion, especially at the beginning of the project. On the other hand, it was imperative that the participants felt ownership of the CoP and the researcher was not seen as the leader of the community. Therefore, he had to assume a semi-active role in the online forum; although he contributed with messages – altogether 20– to the discussion, he never initiated posts. His contributions were always a reaction to research participants' primary posts. This arrangement both ensured that he would not dictate what directions the conversations should take, and demonstrated to the participants that he was listening to what they had to say.

The researcher's posts can be categorized into three different types: messages that a) served to encourage active participation and show the participants that their concerns were listened to, their successes were applauded; b) answered questions which were directly asked from him; and c) elicited clarifications about participants' posts. An example of each type of researcher contribution is given below:

- a) Robert: coming Thursday there's another observation. - always never a pleasure

Researcher: I'm sure you will do fine, Bob!

- b) Robert: [Researcher's name], is there anyway MOE would listen to our voice for placement? They've gotta be wack to think that GP [General Paper – school subject] and English are the same. The flippant casualness of their placeness causes deep gashes to its casualties... no understatement here :/

Researcher: I wish we lived in a perfect world, but the moment I wake up in the morning I realise this is not the case ..... Yet, you need to learn how to appreciate what you have and even come to love it.

- c) Lakshana: My first day and I realised that my school song is a mix of Chinese and English. I figured that the school culture sets the expectations of the students going in there and also for the teachers. The integration of cultural value and people development.

Researcher: What are the expectations of teachers?

Besides the posts, non-verbal messages (e.g. the use of the ‘like’ button) were also used to indicate ‘presence’ and that participants’ posts were read regularly.

The data was collected over a 5-month period, which represented the first semester of the participants’ teaching career and consisted of a total of 579 messages, with 309 primary posts that generated 290 responses, 20 of those from the researcher. The participation in the CoP shows a balanced engagement, with Lakshana’s contribution being an exception.

**Table 1.**  
**Summary table of participant messages**

NAME	Primary post	Response post	Total
Mary	62	43	105
Alfiah	47	73	120
Robert	34	43	77
Emma	71	35	106
Helen	70	64	134
Lakshana	25	12	37
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>309</b>	<b>270</b>	<b>579</b>

### ***Data analysis***

The textual content gathered from the posts was analyzed by using the NVivo 11 software. Messages were examined qualitatively using linguistic, content, and thematic analyses. First, a-priori codes were defined based on Low and Brown’s (2005) and Leimgruber’s (2011) work which allowed the identification of language features that belonged to either SSE or SCE respectively. A random sample of data was then selected from the first month of posting to be coded independently by the researcher and an independent coder (a sociolinguist from the same department) and the results were compared. The discussions revealed a slight misalignment in the coding procedures as to what features of SCE should be considered significant and these disagreements were subsequently resolved by creating a list of SCE features to be coded. Among the essential linguistic features were: a) pragmatic or discourse particles (e.g. *lah* or *la*, *leh*, *hor*), b) borrowings or loan words from local languages (e.g. Malay: ‘*makan*’ to eat, Hokkien: ‘*kaypoh*’ busybody), c) grammatical features, such as the use of present tense to discuss past events, omission of ‘be’ from sentences, categories conversion (e.g. from noun to verb), and d) duplication of words to create emphasis (e.g. *don’t play play*). Additional linguistic features

typical of SCE were not detected in our data or were too sporadic, and were consequently excluded from the analysis.

This stage was followed by content and thematic analyses which aimed to identify the functions for which language was used and unearth the assumed professional identity behind the posts. Similarly to the previous procedure, a random sample of data was selected and coded separately by the researcher and the independent coder. However, this time, there were no a-priori codes; the coders relied on their professional experiences to code the data first independently then together, to discuss, expand or collapse certain themes and functions which appeared in the discourse. This rigorous process ensured a high level of intercoder reliability.

It is important to mention that the analyses focused on how language was used to negotiate collective and individual professional identities in the group. Therefore, the primary focus was on the content of the messages; their intended function, meaning, explicit or implied, and how these were expressed through chosen linguistic features. The qualitative examination explored the reasons, functions, and signification behind the shifts between SSE and SCE, use of professional terminology, and digital language use. These linguistic choices and discursive orientations are therefore posited as pivotal strategies used by participants to index their sense of personal definition and identity in their CoP.

## Findings and Discussion

Quotes from the data, which are presented in this section, have been numbered for ease of reference. Numbering is not based on chronological or sequential appearance in the dataset. While all names used are pseudonyms, original spelling and capitalization in quotes have been kept; italicization signals the use of SCE. The analysis of the data indicates that teachers employ different language forms either to establish a space of self-definition or to display their affiliation with the professional body of teachers, as legitimate participants. The following sections describe the salient themes identified, which illustrate teachers' oscillation between these two domains, and then offers answers to the research questions.

### 1. hahah, *we so similar Alfi*. Champs~~

This above example shows that mutual acquiescence was one of the instances where the use of SCE was observed. Further examples of bonding are expressed in 'private conversations' between participants that were obviously not connected to the topic of the research project, i.e. narrating and reflecting on their professional experiences in schools. In a sense, the



language in these conversations indicated that these were clearly not meant for the researcher (non-Singaporean) and thus the style and the move towards the use of SCE features marked them apart from the professional discourse that characterized the dialogues about education. An example of such a conversation is found below:

2. Helen: *sleeping la bob...* heh heh..wassup?  
 Robert: I wanted to ask u do coffee. Haha. Eh tmr  
 [tomorrow] u want to watch world cup at my place *anot*  
 [or not]?  
 Helen: haha, *I too tired alr* [already].... 10 pm right? I  
 hope to be home by then. Will let ya know!

Bonding can also be noticed in a playful, mutual teasing among participants. On one occasion Robert was describing falling sick during the term and losing his voice. Mary both showed concern and was teasing Robert, who fired back in a friendly, mocking way:

3. Mary: take care of ur voice *bobbob...*  
 Robert: my student gave me strepsils. haha yay  
 Mary: so sweet. must be girl rite? hahaha!  
 Robert: haha, a boy! Sec 1. *so cute hor?* boys rule, girls drool~

### ***'Us' vs 'Them'***

Another interesting way of shifting the linguistic markers to SCE surfaced in the accounts of teaching and learning when the participants tried to establish themselves as being different in terms of qualifications, social status, or opinions, mostly from their students, but on some occasions from their colleagues as well. When such distinction was made between teachers and students, they quoted their students verbatim in their posts, showing students using SCE whereas their voice which reported the incident was mainly in SSE, as exemplified in the extract below:

4. Mary: ... Was talking to my student outside class when a group of sec 4 NT [Normal Technical] students walked past. One of them said "*hi cher. [teacher]*" I acknowledged with a nod and ask them to go back to class quickly. Then the guy who said hi turned towards my direction and said "*exchange numbers leh.*" then they giggled a bit and walked away. i didnt catch it but my student heard it. So i told the boy to stop but he told his friend *nvm* [never mind] just continue walking.

In a way the difference between the varieties of language indicates a distance between teachers and their learners, SSE being the medium of

authority and power, the language of education and professionalism, whereas SCE is spoken by students, who are often not fully proficient in SSE.

Another quotation from Alfiah further illustrates the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’, but this time SCE is used for a different purpose: as mutual support. Mary vocalizes her doubts about being a good teacher which provokes two linguistically different responses:

5. Mary: maybe i am just not good enough for them.  
 Helen: hello friend, yesterday encouraged me, today i encouraged u.. YOU IS POSTGRAD, THEY IS ONLY PSLE [primary school leaving examination]!!!!  
 Alfiah: *nobody is gd enough for you la...* not you not gd enough for them...

Interestingly, although the use of quotations in (4) was aimed to contrast the language used by students (SCE) and their teachers (SSE), here the participants are using SCE to emphasize support and group belonging. On the one hand, the language used in this conversation would put them in the same cultural identity group as their learners, but the content of the message may indicate social boundaries based on educational qualifications and experience. More importantly, the reassuring words expressed here by both Alfiah (SCE) and Helen (internet dialect) vis-à-vis Mary show how identity development is not only negotiated but contingent on peers’ recognition and legitimation. Particularly Helen’s strategic use of caps to convey a louder tenor to her message and her use of ‘lolcat speak’ (Leigh, 2009) – a linguistic variety of internet language – may also indicate an ‘insider’ status and belonging to the online CoP, as she is a) confident enough to use language which is usually frowned upon and all caps which is generally considered to be a sign of higher volume (Zelenkauskaite & Herring, 2006).

### ***The language of emotions***

SCE was also noted to align with localist orientations (Alsagoff, 2010) when it was used by teachers to express emotions and disclosure, and where SSE would be too formal, impersonal, and thus inappropriate to perform the required function with the desired effect. While this was already visible in (5), other posts confirmed this tendency. Some of the emotions expressed using SCE ranged from happiness to frustration as shown in the next three unrelated posts:

6. Alfiah: There's another Eng/ Eng Lit teacher in sch. She just joined us. I feel threatened, *but why leh?*
7. Robert: Had an observation today. *Heng ah...* [lucky] passed. Baby steps... baby steps.
8. Alfiah: As usual, *arrowed* [was assigned a task]. What's new?

It is interesting to observe that that quotes 6-7 use a combination of SSE and SCE. Whereas the factual reporting of events uses the more formal variety of language, the writers seem to shift their positions towards the local and personal domain when they either address their peers (6) or when they express emotions (7). This is not surprising, as speakers who are competent in both formal and vernacular varieties of Singapore English are continuously adjusting language to index their social and cultural position in the complexity of everyday reality (Alsagoff, 2010).

Quote (8) is somehow different from the previous two in the sense that language here not only expresses the frustration of a novice teacher – through the use of subtle sarcasm ‘what’s new’ – but it also highlights power relationships associated with the varieties of Singapore English (see e.g. Cavallaro & Chin, 2009). Alfiah uses the Singlish word ‘arrowed’ to state the fact that she was given an extra task, most probably by her head of department or someone superior to her in rank/expertise. The fact that she chooses to use the SCE instead of the SSE may indicate her lower (either perceived or true) status in her professional community, just as how the participants indicated and expressed perceived power relations vis-à-vis students in the previously quoted examples (e.g. Quote 4).

A further example of how emotions had an impact on language use is quote (9) where Helen recounts an incident in which she, against her own professional judgment, followed the advice of her mentor that landed her in an awkward situation.

9. Helen: i gave the hardcopy of the corrected comments last week to suggest corrections but when vp [vice principal] read it last night, it was not corrected. so hod [head of department] had to correct it and called to clarified whether i did it or not. He didnt accuse or blame me but i just feel upset. it could have been easier if i go online and just correct the errors myself (which i wanted to do it cos the errors where GLARING and it's easier that way) but mentor says *don't spoil market* [referring to the actions of someone who

works so well or efficiently that her colleagues look bad in comparison] so i didn't and now!!!! SIGH.

It is understandable that Helen is upset about the outcome of the situation. As she narrates the events the factual tone becomes emotional which is marked by the use of capitalization, extensive use of punctuation (three exclamation marks), and the use of a Singlish expression. It is not possible to determine whether she quotes the mentor verbatim in the account, but it is possible that she only summarizes the gist of a conversation between her and the more experienced colleague. If that is actually what had happened, then we may assume that it is her emotional involvement in the events that prompts the use of SCE.

The use of SCE also surfaces in professional recounts which have a significant relevance for the 'self' as opposed to the factual reporting of events that took place on any given day of teaching. When the speaker is not 'personally' or emotionally involved in the events, SSE was used as the official voice, but when the 'individual' and not the 'teacher' is addressed then the more intimate variety was called upon.

10. Helen: today, kids asked when is the wedding. WHAT WEDDING?!

Lakshana: It's a sign Helen lol..... Helen: not a sign. they are too *kaypoh* [busybody]. they want to know what's happening in my life. the only happening thing in my life is THEM!!!

The use of Singlish in the discourse of the research participants underscores Alsagoff's (2010) point about speakers of Singapore English not code-switching, i.e. using either Standard English or Singlish exclusively, but effortlessly shifting their use of linguistic resources from the global/official to the local/personal orientations. She argues that speakers would style-shift and employ "a variety of lingua-cultural resources in order to identify or mark a change in cultural orientation or style" (Alsagoff, 2010, p. 345). Therefore, the role of Singlish indicates a step to the local, culturally/personally oriented teacher identity as opposed to the use of Standard English which marks a more global, professionally-oriented stance that requires language that is factual in its content and neutral in terms of feelings and emotions.

### ***Teachers displaying professionalism***

There is an observable change in the participants' discourse when they attempt to portray themselves as language teaching professionals and talk about events in which they assume job/teaching-related roles. The language in these posts becomes more aligned with SSE as it shifts towards the

global, professional end of Alsagoff's (2010) model. This is not surprising; as language teachers, they are aware of the need to fit into a wider professional community which demands a discourse that is mutually understood by its members regardless of their cultural contexts or geographical locations. Thus, the language they use in their professional capacity is more carefully mediated to express intended meanings and avoid misunderstandings.

Furthermore, the novice teachers in this study have been socialized into the profession in the Singaporean context, first as students in the local educational system and then as novice teachers. Many studies have already pointed out that Singapore has a heavily centralized top-down approach to government (e.g. Morris, 1996; Towndrow, 2005) which has a significant role in promoting certain selected and approved values among its citizens through education in particular. Thus, as was expected, the participants acknowledge -- either consciously or unconsciously -- the norms set by an officially sponsored view of professionalism (Leung, 2009) which dictates the use of SSE as the voice of the 'educational officer'.

The officially sponsored values appear in the participants' early Facebook posts, perhaps signaling their efforts to assimilate into their new CoP, embracing its culture. Lakshana shares:

11. My school believes in Teamwork, responsibility, Integrity, Learning, and Service. So as teachers we need to model the values. We need to walk the talk.

As Lakshana states, 'walking the talk' is manifested through modeling or embodying these values which are part of the school's mission statement. While her enthusiasm and dedication may or may not be part of an early set of idealized beliefs (Furlong & Maynard, 1995), it is echoed by other participants. Mary, for instance, portrays her successful 'admission' and endorsement by the community:

12. We had a cooperative learning workshop today. Was engaging and I picked up a few CL [cooperative learning] strategies. Meeting my colleagues was fun. They are a great supportive bunch. I am happy.

Mary's comment displays growing confidence which is the result of a sense of belonging to a new CoP. Other participants also projected themselves similarly, as novice teachers, recognizing the support of fellow experienced teachers. In fact, support is something they needed badly in their first few months of teaching. The entrance into a new CoP is usually chaotic and striven with confusion and challenges. As teachers are adjusting to a new environment they either solicit the assistance of experienced peers

or acknowledge their shortcomings in certain areas of teaching. As shown by the following example, Emma, facing difficulties in the classroom, recognized the need to grow to successfully perform her teaching duties:

13. Died in 2T2 today, had help of an UAE (untrained teacher) but still...lost in a sea of noise. Wish I could gag the students. (~) Feeling the "pain" of wasting 42hrs (1 for each of us). Noise subsided when I did an impromptu lesson on learning to make smart guesses using clues (used ppt) with close ups of nature). Had wanted to start with ground rules & getting to know each other, ha! Couldn't even speak for 5mins with EVERYONE listening...gotta learn how to teach an NT [Normal Technical] class pronto!

Following a few suggestions from her peers she added:

14. Did try not talking...they just keep talking  $\Lambda$  Determined to learn to manage this NT class. Going to join forces with a more experienced Math teacher. Will update. Also sitting in the other teacher's (one of my CT [cooperating teacher]) class later to observe.

In spite of the difficulties she encountered, Emma recognizes that after having tried a few techniques, she could better learn how to manage her class with assistance from a more experienced teacher with whom she will 'join forces', indexing, therefore, a resolutely collaborative attitude towards solving her problem. This positive attitude is also captured in other claimed efforts to achieve higher standards of professionalism, as Robert asserts:

15. My attitude is positive, and I'll mold the best out of clay at hand. I hope to tell you all soon, that I'm doing well and getting along with colleagues and students. Be positive all of us.

Robert affirms his optimism by recognizing that he is still in a transitory state of self-development. This realistic stance prompts him to realize that teaching is about 'becoming' rather than 'being'. He thus invites others to adopt a similar attitude and 'be positive'.

As evidence by Emma and Robert, beginning teachers have a rather genuine attitude towards self-improvement and, probably owing to the open mode of communication with status equals in the online CoP, are relatively ready to admit the areas where they think they need to improve. However, in some cases their posts are general, rather than specific, as in the following post by Alfiah:

16. Think that teachers too easily blame students for weaknesses in comprehension, but I think it's cos we didn't deliver our lessons meaningfully for them to understand and apply the skills learnt.

Using the general subjects of 'teachers' and 'we' indicates that (at least some of) the participants are trying to protect the image of the professional and competent teacher they are trying to establish. As opposed to Emma's recount of her inability to control the class in quote (12), Alfiah chooses a different strategy to admit that she needs to change strategies when dealing with reading comprehension tasks.

After a few weeks, the nature of posts suggested heightened confidence in the professional selves of participants. In this respect, they seemed to adopt another facet of their professional identity where professionalism is equated with the ability to dispense advice and position oneself as an 'expert' in the field who can not only teach their subjects successfully but are also able to manage unexpected situations, discipline problems, or disruptive behavior. They felt comfortable enough to experiment with new techniques of teaching and managing their classes:

17. Helen: I'm not teaching my old class but they are calling me [famous US teen idol] straight in my face (those cheeky lit boys)... must show the fierce side and no nonsense face! Mary: if it was in my school they would have gotten a full day suspension. Helen: ok good idea...I will tell them..

Alfiah: my nonsense-day strategy worked! aim to do a nonsense day per month. seemed like therapy for the kids (i'm doing psy experiments on them) HAHA

The level of confidence gained by the participants seems to allow them not only to showcase their regulatory behavior vis-à-vis students, but to gain confidence in their teacher roles through sharing and experimentation. These 'sharing sessions' facilitated by the virtual platform have the added benefit of helping teachers to remove their affective barrier when seeking advice. It is less intimidating to ask for advice through this interface than when facing superiors or even colleagues working for the same institution. In the latter case, participants risk 'losing face' or may fear to appear as incompetent. Yet, participants rarely asked for help directly; they rather elicited support and tips in more subtle ways; simply stating a problem as in (5), (14), (15), and (17). Explicit request for help from fellow participants (or the researcher) was limited to only two occasions in the whole dataset:

18. Robert: haha, [researcher's name] help me. Lesson plans are burying me ~~

19. Alfiah: Oh I need Help. What have you guys done for Paper 1 in terms of feedback and rubrics and strategies? Anyone has any effective methods?

This illustrates that although the participants at times showed high levels of confidence and expertise, they were still novice teachers. Explicitly asking for help might have undermined their efforts to establish themselves as fully-fledged professionals.

Finally, another feature of the participants' language that indexes them as English language teachers is their use of acronyms. Acronyms, according to Zegwaard and Coll (2011, p. 285), are 'normal language' in specific work-related contexts. Their use indicates an insider status, a position which entails the knowledge and confidence of using terms that are only accessible for members of a particular CoP. The most common acronyms in the discourse were EL (English Language - school subject), HOD (Head of Department), NT/NA (Normal Technical / Normal Academic - streams in the Singapore education system), GP (General Paper – school subject), CT (Cooperating Teacher / mentor who works with student/novice teachers in schools), BT (Beginning Teacher), MOE (Ministry of Education), NIE (National Institute of Education). The following post from Mary gives an example of how acronyms turn the novice teachers' discourse into 'insider jargon', beyond the comprehension of outsiders, to show membership in the CoP:

20. deployment is out. form-teachership duties not confirmed. I'll be teaching Sec 2 Exp EL (2 classes) and Sec 1 Exp/ NA Literature (5 classes). Will be coordinator for Sec 2 EL too.

Other examples that used acronyms were (4), (9), (12), (13), (14) which reported professional events. It can be noted that when acronyms were used, they appeared when the participants positioned their language use towards the SSE end of Alsagoff's (2010) continuum and they were not used when the style was shifted closer to SCE. This indicates that there is a boundary between certain roles and identities novice teachers assume in their professional encounters. They use language to mark what particular roles they enact; their professional or personal roles are clearly indicated.



## **Summary**

In order to briefly recap the data analysis and to answer the two research questions (1. How do beginner Singaporean teachers indicate their professional and personal identities through language in an online community of practice? 2. What social identities and functions of language are associated with the use of SSE and SCE in their online community?), we argue that the data have shown that professional identity emerges from the interplay of professional and personal encounters of various degrees. As VanTassel-Baska, MacFarlane, and Feng (2008, p. 39) point out “(t)eacher identity development and change is shaped by the interrelationship between personal biography and experience”. This was clearly visible in the research data as participants were using discourse to index their evolving roles in their CoP. Through their discourse we had a glimpse of their efforts to position themselves as ‘friends’, a semi-professional identity that assumes supporting and encouraging their peers; they also acted as ‘beginning teachers’, who sometimes were uncertain about their abilities and recognized the need to develop their teaching skills, while they also expressed their confidence. We saw them as ‘experts’ offering advice to their peers, and they projected themselves as ‘insiders’, who converse in a jargon specific to their field.

The language used in the online forum supports Alsagoff’s (2010) theory of code shifting and shows that novice teachers do not use SSE and SCE as exclusive categories, but their amalgam, according to situational demands and the identity they assume. The identities and roles, especially those in the professional domain, are still malleable and are being shaped by various factors such as their level of confidence, the ability to manage stress, and their willingness to change and embrace uncertainty in their everyday work. As shown in the study, when teachers develop a professional identity it is through the medium of their personal/social identities.

## **Conclusion**

The online Community of Practice enacted on the social networking website served not only as a reflective platform where novice teachers came to share some of their experiences on a regular basis, but it also became an important space of mutual support. This cooperative space had the role of a ‘safe-house’ (Canagarajah, 1997; Pratt, 1991). As Pratt (quoted in Canagarajah, 1997, p. 174) explains, safe houses are “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared under-standings, and

temporary protection from legacies of oppression". The safety of the online CoP allowed novice teachers to use language which would have been otherwise frowned upon in more professional contexts. Language use signaled group membership, the sense of belonging to a close-knit professional community, and even friendship; all very important aspects of professional identity development.

The fact that novice teachers used a social networking site added further levels of complexity to the discourse. However, investigating these are beyond the scope of this paper. Language forms which are typically called upon in online communication (Crystal, 2001), such as abbreviations, capitalization, acronyms, emoticons, emoticon acronyms (e.g. 'lol' - laughing out loud) interspersed the data. Although some research has already set out to explore 'Internet dialects' (e.g. Driscoll, 2002; Varnhagen et al., 2010), the literature is relatively scarce on such features of language used by teachers while participating in online professional development. The increasing interest in research on virtual identities (e.g. Benwell & Stokoe, 2006) is encouraging, yet the processes of identity formation of teachers through engagement in Online Communities of Practice have not received due attention.

In a time of a global pandemic which forces teachers to use digital tools, I believe it is crucial to delve into research which investigates teachers' identity development via online discourse communities, especially paying attention to how language is used as a tool in identity formation.

## **The author**

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