The pedagogical and socio-affective dimensions of identity tensions and teacher agency: Case studies of university English teachers teaching online

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Abstract
The unprecedented switch to online education during the Covid-19 pandemic has posed many challenges for language teachers, such as conducting authentic language interactions with reduced modalities in virtual classrooms. Language teachers, therefore, have been confronted with identity tensions of how to reposition themselves to adapt to this new teaching space. How teachers experienced and responded to these identity tensions is critically important to the success of online education, yet this issue remains underexplored. To address this gap, our case studies drew on multiple rounds of individual interviews with four university English teachers who taught online during the pandemic. Findings reveal that individual teachers experienced varying degrees of identity tensions on the pedagogical and socio-affective dimensions. To tackle these identity tensions, the teachers took wide-ranging agentic actions in pre-, in-, and/or after-class stages to maintain an identity, adopt a new identity, switch between identities, and/or redefine identities. Findings are discussed in terms of differential identity tensions brought by online teaching to individual teachers, as well as the complex interplay between identity tensions and teacher agency. The study concludes with implications for online language teaching and language teacher development.

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I Introduction
Globally, education at all levels experienced an unprecedented move online due to the Covid-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2022). Online education, though a safe alternative to face-to-face instruction, has posed many challenges for teachers. Regardless of subject disciplines, distinct features of online education affect the professional identities of teachers in profound ways (Richardson & Alsup, 2015). For instance, the absence of human contact has changed the way that teachers build interpersonal relationships, which affects their sense of professional identity (McNaughton & Billot, 2016; Nazari & Seyri, 2021). For another instance, teachers feel ‘untrained and marginalized’ (Moser & Wei, 2021, p. 26) when they learn to use digital tools to teach students who may possess relatively more technological skills. To become effective in online instruction, teachers may have to ‘deconstruct and re-build a traditional identity or some traditional assumptions about effective teaching and learning’ (Richardson & Alsup, 2015, p. 152).

Language teachers, however, may confront particular challenges when tasked to teach online. First, the online settings, which reduce communication to mainly verbal and textual, profoundly challenge teachers to craft learning-conducive interactions (Harsch et al., 2021). Given the common belief that real-time face-to-face interactions are fundamental to language learning, many language teachers find themselves less able to realize the ‘multimodal, embodied, and mediated’ (De Costa & Norton, 2017, p. 8) approach to language teaching. Thus, tensions may arise when the teaching space conflicts with language teachers’ deeply-rooted pedagogical beliefs. Second, due to technical issues and unclear netiquette, language teachers are concerned about students turning off their cameras and their own reduced control over student participation in remote learning contexts, which may pose threats to teacher authority (Harsch et al., 2021). As a result, identity tensions, the internal struggle ‘between the situation-as-is and the situation-as-preferred’ (Schaap et al., 2021, p. 2), may occur when a teacher’s desired self cannot be realized in the online settings, particularly when he/she has had little preparation for becoming a qualified online teacher during the pandemic (Nazari & Seyri, 2021).

Since teacher identity is highly contextualized, the significant disparities between online and offline settings and the resultant changes in language teaching practices inevitably led to tensions in language teacher identity (Ashton, 2022; El-Soussi, 2022; Harsch et al., 2021). Resolving identity tensions probably requires agency enactment, in which language teachers may reflect on beliefs about teaching, adapt teaching practices, and make emotional investment to achieve an equilibrium of identity (Yazan & Peercy, 2018). While prior studies offer some insights into language teachers’ identity tensions in educational reforms, how teachers experienced identity tensions in the sudden switch to online teaching and agentively responded to these tensions have remained underexplored. To address this gap, the present study reports on case studies of four Chinese university English teachers’ experiences of identity tensions and agentic responses while
being tasked to teach online synchronously, usually in invisible and muted virtual class-
rooms (i.e. when students had their cameras and microphones turned off to ensure quality live streaming). As a study situated in a Chinese university, it has implications for other contexts, given that online education has become the new norm in the post-pandemic period rather than a temporary emergency shift (Hodges et al., 2020).

II Language teacher identity and agency in shifting educational landscapes

I Identity change in online teaching as a new teaching landscape

Language teacher identity is dynamic, continuous, and contextualized (Yazan, 2018). That is, teacher identity is usually constructed through ‘social interaction’ with students and others, and through ‘material interaction’ with spaces and objects (Benson, 2017, p. 4). Of particular relevance to this study is the changed space (i.e. from face-to-face to online settings) for language teacher identity. When confronting online teaching as a novel teaching environment in the pandemic, language teachers reported feeling ‘margin-
alized, untrained, and emotionally overworked’ (Moser & Wei, 2021, p.26). Thus, online teaching is likely to induce tensions in multiple facets of language teacher identity.

Identity tensions may arise when teachers lack expertise in technology. When teach-
ers were mandated to shift to online teaching, many of them were very likely to have limited knowledge of digital tools (Moser & Wei, 2021). Without adequate technological skills to teach online, teachers’ position as knowledge experts can be disrupted (Hanson, 2009), and they may feel like novice teachers again (El-Soussi, 2022; Richardson & Alsup, 2015). Their ideal self-representation could be further challenged when confront-
ing students who are more technologically skillful (McNaughton & Billot, 2016), lead-
ing to professional vulnerability (Cutri & Mena, 2020).

Scholarship from general teacher education further indicates that identity tensions can be related to one’s pedagogical and socio-affective commitment. Previous research con-
ducted in face-to-face settings has identified that teachers’ pedagogical identity tensions may arise from a gap between one’s own concept of a good teacher and the top-down policies dominated by standardized assessment (Buchanan, 2015; Lasky, 2005), or a gap between language teachers’ habitualized role and the role expected by the local culture (Liu & Xu, 2011; Wang & Du, 2014). Similar tensions may be expected in moving teach-
ing to cyberspace where there is a lack of physical presence of both teachers and stu-
dents. The absence of students’ non-verbal feedback and visual reciprocal contact may prompt teachers to repeat instructions and spoon-feed more frequently (El-Soussi, 2022). In addition, when students shut off cameras and mute themselves in online classes, teach-
ers may find it hard to observe student online participation and give immediate feedback (Chen, 2022). Such situations would undermine the performance of their facilitator role (Yuan & Liu, 2021). Specifically, they lack paralinguistic, bodily, and kinesthetic resources to show responses, which would reduce their on-task connections with stu-
dents (Nazari & Seyri, 2021). Without face-to-face communication, teachers were com-
pelled to adopt a television presenter role as ‘just a talking head and a PowerPoint’ (McNaughton & Billot, 2016, p.652), conflicting with their preferred role characterized by student-centeredness.
The socio-affective dimension of identity tensions usually refers to the gap between the desired and actual support given to students (Pillen et al., 2013). Given a lack of personal contact in online settings, teachers may experience tensions in building interpersonal relationship with students (El-Soussi, 2022), and thus perceive more difficulty in connecting emotionally and intellectually with students (Richardson & Alsup, 2015). In particular, when interaction is mainly reduced to verbal and/or textual, it is harder for teachers to show affinity for students or use humor to build rapport (Yuan & Liu, 2021). When teachers cannot develop closeness with students, they are unable to perform the social roles (e.g. friends, counselors, advisors) that they might perform in offline settings (El-Soussi, 2022). Moreover, identity tensions may intensify amid the pandemic when teachers find it more fatiguing to perform a care-giver role while teaching remotely at home (Jones & Kessler, 2020). Online language teachers may find it particularly challenging to tackle care-related identity tensions, given that the emotional bonds built in a second language (L2) tend to be weaker (Costa et al., 2014). In addition, the different dimensions of identity tensions often co-occur to different extents. For example, beginning teachers were found to experience more care-related identity tensions than pedagogy-related ones (Pillen et al., 2013; Yazan & Peercy, 2018).

As a new teaching landscape, online teaching has presented technological, pedagogical, and socio-affective challenges that may induce teacher identity tensions. Such tensions may not reach resolution, but could result in adaption of teaching practices and identity reconstruction if teachers exercise their agency (El-Soussi, 2022; McNaughton & Billot, 2016; Nazari & Seyri, 2021). In the following sub-section, research on the relationship between teacher agency and identity is reviewed.

2 Teacher agency and identity

When identity tensions arise, teacher agency can be seen as a key resource that constructs teacher identity and further ‘establishes its maintenance and transformation’ (Vähäsantanen, 2015, p.15). Adopting an ecological perspective, this study operationalizes teacher agency as a temporal and situated achievement, something that teachers do rather than possess (Priestley et al., 2015). In this definition, the ‘situated dimension’ refers to the interaction between actors and environment, indicating agency as ‘an emergent phenomenon of actor-situation transactions’ (Biesta et al., 2015, p.626). Moreover, agency is a temporally distributed as being mediated by influences from the past (the iterational dimension), orientation towards the future (the projective dimension), and engagement with the present (the practical-evaluative dimension). Below we review prior research by highlighting the interplay between teacher identity and agency.

First, the extent to which teacher agency is exercised can be seen in the maintenance of one’s professional identity, being either ‘stepping up’ or ‘pushing back’ (Buchanan, 2015; Lasky, 2005). That is, teachers may act in line with the expected roles or resist external pressure, depending upon whether their identity fits with the school culture or policy. For instance, teachers may push back the neoliberalism that has narrowed education to a market-focused endeavor through exercising their belief of good teaching in their own classrooms (Reeves, 2018). However, not all teachers have the capacity to resist external constraints, and thus may be compelled to alter their practices that result in identity shift (Buchanan, 2015).
Second, when one’s teacher identity conflicts with the externally defined concept of good teaching, teacher agency may be exhibited through creating a balance between the two, a more sophisticated solution than resistance (Sloan, 2006). Specifically, when discord between teacher identity and the changing environment (e.g. reform mandate or new workplace) arose, teachers not only managed to fulfill the renewed tasks but also tried to maintain the identity they were committed to. They may, for instance, manipulate their own professional vulnerability to build a trusting relationship with students, a core component of their teacher identity, despite the less-human discourse characterized by increased managerialism and accountability (Lasky, 2005). Teachers of English language learners (ELLs) were found to make pedagogical and affective efforts, such as modifying the lesson on the spot and attending to ELL students’ feelings, to perform their self-identification as ELL teachers (Yazan & Peercy, 2018). Such agentic actions enable teachers to maintain their identities through renewed practices, which would pragmatically reduce tensions.

Third, while teachers exercise agency in line with their identity, their agentic actions may also vary, mediated by their future orientations, beliefs about teaching and their own agency, and course context. Individual teachers, when tasked to teach online, may exhibit a higher level of agency in realizing their ‘good teacher’ identity if they develop future orientations to online teaching rather than treat it a temporary solution (Ashton, 2022). Apart from that, teachers’ long-held belief also affects their agency in preserving their identity, which may be related to their professional life cycle (Lasky, 2005). Moreover, contextual factors such as course type (Yuan & Liu, 2021) and micro-politics of the immediate context (Kayi-Aydar, 2015) were found to mediate teacher agency in identity negotiation.

Fourth, the temporal dimension of teacher agency suggests that agency may be manifested in how one’s past experiences shape his/her identity at present (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016), or in how one’s future-oriented identity commitment is realized (Tao & Gao, 2017). Another way to understand it is to have a narrower focus on teachers’ classroom teaching in which agency-identity is examined in moment-to-moment pedagogical practices in language classrooms and manifested in their reactions to problematic situations (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018).

Three research gaps can be identified from the review above. First, while literature implies that identity shift was perceived negatively and related to diminished agency, it remains unclear whether this conclusion relates directly to the shift to online teaching. Second, limited attention was paid to the complexity of situations in which multiple aspects of identity tensions co-cur and the ways teacher agency may vary in dealing with the multiple tensions. Third, teacher agency research has either focused on micro-analysis of classroom discourse or a prolonged perspective of one’s professional career, but how teacher agency is enacted in an academic semester where identity tensions occur is underexplored. To address these gaps, the case studies zoom in on four teachers to answer two research questions:

- Research question 1: What identity tensions did the language teachers experience in online teaching?
- Research question 2: How did they exercise agency to deal with these identity tensions?
III Methods

1 Research context and participants

To develop an in-depth understanding of teachers’ identity tensions and agentic actions in the online teaching landscape, the case study (Yin, 2018) approach was adopted with individual teachers as cases. A first-tier Chinese university was selected as the research site mainly due to data access issues. As a pioneer of communicative language teaching (CLT) approach in China, this university has compiled CLT textbooks and implemented CLT since the 1980s. CLT has also been part of the university’s teacher induction program. Due to this long tradition, language teachers in this university generally have a firm belief in CLT and are dedicated to being facilitators in creating communicative language environments to support student learning. In March 2020, the university closed campus and implemented online education due to the pandemic. To support online education, it then purchased Rain Classroom, an online teaching platform, and provided teachers with relevant training. Meanwhile, it allowed teachers to freely choose other platforms that best suited their courses. Although the university did not mandate the mode of online instruction (i.e. synchronous or asynchronous), most language teachers, including the participants in this study, chose the synchronous teaching mode to ensure real-time communication with students, a key to CLT. They chose various online platforms, including Zoom, Tencent Meeting, Tencent Classroom, and Rain Classroom. Regarding netiquette, the university did not require students or teachers to turn on their cameras, given that they were working in various, and sometimes less than ideal, conditions (e.g. poor Internet connections and crowded living spaces).

Among the volunteers who responded to our call for participation via email, 12 teachers were selected to participate based on purposeful sampling (Cohen et al., 2011). These 12 participants’ age, teaching experience, gender, highest degree, and professional title conform to the demographic characteristics of university English teachers in China (Chinese Ministry of Education [CMoE], 2020). Due to space limitations, this study only reports on four information-rich cases (Patton, 2015) with great individual variations in identity tensions and agentic actions, spreading across different career stages (Huberman, 1989). They are (all pseudonyms): Cathy (an early-career lecturer, Ph.D.), Bill (a mid-career associate professor, Ph.D.), Daisy (a mid-career lecturer, M.A.), and Jenny (a late-career lecturer, M.A.). More information about the participants will be presented in Section IV to facilitate a better understanding of the individual cases.

2 Data collection and analysis

The participants were interviewed at three different stages throughout the semester to understand the identity tensions they experienced and agentic actions. Semi-structured interviews were adopted to stay focused on the research questions but also allow for flexibility in the interview process (Cohen et al., 2011). All interviews were made through phone calls, as both the participants and researchers were then working from home. Table 1 summarizes three rounds of interviews.

All the interviews were conducted in Chinese and audio-recorded. The recordings were transcribed verbatim for content analysis (Cohen et al., 2011). To answer the
research questions, both within-case and cross-case analyses were conducted to identify individual variations and commonalities shared by the cases. First, we wrote case summaries based on our readings of transcribed interviews respectively, which were then combined to reach a triangulated baseline understanding of each case. Second, we searched for narratives on actual and preferred identities based on the operationalized concept of identity tensions (Schaap et al., 2021), as defined earlier. For example, Daisy’s excerpt, ‘I teach six classes, but I don’t just broadcast 6 times. My instructions are based on students’ responses’ (Daisy-I2), was first labeled as ‘not being a broadcaster’ through first-layer open coding, and then merged into a broader category of her preferred identity as ‘a facilitator’ in the second-layer axial coding (Cohen et al., 2011). Third, we searched for data on the ‘doing’ of the participants as indicators of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015), using their original words as the initial codes. These codes were then further read and collated, based on which axial coding was adopted to classify them along the temporal line (i.e. pre-class, in-class, after-class). Fourth, the axial codes on identity tensions and the ‘doing’ were further interpreted within the case summaries completed earlier to make sense of each case, based on which we made constant comparison and contrast among cases yielding commonalities and differences (Miles et al., 2019). In what follows, findings are presented in a case-by-case manner, based on which cross-case similarities and differences are discussed to draw implications for online language teaching, identity tensions, and teacher agency.

### IV Findings

Findings reveal that teachers experienced pedagogical and social-affective identity tensions. These findings will be presented case by case to illustrate individual variations of teacher agency to maneuver through the two types of tensions. Each case starts with a narrative portrait of the participant to contextualize the findings and ends in a summary in response to the research questions. To balance breadth and depth of data presentation, we integrated our narratives with original interview excerpts from the cases to illustrate both themes and scenarios of their identity tensions and agentic actions. Data references are enclosed in square brackets.1

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**Table 1. Information about three rounds of interviews.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Timing</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st round</td>
<td>Before the formal online teaching started</td>
<td>To understand teachers’ long-held teaching practices and identities in face-to-face settings, as well as their plans and desired identities regarding the move to online teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd round</td>
<td>One month after the commencement of online teaching</td>
<td>To explore challenges confronting teachers in the first month of online teaching, and to see whether and how teachers experienced identity tensions and took agentic actions to respond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd round</td>
<td>Immediately after online teaching was completed</td>
<td>To share how their identity changed or remained unchanged and how they dealt with it agently in this process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cathy: Switching between course-dependent identities with adequate digital literacy

As an early-career teacher (with two years of experience), Cathy is very confident in her digital literacy. She believed that language teachers should be facilitators who design and implement communicative activities to support student learning. She was then teaching two courses to two cohorts: Movie English to an old cohort, and Academic English to a new cohort. She had rich prior experience of online teaching as she was once part of a massive open online course (MOOC) team.

Cathy experienced identity tensions deriving from achieving different pedagogical goals of the two courses. She experienced less identity tension to achieve her facilitator role in Movie English, which was intended to improve students’ listening and speaking skills in daily life. She commented that ‘class interactions seem better and easier’ on Zoom (Cathy-I2) as described below.

Usually we play a movie clip and proceed to discussion (in offline classes). This mode seems quite suitable for online discussions. After we watched a movie clip, many students wanted to share their views. They would type in the chat box. Many more students participated than before. (Cathy-I2)

Compared with the ‘turn-taking’ verbal discussions in offline class, she believed that this text-dominated discussion was ‘more efficient and inclusive’ (Cathy-I2), allowing students to contribute their comments simultaneously.

While preserving the facilitator role in Movie English, Cathy strategically adopted a ‘lecturer’ role in Academic English, a content-based course that involves theoretical knowledge concerning genre, style, and formality of academic writing. Given that students had little prior knowledge about academic English, Cathy found it very challenging to conduct interactive activities in this class. Soon after commencement of online teaching, she started to lecture more to ensure the delivery of course materials and assigned in- and after-class exercises to ensure students’ mastery of these materials.

To ensure effective lecturing, Cathy took agentic actions before and during classes. Before classes, she substituted course materials with updated research articles relevant to students’ life. For example, she purposefully selected a research article on Cantonese, the mother tongue of many of her students, and another one on advertisement of losing weight. These carefully-selected research texts engaged students including those demotivated ones; they later told Cathy that through these articles they realized that research is ‘a rigorous and scientific exploration of unknown issues, including our daily phenomena’ (Cathy-I2).

Moreover, Cathy enacted agency in mobilizing digital tools to lecture more effectively in Academic English classes. For instance, she selected suitable tools among her handy software to keep students engaged in her lecturing. As an experienced user of iPad and Apple pencil, Cathy found them ‘very helpful’ in online instruction.

When I was analysing academic texts, I projected my iPad to screen and the students could see me writing notes with my Apple pencil on the scanned copy. Their attention seems better retained in this way. (Cathy-I2)
In addition to her well-planned use of digital tools, Cathy had many impromptu uses of digital resources in class. Below was an example of how she utilized a thesaurus website when teaching paraphrasing.

It occurred to me that I could use a thesaurus website in teaching synonyms which helps students expand their vocabulary. I shared my screen, and they saw me demonstrating the different resources available on the website. (Cathy-I2)

Unlike the differential pedagogical identity tensions, Cathy experienced similar identity tensions in socio-affective dimensions in teaching both courses. In the absence of face-to-face interactions, Cathy reported ‘feeling less attached’ with students (Cathy-I2), and described her students as her ‘cyber friends’ (Cathy-I2) whom she often interacted with but never met in person.

To resolve the tension, she provided socio-affective support to all students during and after class. During class, she tried to create ‘a more relaxing class climate’ (Cathy-I2). She showed more tolerance for students’ late arrival, joked about their background noises when they turned on their microphones, and let them decide whether or not to show their faces, all of which were intended to reduce student anxiety about online learning. In the following excerpt, Cathy explained why she empathized with students who arrived late online.

I understand them by considering different feelings of being late. When you are late in face-to-face settings, everyone is watching you step into the classroom, and that makes you feel embarrassed. When you log in online classes 1 or 2 minutes late, there is no ‘physical appearance’ and you feel less embarrassed. I guess that’s why more students were late to online classes. I don’t blame them, but they would text me to apologize afterwards. (Cathy-I2)

In addition to creating a more relaxing atmosphere, Cathy kept communication channels open to all students after class. She encouraged them to write her emails whenever they had questions or concerns, and she would ‘respond to every email’ and thus did not feel ‘less connected’ with the students (Cathy-I3).

To sum up, Cathy, with her sufficient digital literacy, experienced different identity tensions pedagogically. She maintained her identity as a facilitator when teaching Movie English, but adopted a new role as a lecturer when teaching Academic English. The flexible switch between identities was mainly related to her practical evaluation of what each of the two courses intended to achieve, which was only possible with her adequate digital literacy. Cathy also experienced socio-affective identity tensions, as she found it much harder to show care to students in the cyber space. She then maneuvered to ease students’ anxiety through creating a more relaxing class climate and encouraging after-class communication with her. All these agentic actions successfully preserved her role as a caregiver in both courses.

2 Bill: Maintaining a preferred identity and providing humanistic support with a strong belief in teacher agency

As one of the two mid-career cases, Bill has taught for 18 years and was teaching English News Listening and Speaking to a new cohort of students. He had rich experiences using
digital tools in teaching, yet he claimed ‘only us[ing] technology when necessary’ (Bill-I1). As an experienced instructor, he held a firm belief in CLT by emphasizing the essence of education as ‘interpersonal communication regardless of modes’ (i.e. online or offline) (Bill-I1). Hence, Bill experienced the least identity tensions in online teaching compared to other three cases, which was also related to his strong belief in agency. Bill repeatedly emphasized the agentic role of teachers in online instruction, stating that successful online teaching ‘mainly depends on what a teacher does’ (Bill-I1), and that ‘I am not worried about technology’ which was merely ‘one means of teaching’ (Bill-I3).

With a positive attitude towards online teaching, Bill utilized many strategies (not limited to technological ones) in class to achieve his pedagogical goals. For example, he implemented online quizzes that provided instant feedback on quiz results. Based on that, he created questions of different difficulty levels in class to target students with various language proficiency levels. That is, he invited students with ‘one or two standard deviations higher than the average’ to answer more difficult questions while ‘leaving easier questions to those underachieving students’ (Bill-I2). Such technology-facilitated individualized question and answer (Q&A) enabled Bill to improve the efficiency of online interactions. To avoid lecturing in online instructions, Bill also utilized his prior knowledge of attention span and spaced his instructions every five minutes with Q&A time. These agentic actions helped Bill resolve the pedagogical identity tensions so that his role as a facilitator ‘remained the same in online settings’ (Bill-I2).

Teacher monologue should last no more than five minutes. If (it lasts) longer than that, no one would listen. Basically I had Q&A every five minutes to keep them engaged. (Bill-I2)

These agentic actions notwithstanding, Bill confessed that he did have some initial concerns about the quality of online interaction. Reflecting on why the interactions ‘exceeded his expectation’ (Bill-I2), he restated his belief that online interactions can be gradually improved by ‘connecting with students’ (Bill-I2).

I connected with them first. We need to familiarize with each other before we interact. I gave them sufficient encouragement. When they found me amiable, they were more willing to speak voluntarily by turning on their microphones. (Bill-I2)

This extract suggests that Bill realized the interconnectedness of pedagogical and social-affective issues, which prompted him to prioritize dealing with the socio-affective identity tensions (i.e. emotionally connecting with students), which then contributed to resolving the pedagogy-related tensions. With socio-affective connections with students, Bill perceived ‘text-dominated communication’ settings more of a strength than a weakness by having more introverted students participate.

In online classes, opportunities (for communication) might be more equal for students . . . Active students usually have more opportunities to speak in face-to-face classrooms, giving me immediate verbal or nonverbal responses. In online classes, those quiet students have less concern about losing face and thus feel more comfortable with interacting via text typing. (Bill-I2)
Clearly, Bill saw the positive side of online teaching, and maximized these benefits to reduce its negative effects. Compared to Cathy, he had less worry about the impact of reduced interaction modalities mainly due to his belief in connecting with students emotionally. One important way of achieving such connections is through paying respect for students, which he believed would not be influenced by ‘students’ not showing faces’ in online settings (Bill-I3).

Whenever I saw each name appear on Tencent Meeting, I reminded myself that they are real individuals. Even though they don’t show faces, I can still have some understandings of their personalities by hearing their voices and associating with their names. Voice is also part of one’s identity. (Bill-I3)

This extract reveals the pragmatic side of Bill’s agency. He did not complain about not seeing students face-to-face, but proactively drew on resources available (e.g. students’ voices) to maximize their use. In addition, Bill emotionally connected with students by cultivating their independent thinking. Below is what Bill said in a class discussion concerning whose death students should mourn: a singer or a firefighter.

I told them that this is a world of diversity. It is not either-or. If you mourn the singer, it does not mean that you don’t feel sorry for the sacrifice of the firefighter. We need to learn to respect different views. (Bill-I3).

This extract illustrates how Bill cared for students’ socio-affective development by modeling his way of embracing diversity. All these agentic actions reveal his individual, pragmatic resolutions to mitigate tensions regarding the care-giver role.

To sum up, Bill, with a strong belief in education as interpersonal communication and in teacher agency, experienced the least identity tensions in both pedagogical and socio-affective dimensions among the four participants. He believed that he still acted as both a facilitator of student learning and a care-giver of student’s independent thinking, regardless of the changed teaching space. To achieve such preferred identities, Bill mainly exercised his agency before and during classes to create synergistic efforts which cater to pedagogical goals and students’ socio-affective needs simultaneously.

3 Daisy: Switching to the lecturer’s role comfortably with agentic actions throughout

In her mid-forties, Daisy has taught English for 20 years. At the time of the study, she was teaching Business English and has been the course leader for ten years. She had little experience with digital tools but joked about herself as someone who is good at ‘reading instructions’ and ‘seeking professional help’ (Daisy-I1). She was teaching an old cohort who knew her ‘teaching style very well’ (Daisy-I1).

Holding a firm belief in CLT, Daisy felt that her role as a facilitator was very much constrained by online settings. She summarized these constraints in the first interview as follows: (1) varying conditions of computer and Internet on the students’ part; (2) possible break-down of Internet on the teacher’s part; (3) privacy concern for turning on
cameras on both sides; and (4) relatively shorter attention duration and potentially lower student engagement level. Based on her careful considerations of these constraints, she decided to adopt a ‘lecturer’ role in online settings to achieve her pedagogical goals: to engage students and to deliver instructions. She thus took various agentic actions before, during and after classes.

Daisy did many pre-class preparations. The first preparation was software selection and hardware purchase. She explored many video-conferencing applications through trial and error before deciding to use Tencent Classroom as the best choice for her course. In addition, she registered a student account at Tencent Classroom in order to ‘watch the lessons from the students’ perspectives’ (Daisy-I1), and trained her students to use this application in the trial week. What’s more, in order to enhance her voice quality in online instructions, she purchased a professional microphone after consulting an experienced colleague. All these technological preparations prompted Daisy to feel good about ‘learning something new every day’ (Daisy-I1). Below is Daisy’ reflection of her learning in this technological preparation process.

I felt fruitful. I explored the strengths and weaknesses of each app, and I also had more knowledge of microphones. I chose the software and hardware not because people told me that they were good, but because I chose the most appropriate for my (teaching) purpose. (Daisy-I1)

With a positive attitude towards learning new things, Daisy made the second-step preparation – re-planning her lessons – which is achieved mainly through: (1) updating course materials with more relevant and contemporary ones, such as ‘materials about working from home’ (Daisy-I2); (2) mobilizing online resources as a supplement to her online lectures; and (3) revising PowerPoint slides to cater to students with different devices (esp. for those using smart phones).

I searched for more materials on Bilibili3 and provided videos for their after-class self-study. As I can’t guarantee the effectiveness of online teaching, I would provide as many materials as possible for self-study. (Daisy-I2)

I changed the format of my slides to 4:3, which is most suitable to display on smartphones. Originally the ratio was 16:9 and more suitable for reading on PC. (Daisy-I1)

With such preparations before class, Daisy received positive student responses in class: ‘Every student was active and engaged’ (Daisy-I2). Yet she was not content and continued to make agentic changes to ensure the quality of her online lessons. First, she prioritized retaining student engagement over asking difficult questions. Thus, she simplified her instructions to guarantee the lecturing effectiveness, and changed her purpose of questioning. She justified this change as follows.

As I can’t see students’ instant responses online, I restructured my instructions. I deleted explicit questions and presented ideas directly to save time, as the Internet may break down any minute. So I chose to deliver the messages in the first place . . . I only used questions to check student engagement, rather than inviting them to discuss. My purpose of questioning (thus) has changed. (Daisy-I2)
Clearly, Daisy changed her focus of questioning from organizing interaction to ensuring student engagement to fulfil the lecturer role. Although lecturing was not a preferred way to teach, she still believed that this was the most ‘practical’ (Daisy-I3) way to ensure effective online teaching and learning.

Compared to her identity tensions related to pedagogical issues, Daisy experienced fewer identity tensions relevant to socio-affective issues. She attributed this to the old cohort of students with whom she had established rapport. To remedy the possible disconnectedness in online education, Daisy allowed students to ‘add her as a friend on social media’ (Daisy-I3) and also established a virtual community to provide timely support as explained below.

I only connected with the class monitor in the past, but now I interacted with the whole class. Students can post questions in the Group (chat), or send me private messages. We had a lot of interactions online before class, which didn’t happen in face-to-face settings. (Daisy-I3)

To summarize, Daisy flexibly adopted a lecturer role to achieve her pedagogical roles after careful analyses of the constraints of online settings on language education. With a strong determination to provide the best education possible, she proactively learned about and trialed technology necessary for online lessons before classes despite not being digitally literate. In addition, she made various agentic actions pedagogically before, during and after classes, achieving active student engagement that far exceeded her expectation. Simultaneously in the socio-affective dimension, she connected with her old-cohort of students on social media where online sharing was possible beyond class time.

4 Jenny: Adopting a lecturer role to deliver basic instructions and prioritizing students’ well-being

As a late-career teacher, Jenny has taught for 30 years. At the time of the study, she was in the last year of her career and teaching an old cohort English News Listening and Speaking. She had little experience with using digital tools and was very anxious about learning new technology.

Before the online teaching commenced, Jenny presumed that skills-based courses require intensive class interactions which must be hard to achieve in online settings. She thus described the online teaching mode as ‘not suitable’ (Jenny-I1) for her course.

I feel that online teaching is more suitable for those content-based courses. Our course is very interactive. The online settings don’t allow us to do a lot of listening and speaking skills training. (Jenny-I1)

The above excerpt seems to reflect great identity tensions that Jenny experienced to fulfil her facilitator role. The tensions, first of all, came from her worry over technology which she regarded herself ‘too old to learn’ (Jenny-I1). To learn the new technology necessary for synchronous online teaching, she joined a temporary community and sought technological support from younger colleagues two weeks before the semester started. When
the online instruction began, she mainly turned to her students for help whenever she came across new technological problems. After several weeks’ online teaching, Jenny came to realize that she did not ‘need to learn complicated technology but only the basic functions’ (Jenny-I2). But still, she worried about the possible breakdown of her computer and the Internet.

The tensions also arose from her concern over the reduced effectiveness of class interactions because ‘not seeing students means limited clues concerning student understanding of what was taught’ (Jenny-I1). To address this problem, she adopted a lecturer identity focusing on the delivery of course materials. When preparing for the lessons before class, she included more detailed information on the slides. She did so out of concern that students ‘may have left their textbooks in their university dormitories’ (Jenny-I2). In addition, she updated the course materials in the hope of better engaging students. The next extract shows how she replaced the listening materials about Beijing 2008 Olympics.

The textbook materials were outdated. I replaced them with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. They were interested, and posted many views about the influence of the pandemic (on the Olympics). (Jenny-I2)

During class, she ‘paid special attention to those students who did not post their answers in the chat box’ and ‘did cold-calling to check comprehension’ (Jenny-I2). Jenny justified her cold-calling as follows.

The difficult thing is that you never know what students are actually doing in class. You don’t know to what extent they can comprehend the materials. You don’t know whether they are playing with their smartphones. So I would cold call some of them to check their engagement. (Jenny-I2)

Despite the unknown effectiveness of the cold-calling practice, Jenny reported ‘the surprisingly full participation of her students’ (Jenny-I3) and attributed it to the communication preference of her students as digital natives.

Many of them ‘raised their hands’ when I asked questions. The ‘raise hand’ icons shone every class. So many students were active in answering my questions. Very surprising. I guess probably because this generation was more used to communicating with others on the Internet, a more comfortable way for them. (Jenny-I3)

In addition to agency enactment to achieve the ‘lecturer’ role, Jenny prioritized performing a care-giver role by building affective connections with students. For example, she would stay in the virtual classroom longer to have 10-min free chat, which was ‘warmly welcomed by the students’ (Jenny-I3). Such positive responses from students further confirmed Jenny’s belief that the interpersonal connection is a key to success of online education.

They responded positively about our 10-minute free chat following each lesson. They felt my care and concern. I think after-class informal communication may be a better way to know your students than in class sessions. They would be more relaxed, and know better about me after many free chats. (Jenny-I3)
When asked about what they chatted, Jenny said that students often ‘complained about the heavy workloads of taking more than 20 courses’ (Jenny-I3). In response, Jenny often guided them to prioritize student wellbeing over academic performance.

I told them, ‘try your best, but don’t feel stressed if your homework or presentation is not perfect.’ I also told them not to sacrifice health. Nothing is more important than health. I would particularly pay attention to their emotions. I think it is every teacher’s role to show care for their emotions. (Jenny-I3)

Jenny attributed her concern for the students’ physical and psychological wellbeing to her personal identity as a mother of a daughter who was at a similar age to the students.

To sum up, Jenny experienced tensions derived from pedagogical and socio-affective dimensions in online teaching. Her pedagogical identity tensions, feeling impossible to be a facilitator in online settings, were mainly related to her lack of digital skills and her disbelief in online teaching of skills-based courses. As a compromise, she adopted a lecturer’s role to avoid using complicated technology and focused on the smooth delivery of information. To that end, she learned basic technology before class and redesigned course materials agentively to engage students in online lecturing. Likewise, her socio-affective identity tensions were mainly related to her concern of being unable to show care to students online. She managed to provide motherly care and support to students during and after class, advising students to prioritize their physical and psychological wellbeing over academic performance.

V Discussion

Findings reveal that online education induced identity tensions of different dimensions (i.e. pedagogical and socio-affective) and to various degrees across and within the case teachers. Our participants preserved their preferred identity, adopted new identities, switched between identities, and/or redefined identities, which led to various agentic actions in pre-, in-, and after-class phases. These findings will be discussed as follows.

1 Identity tensions in online language teaching

Our findings echo current understandings of how professional space change induces identity tensions. First, reduced modalities in online settings challenged teachers to perform their long-held facilitator and care-giver identities (Jones & Kessler, 2020; McNaughton & Billot, 2016). Second, identity tensions of online teaching can derive from teachers’ limited knowledge of digital tools (Moser & Wei, 2021) and absence of teachers and students’ physical presence (Chen, 2022; El-Soussi, 2022; Nazari & Seyri, 2021). Third, identity tensions are mainly induced by gaps between one’s own concept of a good teacher and the requirements/constraints of the contexts (Buchanan, 2015; Lasky, 2005).

Our findings also extend current knowledge of how identity tensions can be related to one’s pedagogical and socio-affective dimensions (McNaughton & Billot, 2016; Pillen
et al., 2013) by highlighting the role of individual differences. Given that the four participants experienced identity tensions differently depending on the extent their desired role of being a facilitator was constrained, we argue that identity tensions relating to pedagogical dimensions can be related to a range of factors including digital literacy, belief in agency and course type. The mediating effects of the first two factors can be seen in the cases of Jenny and Bill who taught the same course and yet had differing experiences of pedagogical identity tensions. Jenny perceived the online settings as ‘not suitable’ for classroom interactions and felt enormous identity tensions to fulfill her role as a facilitator. Such high levels of identity tensions may result from her inadequate digital literacy and her disbelief in her agency of performing the facilitator role online. In contrast, Bill identified many strengths of online interactions, and thus experienced low levels of identity tensions regarding his facilitator role. This can be explained by his rich experiences of using digital tools and his strong belief in his own agency in dealing with the contextual change. In addition, Cathy’s case suggests that identity tensions can also be course-specific. When she wanted to fulfill her role as a facilitator, she experienced less tensions in a skills-based course (i.e. Movie English) than in a content-based course (i.e. Academic English). The course type, therefore, is an important mediator of pedagogical identity tensions experienced by teachers in online settings.

Likewise, our findings expand our knowledge of socio-affective aspects of identity tensions. While our participants experienced similar tensions in building teacher-student relationship in online settings (El-Soussi, 2022) and performing care-giver roles (Jones & Kessler, 2020), we argue that such tensions seem to be mediated by teacher belief and old/new cohorts of students. With a strong belief in connecting with students, Bill reported fewer socio-affective identity tensions. In Daisy and Jenny’s case, they both had taught the same cohort in the previous semester, and thus seemed to experience fewer socio-affective aspects of identity tensions as they had built rapport with the students.

To conclude, while moving to virtual space is tension-inducing, teachers may experience varying degrees of identity tensions in both pedagogical and socio-affective dimensions. Our findings further reveal that such tensions were not only context-sensitive, but also highly individualized, course-specific and cohort-specific. This argument then highlights the role of teacher agency in dealing with such varying identity tensions, which is discussed below.

2 Agency enactment in resolving identity tensions

Our findings of teachers’ agentic actions in resolving pedagogical and socio-affective dimensions of identity tensions have generated new insights into the interplay between identity tension and teacher agency, which will be discussed in relation to: (1) the multifarious ways of agency enactment in dealing with identity tensions; (2) agency in dealing with multiple tensions; and (3) a focus on the practical-evaluative dimension of agency to understand its temporally distributed feature.

First, while findings confirm prior conclusions that agency has the power to resist imposed identities and preserve long-held identities or ideals (e.g. Lasky, 2005), they
also reveal that teacher agency cannot be simplified as either ‘stepping up’ or ‘pushing back’ (Buchanan, 2015; Lasky, 2005). Our findings further reveal the multifarious ways of agency enactment in tackling identity tensions: maintaining an identity, adopting a new identity, switching between multiple identities, and/or redefining a habitualized identity. These various identity resolutions are also found to be mediated by teacher belief, digital literacy, prior knowledge, and professional life cycle.

While dealing with the pedagogical aspect of identity tensions, language teacher agency was manifested in identity maintenance (Bill), strategic adoption of a new identity (Daisy & Jenny), and switch between multiple identities (Cathy). Bill’s maintenance of his identity as a facilitator was driven by his strong belief (e.g. belief about the essence of education as interpersonal communication) and mediated by his adequate digital literacy (e.g. allowing him to use different functions provided by online teaching platforms) and his knowledge (e.g. knowledge about attention span to space his instructions with Q&A sessions). In Daisy and Jenny’s cases, while they both labeled themselves as not digitally literate and adopted a new role as a lecturer, the range of agentic actions seemed different. While Jenny learnt basic digital skills and mainly updated course materials to support her real-time online teaching, Daisy made a wide range of digital and pedagogical preparations throughout pre-, in-, and after-class stages. Such contrast in agentic actions can be attributed to their professional life cycle: Daisy was in her mid-career and was more motivated to learn more, as she may need new knowledge and skills in her future teaching, while Jenny was in the last year of her career and thus less motivated to learn. In Cathy’s case, when switching between roles between two courses, her agentic actions were oriented to capitalize on digital tools (e.g. breakout rooms and chat box on Zoom) to perform her facilitator role, and enhanced the relevance of course material (e.g. selecting a research paper on Cantonese for the Cantonese-speaking students) to perform her lecturer role. The smooth switch between roles may be enabled by Cathy’s relatively rich experience of using digital tools, and mediated by her careful consideration of the course conditions.

When dealing with the social-affective aspect of identity tensions, our findings suggest that teacher agency is exercised by redefining an identity (i.e. the care-giver role). Our participants gave multi-faceted care to their students: Cathy showed more empathy and tolerance for students’ online learning and oriented her agentic actions to ease their anxiety; Bill provided his care through exemplifying how to embrace diversity and develop independent thinking skills; Daisy connected with individual students in the virtual community; Jenny invested time and efforts in caring for students’ physical and psychological well-being. While their multi-faceted care can be related to their beliefs about teaching (Biesta et al., 2015), it brings new insights about what a caring teacher can be. While a caring teacher was primarily portrayed as someone who understands and attends to students’ feelings (e.g. Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Yazan & Peercy, 2018), our participants’ multi-faceted care illustrates how agency enactment redefined the care-giver identity to be context-specific.

Second, the findings further suggest that teacher agency has the power to prioritize and resolve multiple identity tensions, based on teachers’ pragmatic evaluation of the
present situations. While all of the four teachers experienced identity tensions deriving from both pedagogical and socio-affective dimensions, only Jenny – the late-career teacher – prioritized the socio-affective over the pedagogical dimension by giving more attention to students’ psychological wellbeing than their academic achievement, which can be partly attributed to her personal identity as a mother whose daughter is at a similar age to her students. Moreover, Bill’s case reveals that teacher agency also has the power to resolve multiple identity tensions in an integrated way. Building socio-affective connections with students contributed to the performance of his facilitator role, making more students, including the introverted ones, to perceive him as ‘amiable’ and thus willing to unmute themselves to speak in online classes. His experience suggests that, through enactment of agency, teachers may resolve one identity tension to facilitate resolving the other. Therefore, we argue that to fully understand the interplay between identity tensions and teacher agency, it is important to explore how teacher agency places relative weights on identity tensions and resolves them with different priorities.

Third, the wide-ranging agentic actions occurred in pre-, in-, and/or after-class stages in this semester-long study indicate the need to have a refined unit of analysis of the practical-evaluative dimension of teacher agency. To reflect the ecology of classroom teaching at present, this study argues that the ‘here-and-now’ cannot be confined to a single session, and instead should involve an expanded temporality to encompass the varied manifestations of teacher agency. That is, successful enactment of teacher agency in language teaching may depend on the synergy of agentic actions in and beyond class time, which transcends the moment-by-moment agency enactment in solely classroom instruction (e.g. Hiver & Whitehead, 2018). We thus argue that stages of pre-, in-, and after-class serve as a more appropriate unit of analysis to capture a holistic picture of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency enactment in language classroom teaching in a broader scope of ‘here-and-now’. Moreover, agency is temporally distributed but also contextually resourced. The case teachers were found to mobilize resources from the digital space and broader societal context in dealing with identity tensions. Bill and Cathy, who are more digitally literate, mobilized different features of software (e.g. online quiz, breakout rooms) and digital tools (e.g. Zoom, iPad, Apple pencil), to enhance class interaction or lecturing effectiveness (e.g. Chen, 2022). By contrast, Daisy and Jenny built connections between language class and the societal context by bringing in social issues (e.g. remote work, Tokyo Olympics) to enhance the authenticity and relevance of language teaching materials, which may remedy the digital constraints and help them perform the new identity.

Based on the findings, this present study generates a refined framework of the interplay between identity tensions and agency enactment (see Figure 1). On the one hand, the online settings have challenged language teachers’ long-held identity and induced tensions in multiple aspects to different degrees. On the other hand, teachers can exercise agency to transform challenges into opportunities, resulting in different forms of identity performance, mediated by personal factors (e.g. teachers’ beliefs, digital literacy, knowledge, personal identity, professional life cycle) and contextual factors (e.g. course type, cohort of students).
VI Conclusions and implications

The present study contributes to scholarship of teacher identity and agency by delineating the pedagogical and socio-affective dimensions of identity tensions, and situating the identity-agency interplay within temporal and contextual frames to understand its important mediating factors. It also enriches current understandings of how teachers can deal with identity tensions agentively, as manifested in their actions to maintain an identity, adopt a new identity, switch between identities, and/or redefine identities.

Situated in a Chinese university context, this study has implications for online language teaching and teacher professional development across contexts and educational levels. First, findings of important mediators of identity tensions in online teaching suggest that teachers need training on digital literacy and online pedagogy to help realize their teaching beliefs in online settings. Second, the teachers’ various ways of tackling identity tensions suggest that teacher educators can take advantage of teachers’ long-held identities as a starting point to help them reflect on possible strengths and weaknesses of different identity possibilities. Third, findings of individualized agentic actions at different stages and in digital and societal contexts highlight the importance of helping teachers reflect on the synergy of their agentic actions within temporal and contextual frames. Fourth, we call for more attention to be given to the relatively less emphasized care-giver...
role in online teaching, which can be achieved in versatile ways contingent upon the immediate contexts.

This study has some limitations. First, as it reports on four case teachers in a single research site, any generalizations should be made with caution. Instead, we believe that the theoretical contributions of understanding identity tensions and agency bear implications for researchers and teachers around the world. Second, we cannot triangulate the interview data with other data sources, such as observations, due to data access issues. Nevertheless, the multiple-round interviews enabled us to keep track of the interplay between identity tensions and teacher agency along the temporal dimension. Future research could approach this issue by drawing on multiple sources of data, such as observational and documentary data, and from perspectives of different stakeholders, such as students, to gain a more holistic understanding of identity tensions and teacher agency.

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Notes
1. ‘I’ stands for interviews, and the number following ‘I’ indicates the interview. For example, Cathy-I2 indicates data from the second interview with Cathy.
2. A real-time meeting application used by Bill for his synchronous online teaching.

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