

**Politician-Turned-Doctoral Student’s Narrative Identity at an
Australian University: A Case Study**

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the narrative identity of a politician-turned-doctoral student at an Australian university with a particular focus on his academic and social encounters based on his English resources and experiences of learning and living in Australia. This case study is unique in the way that very few Thai politicians would end their political career and join in an academic community because of different philosophies underpinning these political and educational agendas. Drawing upon a narrative inquiry, the 60-year-old former Thai politician who decided to undertake a PhD in Engineering (Water Resources Management) found his academic experience positively challenging as he had to familiarize himself with Australian academic discourse such as conducting research, writing his thesis, and taking part in class discussion. Being a competent user of English, he enjoyed living in a multicultural and multilingual society in Australia. This study offers an optimistic outlook at career change through a lens of a politician who became a doctoral student and serves as an example for adults who are transiting their midlife career path and considering stepping out of their comfort zones to venture into something new and exciting. This study hopes to shed new light and hopes on adult education in an era of aging society.

Keywords: narrative identity; politician; doctoral student; Australian university; adult education.

Introduction

Narratives about a person's experiences are socially and historically constructed in meanings that influence his/her choices and decisions to tell his/her stories (Hunter, 2010). Narrative studies regarding career paths and changes have been much researched for many decades (Bujold, 2004; Cochran, 1990; Cohen et al., 2004; LaPointe, 2010). LaPointe (2010), for instance, conceptualizes career identity as a practice of identity construction and negotiation in an individual's career experiences situated within specific historical, cultural and interactional contexts through his/her narratives. Adults' narratives of life transitions in careers can potentially reflect their personal growth and satisfaction (Bauer & McAdams, 2004). Ibarra (2002) states that socioeconomic and political challenges and uncertainties cause many people to rethink and possibly decide to change their current careers to meet their personal goals and economic needs. In this case study, the career transition undertaken by a Thai participant, a former politician who decided to undertake a PhD degree at an Australian university, is unique and rather under-explored. There are few studies regarding how pursuing a higher degree in formal education can provide a transitional platform for adult learners to take up, invest, and grow within the 'new' identities that arise to replace their previous political professions.

Huang (2009) defines a politician as:

Someone who practices politics as his or her professional career. Politicians may be legislators, party leaders, senior government officials, or members of an elite cadre in some countries (p. 163).

Key politicians' personality traits include openness, emotional stability conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion (Gerber et al., 2011; Weinschenk & Panagopoulos, 2014). Although political leaders have uniquely different personal characteristics underpinned by individual leadership, ideology, decision making skills, and intelligence, they are normally challenged and contested by their political counterparts (Simonton, 2014). As public figures, politicians therefore have to take their professional risks to overcome their political rivalries depending on their popularity, dominant parties, and supportive powerful political groups.

According to Kanchoochat and Hewison (2016), Thailand's political contexts are influenced by:

Multiple military interventions, political mudslinging, spates of violence, a 'tradition' of street protests, and repeated civilian uprisings, usually followed by efforts to lay the foundations of electoral democracy. The political landscape, strewn with discarded constitutions, often seems the preserve of elites doing political deals in back rooms. In this context, the political institutions that have greatest longevity are also the sources of conflict. In these bouts of intense political contestation, the key elements of Thailand's political struggle have been the military, monarchy, bureaucracy, a powerful capitalist class, a politically active middle class and repressed subaltern classes. As relatively stable elements in the political landscape, these groups have constantly tussled over conceptions of law, representation and political space, often in a context of wide-ranging debates about democracy, constitutions, elections and redistribution (p. 371).

Thailand's politics has experienced a number of difficult times and hardship throughout its history. Being a politician in Thailand can be daunting and a career in politics is uncertain and

unsecure. As an adult learner, the participant in this study decided to take a new path by entering into an academic field in order to reconstruct his ‘new’ identity. Osborne et al. (2004) use the term ‘personal growers’ for mature learners who pursue higher education for their own satisfaction and desires (p. 291). Ibarra (2002) suggests possible strategies for reinventing one’s career through acting, reflecting, living the contradictions, experimenting with new roles, finding people who are what you want to be, stepping back occasionally, and keeping a window of opportunity open. Addressing an issue of aging population, Yankelovich (2005) notes that higher education should respond to an increasing number of people from ages 55 to 75 as they seek to build bridges to new life in order to fulfill personal aspirations and opportunities to give something back to society while they are still physically and mentally healthy. Education can thus potentially empower adult learners’ life-long learning and human resource development that can reshape their ways of lives and career paths (Knowles et al., 2015).

This study explores the narratives of a Thai adult doctoral student who decided to shift from his political career to the academic field by pursuing a PhD through constructing and negotiating his identities underpinned by his English resources and prior experiences in various academic and sociocultural contexts throughout the course of his personal, academic and professional trajectories.

Literature Review

The conceptual framework of this study is based on narrative identity. Narrative identity has long been studied in the field of social sciences and humanities in order to unfold individual’s life stories (Ricoeur, 1991). According to McAdams (2011), narrative identity is a person’s internalized and evolving life story that integrates the (re)construction of past, present and imagined future of the self to provide life with a certain degree of unity and purpose. Hunter (2010) claims that there is a potential transformation of the participant’s experiences through the process of telling one’s narrative as she states that:

This (narrative inquiry) approach placed the focus on ways in which participants constructed their own narratives about their experiences in relation to others involved at the time, and in relation to available social and cultural narratives. Inevitably they had absorbed the socially constructed meanings placed on their experiences by others, which influenced the narratives that they chose to tell me (p. 45).

Based on a social constructionist perspective, identity narratives can be viewed as an effective tool to lessen the tensions and bridge between someone’s past, present, and future beings and belongings, which offer a way to view identities not only located within particular discourses and ideologies, but also within narratives (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). A social constructionist approach of second language identity is dialectical between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ aspects of the self, involving our own sense of who we are, the ways in which we represent ourselves, and how we are represented and positioned by others; and that illustrates a complex, multidimensional construct and that what we see of a person’s identities varies according to the context (Benson et al., 2013, p. 2).

Identity is significant for this study as the Thai doctoral student constructs and negotiates his identities in linguistically and culturally diverse academic and social contexts where linguistic ideologies and unequal power relations are embedded within institutional, local, and socio-political contexts. Identities in this study are the results of the Thai doctoral student’s dynamic

reconstruction of self through time and contexts. Since the participant in this study has shifted his political identity in Thailand to that of an academic identity as a doctoral student in an Australian university, his identities can be shifted, decentered, fragmented, and imagined by new socio-historical tensions on his sense of self.

Identity is viewed as a ‘person’s understanding of who they are’ (reflexive identity), how they represent their understanding to other people (projected identity), other people’s interpretations of their representations (recognized identity), who they think they may become in the future (imagined identity), or how these different facets of identity are shaped by culturally embedded categories and resources (Benson et al., 2013, p. 23). In this study, the Thai doctoral student not only experiences new academic and social contexts in Australian higher education, but also interacts with other people, which are influenced by various variables, i.e. age, gender, education, occupation, linguistic resources, culture, ethnicity, and social status; and thus effective communication in multilingual and multicultural Australia requires an awareness and recognition of the student’s interlocutors, topics of communication, and communicative settings.

Benson et al. (2013) state that international students will aim to project and achieve recognition for identities that correspond to their reflexive sense of self, but at the same time we recognize that they may also want to take the opportunity to be seen as a different person when they use their second language. For this reason, the term ‘reflexive/imagined identity’ often refers to the ‘inner’ aspect of identity that underlies and is potentially modified by the ‘outer’ aspect of identity negotiation in second language interaction (Benson et al., 2013). Imagined identity is, in this study, closely linked to the reflexive identity of the Thai doctoral student who aspired to become an academic instead of returning to be a politician. It can be understood as a conception of who he might become that is overlaid across the conception of who he is now.

Based on Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004, p. 17), imagination plays a crucial role in the process of imaginative production of identity. According to Kanno and Norton (2003):

In imagining ourselves bonded with our fellow compatriots across space and time, we can feel a sense of community with people we have not yet met, but perhaps hope to meet one day (p. 241).

In study abroad in particular, imagined identities are linked to goals and expectations, which can be understood as representations of who the student expects or would like to become in the study abroad setting. The idea of imagined identities, therefore, adds a layer to our understanding of what he brings to the experience of study abroad.

According to Hoyer and Steyaert (2015), an affective conceptualization of identity dynamics during times of career change integrates the notion of unconscious desires of workers in transition who may try to balance coherence and ambiguity when constructing a sense of self through narrative. Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) state that how people get along with their multiple linguistic resources in their daily lives, perceive, and talk about their language use not only describes the ways in which people of different and mixed backgrounds use, play with and negotiate identities through language, but also captures the relations between language use, objects, and accompanying activities in their interactive spaces.

Drawing upon the theoretical framework of learning and identity within Lave and Wenger’s (1991) communities of practice, learning is social participation where individuals construct

their shared membership identity through engaging in and contributing to the practices of their target communities. Williams (2010), for instance, suggests career change students need to reconstruct their new professional identity in the context of teacher education by learning and acquiring relevant knowledge and teaching skills to become qualified teachers. According to culture of learning, Cortazzi and Jin (2013), on the other hand, view learning as cultural because members of different communities have different preferences, expectations, interpretations, values, and beliefs with regard to teaching and learning, particularly in international and multicultural educational contexts. Bacha and Bahous (2013), for example, suggest that Lebanese students entering ‘Western’ higher educational cultures in Lebanon encountered challenges and difficulties in terms of their use of English, critical thinking, classroom interaction, and student centeredness, which are different from the Lebanese educational culture that focuses on memorization, teacher-centeredness, and lecture methods. The concepts of community of practice and culture of learning are interrelated in this study because the Thai doctoral student who was a former politician had to develop, acquire necessary academic and English skills, and adjust himself to the culture of Australian academia for his PhD study in order to gain legitimate membership in the academic and social communities.

Professional identity refers to an individual’s professional self-attributed beliefs, values, motives, and experiences, which can be underpinned by their sociocultural identity (Slay & Smith, 2010). Professional identity, in higher education in particular, is socially constructed via the relationship between identity, professional socialization, and the role played by networks and their impact on identity formation regarding midlife career academics, the emergence of mixed identities, and the development of new professional boundaries within higher education (Clarke et al., 2013). Abou-El-Kheir (2017), for example, explores the interconnections between identity, language use and education based on a series of interviews with a Qatari female professor of English who negotiates her beings and belongings in various sociocultural factors including religion, family, career, education background, and language choice between Arabic and English; and thus, the professor has to be aware and balance between her personal and professional identities that play significant roles in her different practices.

According to Holstein and Gubrium (2010), narrative identity unfolds the stories of self with regard to one’s everyday practices and experiences leading to the construction of personal and social identities. In this study, the Thai doctoral student’s narrative identity regarding his affiliation with academic and social communities has affected his learning trajectories. Such communities include future relationships that exist in his imagination as well as affiliations such as nationhood or even transnational communities in which he has daily engagement, and might even have a stronger impact on his current practices and investment. The transition process between Thai and Australian academic communities, as well as the mediational role of significant others including supervisors, lecturers, and colleagues in both multilingual and multicultural settings, has had a significant impact on this particular Thai doctoral student. He has had to manage linguistically and culturally diverse academic practices in their transitions; and thus, the ways he experiences his learning could potentially affect his practices and identity construction.

Research Methodology

This paper is based on a larger study on Thai students’ identity in Australian higher education. The study was approved by the Australian University and Thai University Ethics Committees on Human Research prior to data collection. Awarded an Australian Postdoctoral Fellowship

Award to conduct the study, the researcher met the participant at an Australian university. The participant was the main case study of this research due to his unique and interesting experiences that shifted from the political to academic field when he decided to pursue his PhD in Engineering with a particular focus on Water Resources Management. Case study is an empirical enquiry exploring a contemporary situation within someone's real-life context (Cohen et al., 2000; Yin, 2003). It draws upon a qualitative and interpretive paradigm that provides personal and subjective accounts illustrating complex and interconnected individual experiences (Denscombe, 2003; Holliday, 2002).

To keep his identity highly confidential, this study refers to him as the participant who is a 60-year-old male. He obtained Bachelor and Master of Science degrees from America. He had over 30 years of experiences in Thailand politics from being a member of parliament, minister of various departments including education, justice, agriculture and cooperatives, natural resources and environment, communication and information technology, to deputy prime minister. He is currently a PhD student at an Australian university. The researcher became interested to learn more about the participant's viewpoints regarding his academic experience because he is an example of a life-long learner and career changer, and thereby serves as a model for others.

Semi-structured interview was the primary research tool for data collection in this study. According to Edwards and Holland (2013), semi-structured interview includes a set of the primary questions that can explore the interviewee's emerging views. An interviewer, however, needs to deviate from the interview schedule and probe more deeply with further questions to follow-up particular responses to gain deeper insights. In this particular paper, the main interview questions concern the participant's personal background including education, careers, and current degree, as well as his reasons for studying at an Australian university, expectations, perceived academic and conversational English proficiency, attitudes toward his use of English with 'native' and 'non-native' speakers of English, views on supervisors and supervision, linguistic and academic support by university, perceptions toward teachers and colleagues, and academic challenges. The interview was conducted in Thai and lasted for one hour. It was audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated by the researcher. The transcripts were then provided to the participant for validation.

Drawing upon Pavlenko's (2004) data analytic approach, analyzing personal narratives is not only based on the content of the stories, but also the sociohistorical contexts in which the narratives were created and the ideological underpinnings which frame certain story telling. The participant's narratives in this study could be regarded as shifting over time, and influenced by individual and societal views, which allowed me to explore the ways in which he constructed a sense of self through the interview. Based on the interpretive and qualitative research paradigm, the participants' construction of meanings in their complex sociocultural contexts is understood via interpretation rather than generalization, prediction and control (Usher, 1996). This Thai doctoral student's construction and negotiation of his identities while living and studying in Australia were subsequently revealed and then qualitatively interpreted without generalizing the findings to other cases.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study focus on academic context, social context, and use of English for communication emerging from the participant's narratives revealing his construction and negotiation of his identities.

Academic Context

The participant's construction of his academic identity as a doctoral student may not be as smooth as he expects as he needs to adjust himself to the Australian academia, which is different from his professional identity as a politician.

Extract 1

My first challenge was that I had not studied for almost 40 years. Secondly, conducting research allows me to learn new things more. My supervisor told me to attend a number of classes such as research methodology. I can observe new perspectives. I can look back to understand other people's thoughts, analysis, evaluation, and research results compared with my personal experiences. I can see similarities and differences.

The participant encountered research challenges since he had not been involved in academic study for quite some time. He had to rely mostly on his previous experience in politics to discuss issues regarding his project on water policy. Educated in the American academic system, attending classes enabled him to acculturate himself to learning in an Australian higher education environment.

Extract 2

Contributing our ideas in seminars or workshops is good for the learning process and knowledge sharing. The best perspective is holistic by listening to people who have had different experiences in order to better understand the topic of discussion. Communication is the best learning tool; otherwise, we will become narrow-minded without knowing what's going on in the world. It will be beneficial for our future work.

His imagined identity was also realized for future collaborations. He enjoyed class discussion as an important part of widening his views and learning process. His openness and extraversion in class reflect desirable qualities in a good politician (Gerber et al., 2011; Weinschenk & Panagopoulos, 2014). He perceived himself on behalf of Thai doctoral students as a good, collaborative, and friendly student.

Extract 3

They (lecturers and classmates) think that Thai students are good, collaborative, and very friendly.

He also recognized that to become a legitimate doctoral student in the Australian academic culture, he had to develop his research and academic writing skills. He thus sought English support provided by the university in order to acquire and meet the linguistic requirements for his PhD study.

Extract 4

Writing research reports can be problematic. My academic writing needs to be improved. I need to learn how to write academically. Literature review helps me to

understand academic writing styles. However, it's difficult to produce a perfect piece of writing. It's quite common to have someone to review and edit my papers. No matter how good my English is, academic English seems to have a different style.

Extract 5

In terms of English support, I think the university offers full support already. Although international students are required to have a certain level of English proficiency to be admitted, they can attend extra English courses and workshops provided by the university to improve their English.

The participant's academic identity construction required the engagement of lecturers, peers, and support staff, which played significant roles in developing research and academic English skills valued in higher learning. His academic engagement is underpinned by Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice that involve relevant stakeholders to scaffold his academic self. In addition, his determination was to succeed in his study as he imagined that his academic contribution could potentially alleviate Thailand's crises.

Extract 6

After I graduate, I will do academic research to solve our country's problems.

According to Bacha and Bahous (2013), 'Western' higher education values students' active engagement and critical thinking. This mature-age Thai student was required to adjust and accommodate to a 'Western' culture of learning. Investment in education can be considered as a way to promote empowerment for mature-age learners whose increased intellectual capital can promote personal values and realize self-actualization. Academic aspiration was not, however, the only variable in the construction of his academic identity; the social context in which he undertook his study in Australia was also significant.

Social Context

Well-known for his political background in Thailand and Australia, the participant was not only involved in Thai cultural events, but also recognized by a number of Australian organizations. His previous 'professional identity' (Clarke et al., 2013) as a politician offered him special exposure to international contexts, which promoted his well-being while learning and living in Australia.

Extract 7

I joined a Thai people club and attended religious activities. I'm also an honorable member of Taronga Zoo. I was a member of Thai-Australian Parliamentary Friendship under Inter-parliamentary Union.

Extract 8

I'm happy and living a simple lifestyle. I don't need to adjust myself much because I have lived in an international environment for quite some time. I have travelled all around the world.

Extract 9

I don't need to adjust myself because I used to live abroad. It's just that I have a student lifestyle which is best because I don't have a lot of responsibilities. No one forces me. Success depends on me. I have freedom.

As a mature-age learner, he enjoyed having freedom to do things without many responsibilities. When comparing his previous experience as a politician who was under frequent pressure, he had become satisfied with his academic identity as he developed himself as a 'personal grower' (Osborne et al., 2004). Being a doctoral student in Australia, he learned to be independent and determined to pursue academic success. He nevertheless retained the character traits of a politician as suggested by Gerber et al. (2011) and Weinschenk and Panagopoulos (2014) regarding conscientiousness, openness, agreeableness, emotional stability and extraversion, which underpinned his appeal to the locals.

Extract 10

I love to interact with local people because I can learn about their way of life, perspectives toward socio-economic and political changes, and experiences. Interaction with the locals is essential.

Extract 11

It's normal because Sydney is an international city. It's a melting pot like in the USA. There are Aborigines, refugees and immigrants. Linguistic and cultural diversity is good because it allows local people to become aware of differences. It also helps us to understand the locals.

Living in a multicultural city, he was optimistic and open to cultural differences. There were, however, some local people who might generalize about Thai people and stereotype them as Asian. Effective intercultural communication was bolstered by his cultural and linguistic awareness and recognition of communicative contexts.

Extract 12

I think they (Australians) find Thai people good. However, there are some ignorant people who don't care about foreigners because they never go anywhere – even the city. When they see us, they may feel a bit strange.

Extract 13

First of all, I have learned about people's lives including the locals, foreigners, and Thais. Secondly, I have gained more academic knowledge and learned new ways of thinking.

Extract 14

Thai students need to adapt to living here. They need to learn to be independent.

The participant felt that his experiences as a student in Australia had provided him with an opportunity to embark on an academic journey consistent with Ibarra (2002), who suggests that a career changer needs to be open to new possibilities. It is, however, important for him to develop a sense of independence in order to acculturate into Australian society, which is characterized by linguistic ideologies and unequal power relations at local and socio-political contexts. His identities could therefore fluctuate and change depending on his personal, sociocultural and historical factors.

Use of English for Communication

For the participant, English is a communicative tool bridging academic and social contexts. Because he used to live and study in America when he was young, his communicative English was highly competent. He had always used English while being a politician dealing with international organizations. In addition, he noted that English should be frequently used in order to become fluent.

Extract 15

Because I lived in America for 5–6 years, I am very competent in using English. Even though I have not studied for some time, I used English when I worked with international organizations. I was Chair and a committee member at international conferences. I have used English consistently. Actually, if I don't use English for a while, it can get rusty.

He not only recognized the importance of academic English, but he also felt that his communicative English should be improved while living and learning in Australia.

Extract 16

If Thai students have a good English foundation, that will be a great advantage. However, if their English is not good, their learning may be a bit slow. They may get bored and lose motivation. At the very least, they should have good communication skills for daily living. However, they should be prepared before going to class because participation in class discussions is important. If their English is not good, it will be okay because there is a big Thai community here. But, their English will not improve. They need to practice their English communication while studying here.

His previous international exposure allowed him to recognize varieties of English and speakers' accents. Academic English and English for daily communication were necessary for any Thai student in order to engage in academic and social interactions.

Extract 17

I always use English for daily communication. I don't translate Thai to English and vice versa. I understand that when we first learn a new language, we often translate. Listening to various accents also causes some problems. However, I have attended international conferences for the past 30 years. I'm used to listening and recognizing a variety of English accents.

Extract 18

I distinguish between the two (native and non-native speakers) by recognizing their accents, speech patterns, and language use. I can identify right away who comes from rural or urban areas and approximately where in the world one is from because I have extensive experience working with international people.

Extract 19

My university is international. Some people are not native English speakers. They are from different countries. So far, there are more non-native English speakers than native ones. There are a lot of non-native English-speaking professors. Native speakers are Australians. I can identify whether someone is native or non-native by where he/she comes from. However, native accents also vary from one place to another. In Sydney CBD, the accent is blended – similar to that in the USA. There are local accents.

At university, he encountered more non-native speakers including his lecturers and classmates whose accents varied. Distinguishing native from non-native speakers of English by where they came from, he considered himself a speaker of English as a second language. English was his communicative tool for constructing and negotiating his second language identity representing his personal and social selves according to the communicative context.

Extract 20

I can communicate in English like a second language. I don't need to adjust my accent. However, if we can learn and use the local English accent, we can blend in easier. There are various local accents. If we know them, our listening comprehension will be better. If we can sound like them, they will feel more comfortable talking with us. It's like we are one of them. Learning a local accent is useful for our daily living.

Based upon Pennycook and Otsuji's (2015) language practices in the city, the participant's English resource allowed him access to the different and mixed backgrounds of various speakers, to construct and negotiate identities through his language, and recognize the relationship between language use, objects, and accompanying activities in his academic and communicative settings in Australia. To sum up, it is evident that the Thai doctoral student's narratives revealed that the complex inter-relationships between his experience, profession, educational background, social encounters, and English use was based on his sense of self influenced by different sociocultural, educational and professional factors. As a mature-age and career-changing student, he therefore had to be aware and balance between his personal, academic and professional identities that would impact on his different discursive practices including academic and sociocultural adaptations while living and studying in Australia.

Conclusion

This case study explores a Thai doctoral student's narrative identity at an Australian university. The participant was a former well-known politician in Thailand, who decided to enter an academic discipline as a career change. His transition from politics to academics requires his action, reflection, and experimentation through venturing himself into his new role, adapting

himself to the academic and research community, and negotiating his previous professional political experiences with his imagined academician. The participant's academic and social contexts in living and studying in Australia is connected by using academic and communicative English. As a mature-age learner, he reconstructs his academic self into the Australian higher education and employs his former political experiences and connections as a strong foundation to gain his imagined expectations. His narratives of life and career transitions through investing in higher education have illustrated that his personal growth and satisfaction have been enhanced. It is, however, important to note that this case study may not be generalized to other cases; yet, it serves as a platform to undertake further research regarding a career change of a politician who aims to become an academic as his personal aspirations and contributions that potentially benefit the aging society at national and international levels.

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