EFL Teachers' Professional Identity: Insights and Experiences in FYP in a Saudi Context

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Abstract

There has been significant increase in research on exploring and understanding EFL teachers' professional identities in various contexts. The EFL teachers play an important role in developing Saudi EFL learners' English language skills to facilitate in their academic endeavors. The current study aimed to explore EFL teachers' professional identity construction and negotiation process.   Also, it intended to investigate how contextual factors influence this process. To this end, five experienced EFL teachers were chosen through purposive sampling from English Language Institute (ELI) teaching at a public-university in Saudi Arabia. The data were collected through in depth standardized open-ended interviews. The data were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by reading and reading the interview transcripts, and developing codes, categories and themes. The findings revealed that the participants found a few factors quite motivating for them to sustain their professional identity. However, there were many contextual factors that caused conflict in their construction and negotiations process of their identities and resulted in significantly contributed to their weaker professional identities. The findings can have pedagogical implications for EFL teachers, and they can prepare themselves better to deal with contextual dilemmas to perform better in the current settings. For policy makers, it can be implied that

they can provide conducive environment to teachers for developing their strong professional identities.

1. Introduction

The concept of EFL teachers' professional identity has recently received extensive attention in the field of TESOL teacher education and instruction. Studying how language teacher identity is constructed over time is a crucial issue, as it helps in understanding how language teaching is conducted. As Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johsnson (2005) assert that to understand language learning and teaching process it is imperative to study various aspects of teachers' identity and to understand teachers. For example, "we need to have a clearer sense of who they are, the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them" (p. 22). In other words, it seems pertinent to explore various aspects of language teacher's identity including their social and professional contexts, how they perceive themselves, how they are perceived by others before understanding language teaching and learning process. Accordingly, teachers' identity directly shapes their behavior and influence their teaching in all educational contexts (Danielewicz, 2014). A teacher's professional identity can be understood through three explicit selves which comprise of his/her perception of self as a teacher, his/her conception of an ideal teacher, and his/her progression to achieve these ideal concepts and missions. In addition, these distinct selves are constructed by the teacher's negotiation with past educational experiences, current pedagogical experiences, professional interactions, personal norms, values, and beliefs about education (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

With the globalization of English, there is an increase demand of English language teachers that has enhanced today more than ever the importance of language teacher identity particularly for non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTS) (Nunan, 2017). Thus, the postmodern language teaching world requires teachers who understand themselves, their expectations, their roles in relation to their contexts, and the way they can promote their effectiveness as professionals. Research indicates that teachers possessing strong and stable identity can negotiate better with professional identity tensions (Pillen, Den Brok, & Beijaard, 2013; Hong, Greene, & Lowery, 2017) and can effectively mediate with externally designed and implemented curriculum changes (Lasky, 2005). Furthermore, various educational researchers advocate that a stable teacher identity leads to better emotional engagement and motivation at school (Rots, Aetterman, Devos, & Vlerick, 2010; Zembylas, 2003).

A good number of studies conducted within ELT contexts mainly highlight the cultural attributes that influence the construction of teacher professional identity (e.g. Duff & Uchida, 1997; Simon-Maeda, 2004; Varghese, Morgan, Johnson & Johnson, 2005; Tsui, 2007). These studies indicated that identity appears to be a complex and continuous process where specifically social contexts and situations among other factors might have contributed significantly to create a teacher's professional identity. Flores and Day (2006) believe that various factors including personal and professional experiences institutional culture and

leadership play a crucial role on the positive development of teachers' professional identities. Similarly, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) argue that a teacher's identity construction "involves an understanding of self and a notion of that self within and outside contexts such as a classroom or school, necessitating an examination of self in relation to others" (p. 178). Unlike roles which can be termed as externally structured and assigned norms, identities can be "sources of meaning for the actors themselves, and by themselves, constructed through the process of individuation" (Castells, 2011, p.7). Hence, by focusing on teachers' professional identities, we can highlight both personal and social aspects of their professional lives which are constantly influenced by personal and pedagogical beliefs, past experiences and the fluidity of professional settings.

Teachers' professional identity is considered as a major feature of teachers' professionalism (Day, 2002; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2002). A significant number of studies have established that a teacher's identity is closely connected with various features such as efficacy, agency, confidence, job satisfaction, motivation and commitment in teaching profession (Danielewicz, 2014; Crow, Day & Moller, 2017). In this perspective, Farrell (2008) contends that teachers "collect data about their teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching." (p. 2). Therefore, the concept of teachers' identity can be perceived as the way teachers reflect and conceive themselves (Ottesen, 2007). The process of teachers' identity construction involves negotiation of personal norms and experience, professional culture and organizational engagement (Van den Berg, 2002). Teachers' professional identity strongly influence the way they emotionally and cognitively experience their profession. Likewise, teachers' emotional and cognitive reaction to their professional experience also impact their identities (Dang, 2013).

A significant number of studies have focused on the construction of EFL teachers' professional identity in various educational contexts. For example, Wang (2021) in the Chinese EFL context identified internal and external constraints that impact teachers' professional identity construction process. Similarly, Martínez-Prieto and Lindahl (2020) in their research found that the language teacher's identity is negatively affected from either internal or external sources and continued influence her professional development. Her identity seems to be threatened at two levels a) due to institutional procedures for providing language proficiency certificate to verify her legitimacy b) the Mexican institutes and her peers also perceive her not authorized teacher as she only speaks English and lack official pedagogical certificates. In their study conducted in the Iranian EFL context, Ostad, Ghanizadeh and Ghanizadeh (2019) indicated that teacher commitment has highest correlation with skills and knowledge and job satisfaction has a close association with commitment. When teachers are more committed and satisfied to their profession, their professional identity is also shaped positively.

Previous research studies conducted in Saudi TESOL context revealed that EFL teachers, struggle with their social position as they experience a lack of high social recognition in the society (e.g. Ahmad, Latada, Shah & Wahab, 2017). Furthermore, Ahmad, et al., (2017) study mentioned that the Pakistani EFL teachers showed dissatisfaction as non-native EFL

teachers   and they did not receive similar professional and economic status as other native English-speaking teachers have and enjoy in the educational settings. Additionally, they focus their research on various personal and professional factors that contributed to the development of the Pakistani EFL teachers' professional identity by employing quantitative methodology (ibid).   Asif, Bano and Najjar (2020) in their study on expatriate teachers working in Saudi context reported that teachers negotiate their professional identities by dealing with the challenges offered by job expectations, socio-cultural and linguistic barriers.

The topic of teachers' professional identity construction and negotiation has not been explored widely in the Saudi EFL context. In fact, very little is known about the topic and a few researchers investigated   the   issue in the Saudi context. For example, Anwar, (2020) explored the construction of EFL teachers' professional identity in curriculum implementation by analyzing teachers' narratives. However, there is still a lack of sufficient studies regarding how the contextual factors influence the EFL teachers' professional identity construction process in the Saudi EFL settings reveals the necessity of conducting the current study. Therefore, it would be useful for both the context of the study and EFL teachers to identify the positive and negative issues that could influenced these teachers' professional identities. Additionally, it was a chance to give some teachers a voice to reveal their views of the investigated topic for better understanding and future improvement of their teaching circumstances and environment.

2. Literature Review

The literature section discusses some major issues and concepts related to teachers' professional identities. namely, definition of teachers' professional identity, concept of teachers' identity, factors influencing teachers' professional identity and negotiation of teachers' professional identity. These elements will be discussed in the following sections relations.

2.1 Definition of teachers' professional identity

Kelchtermans (2005) defines teachers' professional identity as "a personal interpretive framework" or a "set of beliefs and representations that a teacher develops overtime and that operates as lens through which they perceive their job situation, make sense of it, and act in it" (p. 100). Conceptualizing identity as an sense-making principle in teachers' personal and professional worlds. Maclure (1993) maintains that it "should not be seen as stable—something that people have—but as, "something that they use, to justify, explain and make sense of themselves in relation to other people, and to the contexts in which they operate" (p. 312). While reviewing growing educational literature on identity Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) recognize   a variety of multidimensional perspectives on exploring teachers' identity, namely   as a continuous reinventing of themselves during teachers' professional journey, as the narratives teachers describe themselves and their working lives (cg. Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Also, the term identity includes various discourses in which teachers engage in (Alsup, 2006), as metaphors which emerge from their negotiation with their professional roles   (Hunt, 2006;Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011; Karabay, 2016), and a wide variety of personal and professional contextual influences on their

professional selves (Raudenbush, Rowan & Cheong, 1992; Flores & Day, 2006; Pennington & Richards, 2016;). Fundamentally, Gee (2000) acknowledges that identity can be perceived as a kind of feature operating within a specific context, while one may possess a core identity. There can be multiple variants of this identity as an individual one engaging in different contexts. In other words, identity can be understood as a multifaceted construct that may continue reshaping due to external influences.

2.2 Concept of Teachers' Identity

The concept of teachers' identity has extensively been discussed in recent decades (e.g. Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Davey, 2013).Teachers' identities are profoundly linked with their beliefs, values and practices that influence their behaviour within and outside the teaching context (Walkington, 2005). Similarly, teachers' identity has gained significant research interest in recent years and more attention is paid on the way teachers work, learn and develop over time (Alsup, 2006; Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Schutz, Hong, & Francis, 2018). As a matter of fact, teacher's identity needs to be redefined as the recent changes in education have posed variety of challenges for the post-modern societies (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005). In a rapidly changing global world, teachers are reconstructing their professional identities with reference to their workplace contexts. These shifting contexts sometimes make it even more complex for teachers to develop a strong professional identity (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). According to postmodern perspective, research on teacher's professional identity reveals that teacher's professional identity is not a fixed entity, rather it is an active and ongoing process influenced by a teacher's personal qualities, past experiences and present professional settings (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Barahona & Ibaceta-Quijanes, 2019). Furthermore, Akkerman and Meijer (2011) acknowledge that postmodern conception of identity provides insights into how individuals develop over time and situate themselves differently in different situations. However, they identify a number of limitations with this conception of identity and advocate for an inclusion of previously denied modern understanding of core identity (Gee, 2000). To attain a comprehensive characterization of identity, teachers' professional identity takes into account teachers' internal and external features such as teachers' past life experiences, teachers' perceptions about teaching, personal norms, values and expectations, teachers' behavior with peers, professional environment, organizational hierarchy, curriculum implementation and reform in curriculum policies and professional development (Kao & Lin, 2015).

2.3 Construction of Teachers' Professional Identity

Within sociocultural perspective, the construct of an identity can be viewed as a) product and process and b) discourse. The perspective of identity as product reflects an outcome of effects on teacher) and as process is a kind of continuous engagement within teacher growth) (Sachs, 2005). For Olsen (2008) identity is a label that originates from influences of the immediate contexts, preceding shaping of self, social orientation, and meaning making process that is strongly associated with the flow of operations. Also, it negotiates concurrently with immediate settings and human relationships (ibid). Similarly, within

recognizing identity in terms of discourse, the process of identity construction is linked with "how collective discourses shape personal worlds and how individual voices combine into the voice of a community" (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 15). By acknowledging Sachs' (2005) assertion that teacher's professional identity embodies essence of teaching profession, the current study also conceives teacher professional identity as a framework for teachers in which they construct their views of "how to be, how to act and how to understand their teaching and their social positioning" (p. 15). This view of identity includes both personal and professional facets of the construct and its reforming within experience. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) draw our attention to one of the complicated features of conceiving identity is struggling with the view of how identity changes and reshapes. This notion of reshaping identity has been inconsistently used across literature which includes references to construction of identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Coldron & Smith, 1999), to 'formation' of identity (Tsui, 2007; Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Dang, 2013), to 'development' of identity (Walkington, 2005; Olsen, 2008;), to 'making' of identity (Taylor, 1992; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Hunt, 2006), to 'shaping' of an identity (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Flores & Day, 2006; Sardabi, Biria & Golestan, 2018), and even creating an identity (Volkmann & Anderson, 1998). According to Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) each term includes a slight shade to some major questions that could be raised about the nature of development of a teacher's professional journey. For example, "how does an identity shift and change? How do we characterize this change? What happens in the shifting from one identity to another? Who or what influences the change?" (p. 178). The current study used the term construction of identity and recognized the impact of personal and professional factors that can influence its construction.

Teachers' professional identity construction, has been claimed that it is a process that involves many knowledge sources like knowledge of teaching, subject matter and human relations (Antonek, McCormick & Donato, 1997). Several studies have taken this process as teachers need to make sense of variety of contradictory perspectives, beliefs and professional roles they have to adapt to (Volkmann & Anderson, 1998; Samuel & Stephens, 2000). Moreover, professional identity construction is also seen as "a process of practical knowledge building characterized by an ongoing integration of what is individually and collectively seen as relevant to teaching" (Beijaard et al., 2004). In brief, teachers' identity construction is seen both as a product and process (Olsen, 2012), the former refers to how a teacher perceives himself or herself as a person and a professional, as a result of his or her interaction with others. The latter denotes to changes in that perception which are resulted by internal and external influences (Pillen et al., 2013). As discussed above, teachers' professional identity construction is a complex and dynamic process that involves multiple factors including teachers' different knowledge sources, their understanding of various perspectives and professional roles, their narratives and relevant practical knowledge.

Having reviewed the literature on how teachers' professional identity is constructed, it seems pertinent to retrospect the literature on the role of contextual factors play in influencing teachers' professional identity and how teachers negotiate their identities.

2.4 Factors Influencing Teachers' Professional Identity

Research suggests that   achieving a full understanding of various aspects of identity and the manner they corelate with each other is quite a challenging task (Beijaard et al., 2004; Beauchamp &Thomas, 2009). During the past 20 years, most research on teachers' identity has focused on how teachers' professional identification is grounded on factors interceded by sociocultural dynamics as proposed by Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Shabani, 2016 ; Eslamdoost, King, & Tajeddin, 2019;) and professional experiences including past teaching, intercultural interactions, the impact of local classroom, institutional cultures and curricular constraints (Powell, 1994;   Duff & Uchida, 1997;   Anwar, 2020). Researchers have perceived the word identity in a variety of ways over time. The word 'identity' was conceived as personalized self-image of an individual and later it was understood as the ways a person identifies himself/herself with different features such as culture, religion, nationality, class, race and gender (Olsen, 2012). However, the literature on teaching and teacher education affirms a common assumption that identity is dynamic and not a fixed attribute of a teacher that changes over time and is influenced by variety of internal and external factors (Beijaard et al., 2004; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Reeves, 2018). The internal factors may include teacher emotions (Zembylas, 2005; Rodgers & Scott, 2008) whereas the external factors including teaching and practical life experiences in a particular context (Flores & Day, 2006; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). From a sociocultural viewpoint, Holland and Lachicotte (2007) view teachers' identity as the way teachers consider themselves "in relation to ways of inhabiting roles, positions, and cultural imaginaries that matter to them" (p. 103). This perception of self involves an individual's emotions and it provides a framework for one's attitude and actions (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). Additionally, self-perception develops out of teachers' engagement with a specific context which reflects teachers' distinctive understanding of themselves that can not only be subjective but also idiosyncratic as Kelchtermans (2018) indicates . Hence, identity is not an innate feature of an individual rather a continuous process of   becoming concern about an individual and context   yielding a multidimensional conception of self (Tao & Gao, 2018).

EFL teachers negotiate a number of conflicting ideas concerning their personal, social, professional, economic, and political conditions. Palmer (2009) maintains that "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique, good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). Moreover, teacher's identity intends to explore teachers' understanding of themselves in connection to their profession, and investigating teacher identity can lead to enhanced understanding of pedagogical theories and practices (Morita, 2004).   In brief. Smith et.al., 1999, contend that understanding individual identity is crucial and it provides an outstanding control of teachers on how they conceive others, their self-confidence, their ambitions, their inspiration and efforts governing various elements of their lives.

2.5 Negotiation of Teachers' Professional Identity

Traditionally, it has been argued that identity is the result of negotiation between the identity an individual possesses and the available identity choices that are influenced by power

relations operating in various social contexts (Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, 2004). It is a widely held view that identity changes throughout a teacher's career because of his or her interactions within the professional context and in broader communities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Teachers' professional identities are negotiated through personal lives. They form and give meaning to their experiences, and make sense of their relationships through "a subjective emotional world" (Day, 2002, p.685). Overall, there seems to be extensive evidence to indicate that teachers negotiate their professional identities by interacting with various contextual factors and this process of negotiation helps them to construct their identities.

Several studies have linked the influence of context on student teaching experience in construction and negotiation of identity (Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004). However, in their review of literature, Beijaard et al., (2004) maintain that contextual factors are mainly underemphasized in teachers' professional identity development. Institutional context and professional communities significantly influence a teacher to determine the type of identities he or she may develop (Goodson & Cole, 1994;Tsui, 2007). There is a strong possibility that the institutional environment, students' nature, the influence of colleagues and administrators can substantially affect the process of shaping of teachers' identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Further to this, Coldron and Smith (1999) indicate that under the influence of institutional culture, teachers may insidiously make different customs and habits a part of their teaching practice. In addition, by assigning them additional professional duties, they may alter present features of their professional identities.

Research indicates that teachers' engagement with the target language culture and the way they position themselves differ widely and thus remains open for investigation. Teachers usually face workplace conflicts and engage in rectifying these conflicts by keeping a balance in these contending identity positions and pedagogical practices (Alsup, 2006; Trent, 2012; Vetter, Hartman, & Reynolds, 2016). According to Volkmann and Anderson (1998) this act of achieving an equilibrium of identity is a complex and dynamic process in which a teacher's personal self-image is determined through performing various social roles. In this respect, teachers can be viewed as dilemma managers (Lampert, 1985), concurrently, negotiating between their personal beliefs and contradictory interests, and in this way the "individual sites of agency" intervene between teachers' professional identities and institutional settings (Scotland, 2014, p. 41). To sum up, EFL teachers especially are susceptible to conflicts due to internal and external pressures related to curriculum issues like teaching materials, teaching methodologies, standardization, and broader educational policies. Research suggests that contextual factors, including subjects teachers, teachers relationship with their students, their professional assessment, impact of colleagues and interaction with institutional administration have strong influence on shaping teachers professional identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, 1995; Day et al., 2006; Flores & Day, 2006). However, the conflicts EFL teachers face and the way they negotiate with professional dilemma is not significantly investigated in the Saudi EFL context. The current study is an endeavor to explore how contextual factors influence their professional identities and how they negotiate with these factors. More specifically, the present study is significant as the educational

literature lacks any major research studies that particularly explore how EFL teachers construct and negotiate their professional identities and how the Saudi EFL context impacts these identities.

Thorough reading of the literature about process of construction and negotiation of teachers' professional identity, along with our experiences as EFL teachers, has guided us in great deal to develop the research questions of the current study.

3. Methodology

This study was qualitative in nature, conducted within the interpretive paradigm. Therefore, data collection and analysis were informed and guided by qualitative approach. This approach was helpful in exploring the teachers' professional identities construction and negotiation process in their teaching context. Additionally, this chapter provides comprehensive background information about the context of the study. Furthermore, the study addresses the following research questions:

1). How do EFL teachers construct their professional identities?

2). How do EFL teachers negotiate their professional identities?

3.1 Context of the Study

The context of the study is an English language institute (ELI) which is part of Saudi public university. The ELI provides different intensive EFL courses with different levels (1,2,3 and 4) for Foundation Year Program (FYP) students. These EFL courses are offered for all undergraduate university students joining all the colleges, like medical, engineering, science and non-science colleges. EFL teachers play an essential role in the FYP as they are assigned to teach the intensive EFL courses. The ELI context is a multinational environment because teaching staff at the institute embodies native, non-native teachers and local Saudi teachers who represent a minority percentage at the ELI. Whereas, interestingly, the non-native teachers represent the majority and they come from different countries in Asia (e.g. Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka) and Africa (e.g. Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and South Africa). There are about (250) teachers. The ELI uses different units to manage the institution, such as Academic Management, Curriculum and Testing Unit, Accreditation Unit, Recruitment Unit and Quality assurance Unit. These units' heads and members are selected by ELI top management.

3.2 Participants

Participants were five EFL teachers who have been teaching the offered English language courses at the English language institute in the context of the study. Three of the participants hold PhD degrees and two participants had MA in TESOL qualification. All the participants belong to different countries, namely Pakistan (2 teachers), Tunisia (1), India (1) and South Africa (1). The study adopted purposive sampling which involves selecting the sample holding certain features to meet the aim of the study (Cohen et al., 2011). There were three main characteristics required in the EFL teachers participating in the study. First, they have taught all the intensive English language courses offered by the ELI. Second, they have

taught all the courses levels (1,2,3,4) and tracks, like medicine, engineering, science and Arts students. Third, they have taught at least 8 years continuously at the ELI.   These criteria were adopted to help the participants to explore their professional identity construction and negotiation based on their contextual factors and experiences. Also, these criteria can help them to relate different known and experienced issues and information to the investigated study topic.

3.3 Research Instrument

For collecting data, interviews were used because they provide deep insight into people's perceptions, meaning making and reality construction (Punch, 2013).   Open-ended interviews were utilized in this study. Interviews questions are precisely worded and ordered for "increasing the comparability of responses" and it "facilitates the organization and analysis of the data" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 413). Above all, such interview protocol provides an open space to construct and reconstruct reality.   The interviews were digitally recorded, and each interview lasted around one hour.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis technique was utilized for data analysis. Thematic analysis is characterized not as a *specific* method rather as an analytical tool that contains different features which are common in various approaches in qualitative analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Boyatzis, 1998). However, Braun & Clarke (2006)   define it as a method for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 6). It attempts to unearth themes that are significant in a text at different levels and it also helps in "structuring" and "depiction" of these themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 387). One of the benefits of utilizing thematic analysis is its flexible and compatible in nature which can to help the researcher in data presentation and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Qualitative software program Nvivo was used for analyzing the transcripts. The initial analysis of data followed Miles, Huberman and Saldaña's (2013) coding approach by creating deductive codes and inductive codes.   During this process, codes were created. Then these codes were collapsed into categories, sub-themes and major themes were generated which are discussed in the following section, finding and discussion chapter.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section delves into the complexities of professional identity construction and negotiation among EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. Drawing on the study's findings, it explores how teachers navigate multiple influences and expectations within the educational landscape. The analysis will discuss key themes that emerged from the data, situating them within the wider discourse on teacher professional identity and considering the specificities of the Saudi context.

4.1 Constructing a Professional Identity: A Multifaceted Journey

The study reveals the multifaceted nature of professional identity construction among EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. Four key themes emerged, offering valuable insights into the factors

that shape how teachers view themselves professionally:

4.1.1 The Influence of Agency and Decision-Making

As the data revealed, all the participants indicated their lack of their involvement in developing writing tests policy and rating scale rubrics of students' writings. They reflected on their passive contribution in this area. Ikram's quote briefly revealed his passive involvement in this area as his statement indicated: *"… as a teacher I had zero contribution in making grading policy or guidelines of writing exams, quizzes, assignments and final exams".*

Similarity: Taimoor referred to the nature of his exclusion process as his quote indicated:" I *was not invited to take part in any decision-making process of all types of writing tests. I was totally excluded from that process."*. Also, Shakir indicated that his long experience in teaching both science and arts did not qualify him for the task as his statement showed:*" I have been teaching science and arts students for many years, but I wasn't invited or asked to help in preparing the grading policy or rating rubric scales of the writings tests".*

Additionally, the obtained data showed that majority of participants related their passive involvement in developing students' evaluation policy namely, the grading policy and rating rubric scales of the writing tests, with the state of their professional identity. More specifically, they expressed the negative impacts of implementing that policy on their professional identity. Also, they were dissatisfied with that experience. For example, Ikram's quote revealed his stance and the reason behind his dissatisfaction as he said: *"…. excluding my say or input in writing the grading policy or rating rubric scales of writing tests for me means denying some features of my professional identity and I do not like at all".* Shakir, tackled the unpleasant impact on himself as his quote indicated:*" …as an experience teacher excluding my role influences my confidence negatively as a result the condition of my professional identity".*

Additionally, Nauman's quote clearly uncovered the state of his own professional identity: *"…. ignoring part of my professional role or identity is not a good thing. To be honest with you my current view about my own professional identity is not as it was before experiencing the exclusion in writing tests policy making in this institution".*

Lastly, Taimoor added a new dimension and explained the direct negative impacts of his lack of involvement in writing tests decision making process on his professional development as his quote's showed:

"…. maintaining a high teaching performance has been part of my professional identity, but recently I have developed a feeling of frustration and lack of enthusiasm for any more professional development activities. It is a natural outcome for CTU policy towards teachers' exclusion from important things like making grading guidelines of writing tests."

Exclusion from decision-making processes negatively impacts teachers' professional identity. This aligns with Wenger's (1999) notion of "identity work," where participation within a community of practice (the school) strengthens a sense of agency and value. Exclusion can lead to feelings of alienation and a diminished sense of professional identity (Flores & Day,

2006). However, the concept of teacher agency in the Saudi context requires further consideration. Cultural factors, such as a hierarchical power structure, may influence teachers' comfort level in actively seeking leadership roles. This finding is similar to research in other contexts where teacher exclusion from decision-making is linked to feelings of disempowerment (Fullan, 2007). However, the influence of cultural factors adds a unique dimension to the Saudi context. Future research could explore how schools can create a safe space for teachers to voice their opinions and concerns.

English language Institutions in Saudi Arabia could explore strategies for empowering teachers through collaborative decision-making structures, such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) or teacher councils. Additionally, investigating the effectiveness of teacher leadership programs in the Saudi context could provide valuable insights for fostering a more collaborative school culture (Aydin & Darling-Hammond, 2018; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2014).

4.1.2 The Role of Feedback in Shaping Identity

The data revealed that most of the participants believed that their teaching methodology and teaching style were significantly influenced by classroom observations. This influential factor contributed greatly to the formation of their professional teaching identity and was a part of the process of becoming a good teacher. The participants' statements tackled different positive impacts of classroom observation on their teaching practice. For example, Taimoor's quote provided a general advantage:

"The greatest influence on my method of teaching had been classroom observations and the feedback I have got from the observers because they observe my teaching from a different perspective from an outsider viewpoint."

Nauman was a bit more specific as he referred to meeting institutional teaching requirement had influenced his teaching performance in classrooms as he said: *" my teaching style must meet ELI teaching standards. We have classroom observation and I got some useful points from some experienced observers which helped to improve my teaching practice and skill"*. Similarly, Ikram's quote indicated that he became a good teacher because of positive impact of classroom observation on his teaching performance: "*I have been observed many times. Some observers gave me good practical techniques which helped me to make my students more motivated and active, especially level 2 students"*. Lastly, Shakir's experience focused on developing time management skill resulted from observation process as his quotes indicated *" I cannot deny that classroom observation has made my teaching practice better and more efficient in terms of time management. I am being honest about it"*.

The positive influence of classroom observations with constructive feedback aligns with the emphasis on formative assessment in shaping teacher learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback that focuses on growth fosters a sense of self-efficacy, a crucial component of teacher professional identity (Guskey, 1988). However, the effectiveness of feedback depends on the quality of the interaction between the observer and the teacher. Trust and a collaborative approach are essential (Brookhart, 2010). This finding aligns with research

across different educational contexts, highlighting the importance of formative assessment for both student learning and teacher development (Darling-Hammond & Bali, 2019).

English Language institutes could explore moving beyond traditional written reports and investigate the use of video-based feedback to promote teacher reflection and self-improvement (Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2010). Additionally, creating a culture of formative assessment that benefits both teachers and students would be insightful (Darling-Hammond & Bali, 2019). Future research could investigate the impact of different feedback formats (written, verbal, peer observation) on teacher professional identity development.

4.1.3 Religion as a Unique Influence

Religious beliefs are generally important aspects of an individual's personal identity. Likewise, all the participants, came from a Muslim background and their discussion on teaching in Saudi context, indicated clear presence of religious references associated with their professional lives. Their religious ideology influenced their educational philosophy. For example, Nauman's quote raised this issue:

"I believe it's not about teaching English or math even teaching how to make a shelf has got the biggest reward in the eyes of God. No one can give the reward to teachers except Allah. It's such a sublime and delicate concept. Even someone pays you million dollars this can't be the reward."

Also, Taimoor's statement emphasized the concept of religious factor: *"as Muslim EFl teacher, it's my duty to take my job very seriously, especially I am teaching Muslims students. We must do our utmost to help our students to master English language to achieve their academic goals"*. Muaaz related the position of teaching to his Islamic belief as his stance indicated: *"teaching in Islam has the most honourable status. My teaching is guided by my Islamic faith. I mean more efforts and time I dedicate for teaching my students, the more rewards I can get from Allah {God}"*. In brief, Ikram's quote referred to a personal motive guiding his job:*" teaching English for me is not only a job. It's also a religious thing or work I enjoy doing, because I am teaching Muslim students to become professionals, scientists, engineers to benefit their societies…."*.

The emphasis on religious beliefs as a significant influence on teachers' professional identities offers a unique contribution. Teachers perceiving teaching as a way to contribute to students' lives and potentially gain religious rewards aligns with Park's (2013) concept of "calling" in the teaching profession. However, acknowledging the diversity of religious beliefs within Saudi Arabia is crucial.

This finding highlights a cultural aspect of teacher identity that may not be as prominent in other contexts. While the concept of teaching as a vocation exists elsewhere, the religious dimension adds a unique layer to the Saudi context. Future research could explore how educators from different religious perspectives integrate their faith-based values with effective teaching practices in the Saudi EFL context (Abouchedid & Eid, 2004). Additionally, investigating how teacher education programs can prepare future EFL teachers to navigate the intersection of faith and pedagogy would be valuable (Safitri et al., 2023).

4.1.4 Past Learning Experiences: Building a Foundation

Most of the participants' interpretation of their present professional identity is substantially affected by their past learning experiences. The earlier learning experiences including their interactions with their teachers and others within the learning environment influenced their professional identity. The participants recalled their learning experiences quite positively. Shakir 's quote expressed his past learning impacts on him.

"It was awesome. It was simply amazing. Every day was a new day for you. When you learned from your colleagues, peers and most importantly I learned a lot from my university teachers. Their teaching skills and styles helped me to develop my personal teaching style and professional identity when I became an EFL teacher years later".

Ikram was more precise as he indicated to the aspect which influenced his learning and his current professional identity as an EFL teacher. *"I was really lucky at the university. I had many very good lecturers, especially the ones who taught me the most difficult courses. They were skilled in explaining difficult things to us. So that made me to try to find different ways or techniques of explaining difficult things for my students like in grammar or writing courses".*

In the same vein, Muaaz reflected on his previous positive postgraduate learning experienced in the UK and its positive on his relationship with his students as his quote indicated: *"I did my MA in TESOL in the UK and it was a nice learning experience because I had a lot of support from three lectures and professors, especially the ones who had long teaching experience in the program."* Then, he heightened their positive influence on his professional role as an EFL teacher as he his quote revealed:*" I had some academic challenges in most of the courses there. They were so supportive, encouraging and motivating. I realized the importance of considering these issues and I implemented them with my students, especially level one students".*

Helping each other was another aspect of good previous leaning experience which encouraged Nauman to adopt this style with his students in his teaching practice as his quote indicated:

" I had very nice colleagues at the university. We used to help each other when we had difficult homework or courses. We reviewed each other's works and essays or to prepare for final exams. I found that very useful and it helped me to learn a lot. So, I am doing the same with my students and trying so encourage them to help each other".

The finding that positive past learning experiences contribute to a strong professional identity aligns with Pintrich's (2000) work on teacher education programs. Effective programs foster a sense of self-efficacy and effective teaching practices. The Saudi context presents unique challenges and opportunities. Future research could explore the specific types of past learning experiences that were most influential for teachers and how teacher education programs can integrate culturally relevant pedagogy while preparing teachers for the national curriculum and standardized testing.

This finding aligns with research across different educational contexts (Beijaard et al., 2004; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Effective teacher education programs prepare future educators with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in the classroom. However, the Saudi context presents specific considerations. Teacher education programs in Saudi Arabia may need to address the specific needs of EFL instruction, including the use of innovative methodologies catered to learners from diverse cultural backgrounds (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Additionally, navigating cultural norms around student-teacher interactions and integrating Islamic values into language pedagogy are crucial aspects for future EFL teachers (Alharbi & Ahmad, 2015).

4.2 Negotiating of Professional Identity: Balancing Demands and Expectations

The findings on how teachers negotiate their professional identity in relation to students and the institution offer valuable insights. Two key themes emerged providing useful perspectives about the issue.

4.2.1 Fostering Cultural Responsiveness: Building Bridges in the Classroom

The obtained data reflected the nature of the participants professional relationship with the with their students, Foundation Year Program student. The analyzed data revealed that most of the participants indicated that they had gradually learned to build rapport with their students' cultural norms and learning behavior. The following quote is an example of their comments as Nauman explained: *"my relations with students have gradually improved. Now I feel I need to be more considerate towards their cultural, linguistic and social problems. "*.Similarly, Shakir said:*" at the beginning of every term I do my best to establish a good relationship with my students, know the level of each one and identify their learning challenges"*.

Additionally, the analyzed data revealed that students' learning attitude towards English language largely made teaching a strenuous task for the teachers. The data revealed that all the participants primarily strived to cope with students' low level of English language, demotivation towards learning, paucity of seriousness towards punctuality and regularity and demanding, revengeful and unreliable nature. Ikram provided an example of their views as he said: *"I must say that but it's really challenging when you're dealing with students of level one and who are repeaters. They're not willing to improve, they're not willing to learn but they're willing to get 100 % marks"*. Similarly, Muaaz's quote explained their negative behavior towards their learning requirements tasks.*"...teaching weak students especially multiple repeaters is very difficult. They are careless, they do not do their assignments, always absent and demotivated. They just want to pass without making any efforts"*.

Interestingly, the analyzed data revealed that most of the participants indicated that they were left with internal institutional conflict as the result of teaching weak and repeaters students. They negotiated their professional identity, more specifically, they had two options, either to evaluate their students' English language proficiency performance according to the ELI guidelines or ignore them and give everyone high grades, regardless of their actual English language proficiency level. The following quote given by Taimoor is an example of their

views:

"I taught repeaters or level one students many times. I was always in a real dilemma, to give them what they deserved or listened to their demands and desires. They always asked me to be kind and give them high grades, no matter how bad their levels were".

Then, Taimoor continued and explained his strategy with these students as his quote showed. *"..eventually, I grade my students professionally based on their performance level ."*

Similarly, Nauman's quote revealed the challenge he experienced to do his job professionally as required when dealing with these students.

'' It's a challenge to be in a balanced position when you are dealing with weak students. I encourage them, help them by asking them to resubmit their assignments, but I do my teaching and grading duties as a professional teacher following ELI grading instructions."

The study highlights the importance of building rapport with students from diverse backgrounds. This aligns with the growing emphasis on culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010). Teachers who adapt their practices to create inclusive learning environments demonstrate a strong cultural identity (Nieto, 2000). This fosters a sense of value for students' backgrounds and contributes to a positive teacher identity. Future research could explore specific strategies employed by teachers and the challenges they face in implementing culturally responsive practices within the Saudi EFL context.

This finding aligns with research across various educational contexts, where culturally responsive teaching is linked to improved student engagement and learning outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). However, the specific challenges and opportunities related to cultural responsiveness in the Saudi EFL context require further investigation.

Teacher education programs in Saudi Arabia could emphasize culturally responsive practices, equipping future teachers with the skills to create inclusive learning environments for students from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, professional development opportunities for in-service teachers could focus on culturally responsive strategies for the EFL classroom.

4.2.2 Navigating the Tension: Institutional Recognition and Teacher Identity

The data revealed that most of the participants indicated that they had conflicts between two types of identities, and they had to navigate between them in their teaching context. More specifically, their statements showed that they had conflicts between their institutional recognized professional identity and their own perception of their academic identity. An example of this was pointed out by Nauman as he said: *"I had my doctorate degree, but here I am an instructor. They did not consider my degree. I was an academic in my university, but here I am an instructor". I'm an academic…. I wish they understand the difference".* Similarly, Muaaz expressed his disappointment due to downgrading of his status as he said:

"Well, I am a researcher and I have eight publications. I researched different topics in EFL and two of them focused on our students here. It makes me very disappointed that I am

treated as English language instructor. I am *a doctor. This means **I** deserve assistant professor title, not an instructor "*.

In the same vein, Ikram said:

"It is a sad thing to tell you I am not recognized as an academic in this institution. I got my doctorate degree from the UK seven years ago, while I was working here, but I am still the same, English language instructor, when I started teaching at the ELI ".

Muaaz, concluded his demand asking for changing his institutional title to the one he deserved.

"I Hope they will give me my deserved title, Dr. along with any academic and financial benefits ".

The study reveals a significant tension between teachers perceived academic identity and their institutional designation. This resonates with Bullock and Macdonald's (2007) work on the challenges faced by academics working in non-university settings. A lack of recognition from the institution can be demotivating and hinder professional satisfaction (Fullan, 2007). Schools can address this by creating opportunities for teacher leadership and professional development that leverage teachers' expertise.

This finding is similar to research in other contexts where teachers in non-traditional settings report feeling undervalued (Valli et al., 2012). However, the specific reasons behind the perceived lack of recognition in the Saudi context require further exploration.

English language institutions in Saudi Arabia could explore strategies to enhance teacher recognition. This could involve creating teacher leadership roles, providing opportunities for professional development that aligns with teachers' academic interests, and fostering a school culture that values teacher expertise. Investigating the impact of national education policies and school administration structures on teacher recognition could be insightful for future research.

5. Power Dynamics and the Teacher-Student Relationship

The study suggests a dynamic of power negotiation within the teacher-student relationship. Teachers adapt their teaching styles to accommodate student needs, highlighting a student-centered approach. However, it's crucial to consider how power dynamics might influence this negotiation. Apple (2012) critiques traditional education systems as potentially reinforcing existing power structures. This aligns with research on teacher-student power dynamics, which acknowledges the complexity of student-centered approaches within hierarchical educational systems (Calabrese, 2017).

By examining these themes, the study offers valuable insights into how EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia negotiate their professional identity. Understanding these complexities can inform strategies for supporting teachers and fostering a more positive and effective learning environment for all. Future research could explore how EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia navigate this power dynamic while fostering a positive and culturally responsive learning

environment. Investigating specific strategies employed by teachers and the influence of cultural norms on teacher-student interaction would be valuable.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings, institutions can implement strategies to support teacher professional identity development. These include:

- Including teachers in decision-making processes to enhance their sense of agency and value within the institution.

- Providing ongoing professional development opportunities with constructive feedback to promote continuous improvement.

- Recognizing and valuing teachers' qualifications and experiences, fostering a sense of professional satisfaction.

By addressing these areas, institutions can create a more supportive environment that empowers teachers to develop strong professional identities and contribute effectively to student learning.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the process by which EFL teachers' construct and negotiate their professional identities within the ELI context in a Saudi university. For improving teaching quality and motivating teachers to perform better to make the teaching learning process fruitful, it seems inevitable to determine what factors contribute in the construction and negotiation of professional identity. Multiple factors contributed to teachers' professional identity construction process including their past experiences, early education and the environment in which they developed as EFL teachers. More importantly, the current socio-cultural settings and specifically institutional policies and practices shape their identities significantly as they negotiate with these factors on daily basis. It was really interesting to observe that teachers' religious identity emerged as one of the motivating factors for them to teach in considerably challenging working environment. It was also note-worthy that teachers had to struggle in their relationships with their coordinators, students and peers which causes conflict in their identities as they felt lack of fair treatment in their institutional and social status as teachers as compared to their skills and qualifications.

The findings of this study contribute to the discussion of probing into ways effective for teachers to develop professionally in the Saudi EFL context and what contextual factors undermine EFL teachers' efforts to perform better to improve the quality of teaching. This study recommends further research that could improve our understanding of how to make the workplace environment conducive to facilitate teachers to become better professionals and impact positively on the process of professional identity construction.

Informed Consent

Obtained.

Provenance and Peer Review

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request.

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