

English Language Teachers' Professional Identity: A Review

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Abstract

This paper reviews ten peer-reviewed empirical research studies on English language teachers' identity construction from 2018 to 2022. The review study follows a systematic process of paper selection and analysis. The result of the study is presented in two major themes: contextually situated English language teachers' identity and English language teachers' identity formation process. Similarly, the paper also critically presents the review of the methodology adopted in identity research. The findings of the study shed light on contextual factors, which are heavily influential in language learning process. Besides, this review study presented the identity formation process of EFL teachers in five different stages. The study concludes that the identity construction process begins from pre-service learning to a career-long process.

Keywords: ELT teachers, identity construction, review article, English language teachers

Introduction

The term identity has become a pertinent issue in academia. Identity is defined with diverse perspectives. Wenger (1998) defines identity is not what others think about us, nor is it what an individual thinks about oneself; it is entirely based on an individual's enactment in their day-to-day life. Similarly, for Norton (2000), identity is a person's relationship with the world, how the relationship will last, and what possibilities a person finds for the future. Pennycook (2001) supports both definitions; identity is the negotiation of our daily engagements in the space around us. Gee (2000) contradicts the

definition. Gee defines identity as people's 'concept' of who they are, how they are for others, and how they are connected with other people. However, the researcher presented diverse views about identity. Researchers in the present time are paying attention to teacher's identity issues. Barkhuizen (2021) confirms that people are paying much attention to identity issues as it is a popular topic at conferences, presentations, research, and dissertations. Identity-focused research are found highlighting issues like self-image as the factor of identity (Eslamdoost et al., 2020), similarly, Kılıç and Cinkara (2020) put light on critical incidents as a factor to construct identity and other on diverse issues. Scanning identity study is expected to bring innovative knowledge on identity through this review paper.

From the last two decades teachers identity construction is being one of the demanding topic for research with different issues such as teachers practice as a professional, their way of applying theory and teaching learning process, their teaching style and social recognition (Salinas & Ayala, 2018). The present body of literature contains a number of studies on English language teachers' professional identity construction. However, only a few researchers conducted systematic reviews. Yuan, (2019) reviewed non-native English teachers' identity research: from 2008 to 2007. Similarly, Amini and Kruger, (2022) reviewed the role of EFL teachers' autonomy and reflection in teachers self-directed learning in an Iranian setting, likewise Golzar (2020) reviewed empirical research presented between 1997 and 2000 to explore how English language teachers constructed their identity through their practice in the classroom setting. Most importantly, Neupane et al. (2022) presented a systematic review of English language teacher's identity studies from 2004 to 2022, focusing on existing themes and methodology employed in identity-related empirical research studies. The study reveals that narrative inquiry was considered a successful method for studying teachers' identity-related issues. On the other hand, my study focuses on the route of identity construction and the process teachers pass through to shape the identity of English language teachers through in the existing studies. To my knowledge, none of the studies reviewed empirical research studies relating to English language teachers' professional

identity construction process. On this ground, this review paper highlights 10 peer-reviewed journals from 2018 to 2023. The main thrust of this research review is to scan the major findings of the very recent research on identity construction and to produce a thick understanding of the route of professional identity construction. Moreover, it also unfolds the component involved in identity construction. In addition, this review article aims to provide information for those who involve in designing teachers training and teacher's education program, teacher educator and teaching professional. Purpose of this review is to give insight to those teachers who feel slow with a belief, one cannot construct identity in teaching profession. I believe this study, encourages English language teachers to grow in the profession to shape a new identity in the professional space. The study further pinpoints gap in the English language teacher's identity related literature comparing and contrasting findings and methodology and provides guideline for the future research. Along with this broad area the study aims to answer following questions;

- a. What are the major findings of the studies conducted on teachers' identity construction?
- b. What is the major route and process teachers follow to shape their identity in the professional space?
- c. What sort of methods are employed to explore EFL teachers' identity?

Understanding Teachers' Professional Identity

Teaching is the prime concern of a teacher. Teachers' professional identity therefore relates to teacher's professional pedagogical practice. English language in Nepal is not the native and the first language in Nepal. However, English in Nepal is taught and learnt as a subject. Notably, the English language is the means of instruction in the majority of educational institutions in Nepal. Therefore, developing an identity as an English language professional in Nepal demands a change in perspective and practice both at the individual and institutional levels. Language teaching and constructing

identities in Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Language (TESOL) situations encounters a number of components, as presented in (De Costa & Norton, 2017). Decosta and Norton present the Identity component as meso level, macro level, and micro level, that is, ideology, institutional practice, and societal practice, respectively. Neupane (2023) also confirms teachers' professional identity construction is largely impacted by three components: meso level, macro level and micro level. Similarly, Teachers' professional identity, according to the available literature is defined based on their roles, self-observation, the way they integrate multiple roles, their personality, and the way they adopt their roles as a teacher. All these components come under their self-image (Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014).

Methodology

This study followed a systematic review process suggested by Gu et al. (2016). The systematic review is the process of identifying, evaluating and interpreting data available in particular areas (Gu et al., 2016). Besides, to study teachers' identities based on the available literature, I used two databases: Eric and Google Scholar. Scanning Eric with the keyword English language teachers' identity construction, produced 1,103 results. In order to minimize the result, I limited it to since 2018, then it produced 334 results. Out of 334 results, I included only ten peer reviewed articles in this study. I read abstract of the study and selected only ten papers which are related to English language teachers' professional identity. For the inclusion and exclusion of the articles, I adopted Gu et al., (2016) guidance planning a systematic review. Only peer reviewed paper written in English language and published within 2018- 2023. This study also considered the agenda of the study one of the crucial criteria of the study. Studies with unrelated agendas were excluded after screening abstracts. This study included studies that employed any methodology if other criteria are matching.

During analysis phase, research findings of each study are used as the data of my review. The research findings are carefully studied and synthesized. For example, a study conducted on critical incident in pre-service teachers identity construction reveals critical

incidents which an individual encounters during the teachers learning phase, both inside and outside the classroom setting impacts on teachers' perception and belief about the profession and ultimately it hits on individual identity formation (Kılıç & Cinkara, 2020).

All the identity categories are further compared and contrasted. Besides, the iterative study of the finding section brought two themes which are discussed in detail.

Finding

Iterative study of 10 shortlisted peer-reviewed articles on English language teachers' professional identity construction has brought two major themes: contextually situated identity and the process involved in identity construction. This section will discuss two identity themes and follow a methodological review.

Contextually Situated English Language Teachers' Identity

English language teachers' identity construction is influenced by the context. Context refers to both the internal and external contexts that impact how we work. Out of 10 peer-reviewed empirical studies, nine study findings showed contextual factors play a prominent role in teachers' identity construction. Among them, Fahd Aljuhaish et al. (2020) highlight a positive teaching environment where teachers are supported by colleagues, intuitions, and the community helping them to advance their careers which ultimately became a way to shape new identity in the professional space. Encouraging and supporting contexts encourage teachers to grow themselves professionally and energize them to explore innovative practices. Such supportive teaching and learning contexts help teachers to construct new identities. Another study conducted in a Chinese setting by Mansouri (2021) highlights EFL teachers positioning in different contexts, such as familiar context, intuitional context, past and present experiences are interwoven with teachers' identity construction. Mansouri further states that contextual aspects and teachers' prior and present experiences impact their practice and ideology. EFL teachers therefore situate themselves in the local context with the mindset that teaching English does not necessarily mean adopting western culture. EFL teachers' identity in such setting is likely to be guided by religious ideology. In addition; teachers working in the private institutions in the Saudi context reveal that they have to cope with conflict

while constructing their identity. Social practices and values demand the teacher to behave as per their existing ideology, and being part of society, the teacher cannot deny the fact (Mansouri, 2021). Available studies reveal that teaching context which are guided by religious ideology prevent teachers to work autonomously.

Teachers' identity is a multimodal aspect which encompasses how to be, act and understand (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Beauchamp and Thomas further add that the identity of the teacher is complicated in nature where changes are impacted by peripheral factors that influence identity construction. Similarly, Wang et al. (2021) studied identity in relation to emotional factor. Wang's study revealed that cruel and inhuman way of assigning work in the institutional context negatively impacted teachers' emotion and their perception about the profession. Participants in Wang's study was mentally tortured due to the heavy workload, standardized curriculum, strict institutional norms, deep-rooted educational context that pressurized teachers to follow the status quo (traditional practiced systems and policies)—in addition, teaching learning context forces novice teacher to follow strict rules. The scenario and reflection reveal that the teaching context is unfavorable to encourage novice teachers to continue teaching as a career. Another case study also confirms that teachers' identity construction is entangled with their self-image, learning environment, and practice (Salinas & Ayala, 2018). The study result highlights favorable teaching environment and interaction with colleagues shape professional identity (Salinas & Ayala, 2018). Eslamdoost et al. (2020) in their study sustains the similar findings; although teacher participant's prior understanding was negative, it changes through the interaction with the context. Teachers who are in the profession didn't join the profession as a career might. However, positive working environment changed their mind and started seeing the future in the profession.

Moreover, going beyond the positive environment, EFL teachers' identity construction was influenced by critical incidents that teachers encountered during their pre-service learning phase. Kılıç and Cinkara (2020) study on pre-service teachers' experience of identity construction discovered that teachers in pre-service stage not only learnt to be a teacher but also developed their way to EFL teachers' identity. The critical incidents that

teachers encountered during the pre-service stage revealed these incidents changed aspiring teachers' perspectives about teaching profession.

Teachers' identity related study findings conducted from 2018 to 2022 revealed that teachers' identity formation was mingled with the contextual factor. Teachers' interaction with the context helped them to shape their identity in their professional space. If teachers negotiate the situation, they encounter, they survive in the profession, or else they choose another career.

EFL Teachers' Identity Construction Process

Teaching in my experience is a profession that requires continuous updates. English is a global language, in this regard, English language teachers need to be informed with the global trends and innovations in English language teaching and learning. Teachers' continuous engagement and updates assist teachers in changing their pedagogy. When a teacher updates his/her pedagogy, teachers happen to carve out new identities. Researchers these days are exploring to dig the process involved in identity construction. Yang (2021) explored the early career university teacher's identity construction process in his study. According to Yang, teacher's identity construction involves three stages: surviving, striving, and thriving. Yang, in his study, highlighted that teachers in the beginning phase were enthusiastic and offered themselves as companion among the students. In the mid-career, they presented as motivators. Finally, in the late career of their professional journey they performed the role of life coach. Thus, Yang's study demonstrates that teachers' identity construction is guided by their enthusiasm, frustration, and tiredness. Teachers' emotion drives them to be a knowledge transmitter and learner-centered innovative teachers. Another study Wang et al. (2021) conducted in a Chinese setting reveals EFL teachers' stories of negotiation with several constraints in the first five-year teaching phase. The study reveals striking facts about identity construction where teachers negotiated with strict institutional rules, unsupportive colleagues, standardized curriculum, and unsupportive social context in their identity construction process. Wang's study reveals that the identity formation of pre-service teachers in Chinese university settings is not favorable. The process of EFL teachers' identity

formation was full of constraints.

Other studies on identity depict identity formation process starting from the university, where a teacher enrolls in language teacher education. Dilekand Altas (2022) studied on EFL teachers' identity and autonomy that revealed that language expertise acquired during teachers learning process led teachers to be agentic in their teaching career. The studies reported that teacher's educational achievements during the learning process and choice of professional career begins right from their pre-service stage. Teachers' achievement helps them to present themselves as an expert in their professional career, that eventually manifests on their identity formation process. Delek and Altas further pinpoint teacher's motivation, attitudes, and pleasure they find in the profession fosters a level of professional autonomy. Hence, teachers who are highly motivated having positive attitudes are likely to involve in professional development activities. Therefore, identity formation process starts from the pre-service stage to the whole career, working as a teacher.

On the other hand, Aboud (2020) conducted a study in an Iranian setting which documented that teachers' identity construction process starts from traditional teaching to techno-integrated modernized teaching. About restates that teachers at the beginning were less confident to integrate technology, gradually they overcome fear and gain confidence. Aboud's study findings provided strong evidence that teaching with technology enhances learning which brings self-satisfaction on the part of teachers. The study concluded that teachers teaching with the traditional method might lose control over students due to the one-way monotonous lecture method. To address such situations, the use of technology might help the teacher to make the teaching and learning process more interesting. Prensky (2007) addressed learners in the 21st century are digital natives since they play and use technology right from their childhood. Therefore, using technology and e-learning is the strong bridge to identity construction process. Study by Meihami and Esfandiari (2021) also supports use of technology in EFL teaching through Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) program during teachers' preparation phase provided insight into the use of CALL-in language classes.

The study findings suggested that the idea collected during the learning phase helped to adopt CALL in L2 pedagogy which enhance language learning and shapes teachers' new identity, possibly the teachers' who employed digital technology are identified as techno-friendly teachers. Therefore, both studies advocate that teacher being informed to the technology during the learning phase helps in the EFL teaching process. Engaging in the learning process and employing ideas innovatively according to Wenger (1998), termed engagement and imagination, the components of identity formation process. Similarly, a recent study conducted by Deuja (2024) on teachers' identity and digital literacy reveals that teachers' can construct a new identity through the use of digital literacy skills in their professional space.

Another identity study, Fahd Aljuhaishet al. (2020) documented that teacher's engagement with the positive environment impacts identity construction. Teachers sharing with supportive colleague students and interacting with the parent's paves the way to identity construction. In this regard, teachers' engagement with the positive environment is the process of identity construction. To conclude identity construction is a dynamic and multifaceted process which happens to encounter number of stages and components. Thus, the identity formation process is continuous and abided by the immediate situation, which starts from the teachers learning stage and continues till we remain in the profession.

Methodology Review

Table 1 Methodology Adopted for the Identity Studies

SN	Study ID	Participants	Data Collection Method	Data Analysis
1	Aboud, 2020	6 EFL teachers	Semi-structured interview 2 weeks' data collection	Content analysis

2	Wang, 2021	First five year 5 EFL teachers teaching in uniuniversity	In depth narrative reflection. 20 months data arrangement	Narrative data analysis
3	Fahd Aljuhaish et al., 20	3 EFL teachers teaching in Saudi school.	Qualitative case study Interview and observation	Wenger's (1998) communities of practice framework to analyze and Interpret the data.
4	Kılıç & Cinkara, 2020	49 pre-service EFL teachers	Critical incident form developed by researcher and FGD	An inductive quantitative
5	Eslamdoost et al., 2020	2 EFL teachers	Narrative reflection through online and social media, telegram is mostly used	Positioning analysis was utilized to analyze their reflections
6	Mansouri, 2021	2 Iranian teacher who started their career in private language institute	Semi structure interview, narrative writing for six months 'Restoring cycle' Narrative inquiry	Bemberg (1997) three level positioning theory
7	Yang et al., 2021	3 working university teachers	Qualitative interview	Inductive-deductive content analysis
8	Dilek & Altas, 2022	250 EFL teachers	Survey method	Descriptive statistics
9	Babanoglu, & Agcam , 2019	96 pre-service teachers	Likert-type questionnaire with 17 statements	SPSS 15.0

10	Meihami & Esfandiari, 2021	2 EFL teachers	Interaction orientated narrative	Dialogic and performance analysis
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Table 1 summarizes the identity of the author along with the methodology adopted for data collection, the number of participants, and strategies adopted for data analysis for meaning-making. peer reviewed articles on teachers’ professional identity revealed that out of 10 research studies seven adopted qualitative research design. Whereas only three (Babanogulu&Agacam, 2019; Dilek &Altas, 2022; Kılıç &Cinkara, 2020) studies adopted quantitative research design. AlthoughKılıç and Cinkara (2020) preferred quantitative research design, theyusednarrative information employing semi-structured interviews and made it a mixed-methods research.

The majority of the studiespaid attention to the pre-service and novice teachers’ identity construction (Babanoglu&Agcam, 2020; Dilek &Altas, 2022; Kılıç &Cinkara, 2020; Mansouri, 2021; Wang et al. 2021). Pre-service teachers are given priority in the research studies since the pre-service stage is believed as the foundation stage of teachers’ professional career. Notably, almost all the studies used interviews as a data collection tool. However, the majority of the studies used semi-structured interviews. Similarly, Wang et al. (2021) implemented an in-depth narrative interview spending twenty months long time span to collect thick information for his study. Likewise, Meihamiand Esfandiari (2021) adopted interaction interaction-orientated narrative in order to grabthick information. Existing studies conducted on identity construction used narrative methods for information collection. However, the strategies they used were slightly different for their study purposes. In contrast, only one research studyDilek andAltas (2022) adopted a survey design with 250 participantsto explore the relationship between teachers’ professional identity and autonomy.

Meanwhile, the researcher emphasized pre-service and novice teachers’ identity construction. Only two out of 10 (Aboud, 2020; Fahd Aljuhaish et al., 2020) found interest in salaried teachers’ identity construction. The studies presented report, the

majority of the study was conducted in face-to-face mode, whereas the study by Eslamdoost et al. (2020) study completely adopted online mode for the data collection. Understanding the contextual factor, the researcher rightly adopted social media to collect data.

The review study explored another noteworthy point that all the studies adopted different strategies to analyze and interpret the data collected using similar tools. Quantitative researchers have chosen SPSS 15.0 and descriptive statistics, whereas qualitative researchers implemented content analysis to dialogic performance analysis. The variety adopted in the study indicates the subjective dimension employed in meaning-making.

Discussion

Review result reveals that EFL teachers' identity researches are gaining wider scope since there are number of peer-reviewed articles found in the short time span. The studies confirm that contextual factors impact teachers' identity. Context incorporates teaching learning context during pre-service stage, institutional context, policy related context, context influencing self-perception, and digitally situated context. This review study summarizes the whole review in the following diagram. The first diagram presents contextually situated EFL teachers' identity and another visualizes the process of identity formation which starts from pre-service learning phase.

Figure 1. Contextual Factors Affecting Teacher' Identity

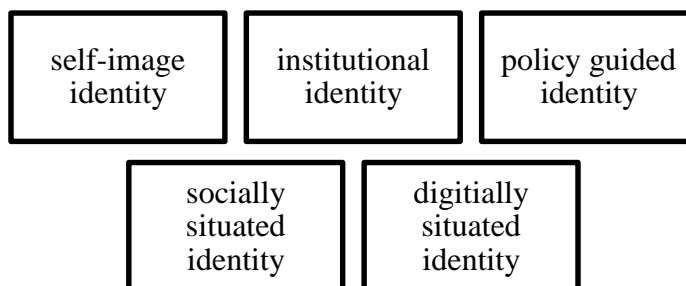


Figure 1, highlights the tentative framework of contextual factors affecting teachers' identity. As per the figure, teachers' identity construction commences from teachers' perception, how a teacher perceives his/her profession. Meanwhile, an individual's perception is shaped by the immediate context. A person's career as a

teacher starts from the pre-service stage. How would-be teachers are guided by the teacher educator, what sort of environment they encountered during their practicum and learning process as prospective teachers shapes their perception. Kılıç and Cinkara (2020) in their study documented that significant incidents which are experienced during the learning process tune a teacher's self-image about the profession. Studies also highlighted that teachers' integration of technology is context-bound. If the institution is digitally equipped, teachers find the context suitable for digital incorporation in EFL learning. Studies also highlight that interaction with colleagues and stakeholders plays a significant role in identity construction. Hence, a teacher's professional identity construction is circumstantial.

Available literature highlights that teaching is not only the profession, it is a social service. Teaching professionals interact with the whole society. Therefore, societal support matters on teachers' identity construction. If the social setting is sympathetic for the productive interaction, it helps teachers work creatively which ultimately helps their identity formation process. In the meantime, a teaching context which facilitates the enthusiastic teachers to use digital tools and resources in English language learning would be a milestone for teacher identity formation. Likewise, policy and the institutional setting restrict teachers. If both elements are supportive, teachers bring innovative and self-guided practice in language teaching. If both the policy and institutional obstacles the teacher with standardized norms and values, such factors demotivate the teachers. Another teaching context in an Iranian setting Eslamdoost et al. (2020) exposed an extreme teaching context where teachers are imposed with several rules, teachers in the context are treated like robots. Study observations from different settings (Iranian, Saudi, Chinese) show that identity construction is largely contextual. Teachers' aspiration to engage in professional learning would become a robust means to construct teachers' professional identity if context-related factors energize English language teachers in all the settings beyond religious and geographical limitations.

EFL Teachers' Identity Formation Process

Figure 2 Teachers Identity Formation Process

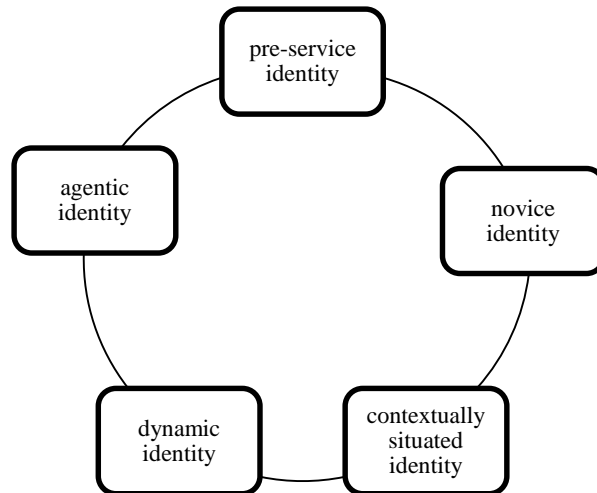


Figure 2 is the summary of the findings of the studies I reviewed. As per the figure the tentative process involved in EFL teachers' identity formation process. The figure depicts that identity formation starts with teachers learning as a scholar at the university level. The figure reveals that teachers pass through the different stages in course of identity formation during their professional career. Teachers' identity formation process starts with the pre-service stage, moves to novice stage. Teachers during the novice stage face context related issues. If the context as per the literature is favorable it helps the teachers to form the identity, if not it hinders their identity formation process. The studies show when a teacher enters the profession, as a novice teacher, they happen to encounter lots of constraints, institutional norms, and structured social constraints, as documented by Wang et al. (2021) in the Chinese university setting. Early teachers' careers were structured by a standardized system. Besides, they might face emotional conflict; how to teach? Am I doing well? All these questions trouble the teacher. However, gradual change in teaching strategies leads the teacher to a role model teacher. Markedly, all teachers during their teaching careers face contextual-related issues. The teaching profession is largely connected with human science. In this regard, facing issues related to values and norms are natural for human society. Taking such issues as a

part of professional growth, EFL teachers can survive in the profession.

Conclusion

This review paper entitled EFL teachers identity construction from 2018 to 2022 offers two main themes: Contextually situated EFL teachers' identity and identity construction process. The paper presents the study highlight of 10 peer-reviewed articles relating EFL teachers' professional identity construction. Regarding the first research question, what are the major findings of the identity-related studies? Analyzing the paper selected, the findings are presented in two major themes; contextually situated teachers' identity and the process of identity formation. Therefore, the finding of the reviewed paper presented similar findings relating to contextual factors. Second question: what is the process of EFL teachers' identity formation? Regarding the process, this study explores five major processes as per the second figure. The process as per the figure is pre-service stage, novice stage, contextually situated stage, dynamic stage and agentic stage. Finally, the last question of the study is to review the methods adopted by the researches. In addition, the paper also paid attention to the tools implemented by the research works for the information collection. The methodological analysis suggested that studies on identity are heavily influenced by qualitative research design and interviews as a tool for data collection. However, a few qualitative researchers also adopted surveys, and question answers as data collection tools. The finding of the paper reveals teachers negotiate with several facets; context related, intuition related and emotion related facets to construct identity.

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