

Iranian EFL Teachers' Professional Identity in Online Teaching

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Abstract

It has been proven that teachers' professional identity has an impact on their ability to exercise agency, autonomy, and career advancement. Understanding the impact of the teaching setting on the development of teachers' professional identities is critical for assisting them in dealing with the problems. This article explores the impact of the changed educational context on the professional identity of three EFL experienced teachers' narratives of their experiences as they faced the transition from face-to-face to online teaching. According to the findings, all individuals underwent professional identity reconstructions in their daily routines and knowledge/skills, but their teaching beliefs underwent various transitions. Moreover, changes in routines and knowledge/skills may not result in belief negotiation, and current beliefs may impede or encourage their adjustments to the changes.

Keywords: Professional identity, Experienced teachers, Online teaching, Face-to-face teaching

INTRODUCTION

Speaking English is considered a requirement for being a world citizen in the twenty-first century, as it is in Iran. Because of Iranian's increased involvement in economic, social, cultural, and political activities with other countries, as well as technological advancements, English has become indispensable in this country. As a result, the number of EFL teachers has risen dramatically, and English language teachers have been allocated a variety of positions as English teaching and learning has gained traction. Furthermore, EFL teachers have a heavy workload because they are in charge of implementing teaching approaches, methods, and classroom activities; in other words, teachers are taking a more active role in achieving the desired outcomes of the new curriculum, which makes knowing EFL teachers' TPI important. according to this theory "Teachers' perceptions of their own skilled identity affect their effectiveness and professional development, furthermore as their ability and disposition to influence instructional changes and

incorporate innovations in their own teaching practice” (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000, p.750).

To summarize, it is critical to gain a deep understanding of EFL teachers' identities and discover who they are, and it can be said that the field of teacher identity necessitates extensive research in order to obtain useful results for effective teacher training and a thorough definition of teacher identity.

Teaching methods and techniques have been developed with the integration of information technology in recent years, with the advancement of information and communications technology (ICT), which is thought to be the trend for future education. It's worth noting that during the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, all Iranian institutions used online teaching along with ICT technologies to extend the class beyond traditional face-to-face (f2f) classrooms. Teachers may, however, struggle to implement online teaching, not only because of the differences in fundamental interactions from face-to-face classes, but also because of a lack of knowledge and skills preparation (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020; Baran, 2011). Furthermore, because communication is so important in foreign language teaching, EFL teachers may notice significant changes in teaching methods, class organization, teacher-student communications, and even the broader educational context, all of which could affect their previous professional identity (Jonker, März, & Voogt, 2018; Hargreaves, 2005).

Given the abrupt shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to entirely online instruction, it is critical to investigate how the new educational context influences teachers' professional identity development. The purpose of this study was to see how experienced instructors' professional identities were impacted when they transitioned from traditional face-to-face teaching to online teaching.

The key research question was: what impacts do online teaching have on participants' professional identities in terms of daily routines, knowledge/skills, and beliefs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers' professional identity became a distinct research subject in the 1990s (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). For years, different emphases were made in the researches, resulting in conflicting definitions and explanations. Brooke (1994), Farrell (2010), and Jonker (2018) argue that professional identity is however lecturers outline themselves as professionals within the classroom. Most studies in the field of development utilize a sociocultural approach (e.g. Lasky, 2005; Eslamdoost, King, & Tajeddin, 2020; Gao, Tao, & Gong, 2018). As a result of interactions with personal and societal settings, professional identity can be understood as a dynamic construct (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Scotland, 2014). This research uses a dynamic notion to track changes in the creation of teachers' professional identities.

Teachers' active engagement and adaptations to a variety of elements and contexts contribute to the continuing professional identity development process (Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014). According to Laat, Lally, Lipponen, and Simons (2007), teachers in digital and traditional face-to-face teaching contexts react differently. As a result, for the vast

majority of teachers who have acclimated to traditional teaching, online education poses challenges to their professional identity in terms of various teaching contexts and experiences. In the ICT context, everyday routines, knowledge/skills, and beliefs are all important aspects that drive identity construction (Jonker, 2018). Lesson preparation, lesson enactment, and teacher-student interactions are examples of daily routines; knowledge/skills refer to pedagogical, technological, organizational, and subject knowledge and skills; beliefs refer to instructors' perceptions (Jonker, 2018).

Teachers' professional identities are constantly constructed and reconstructed throughout time as a result of their interpretation and reinterpretation of interactions with internal and environmental circumstances (Eslamdoost, King, & Tajeddin, 2020). According to Lasky (2005), this construction process evolves through the course of a person's career, therefore it may be unchangeable or fixed at particular points (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Long & Huang, 2017). Rodriguez and McKay (2010) propose that novice teachers, who are typically classified as novices with fewer than two years of teaching experience (Gatbonton, 2008), differ from experienced teachers who have worked for more than five years in terms of knowledge, abilities, and beliefs. As a result, novice and experienced instructors may have distinct difficulties in constructing their professional identities. Furthermore, because most rookie instructors are subjected to reality shocks as a result of varied and unpredictable authentic educational contexts in the early stages of their careers (Xu, 2013), it is difficult to isolate the impact of the online teaching environment on their identity building. Experienced teachers, on the other hand, have a relatively stable professional identity based on long-term f2f teaching experiences, which may give them a better understanding of how their professional identity changed as they adapted to new pedagogy, technology-based tools, and modes of communication in an online teaching context.

Wang (2020) looks on the limits that have arisen in the professional identity development of first-year English language teachers at five Chinese institutions. Narrative Inquiry was the method used in the research. The debate focuses on their newly negotiated and renegotiated identity as a result of specific issues in addition to the general issues, and how these processes have reshaped their viewpoint in unexpected ways.

Parsi and Ashraf (2020) wanted to see if there was a link between critical thinking, professional identity, and teaching experience among EFL teachers. A multiple regression analysis revealed that EFL teachers' teaching experience was a better predictor of their professional identity than their educational background. As a result of the study's findings, EFL policymakers and teachers are advised to implement strategies to promote EFL teachers' critical thinking and professional identity. The study's findings are described in greater depth in the paper.

Hashemi, Karimi, and Mofidi (2021) presented a study which is an attempt to develop and validate a questionnaire on EFL teacher professional identity. A unique mixture of individual teacher qualities within the disciplinary knowledge, norms, and practices of the field, they described EFL teacher professional identity.

Meihami (2021) looks into the role of PEPAs in the development of EFL teachers' professional identities. A PEPA program was implemented, with two EFL teachers taking part. The teachers were introduced to the academic and practical parts of PEPAs over the course of a year. Teachers attempted to use PEPAs to help students grasp riddles in their classes. EFL teachers engage in a never-ending research process to understand and solve their teaching puzzles by employing PEPAs.

METHOD

This study was conducted in a local university located in Mashhad, Iran. Because of the COVID-19 outbreak, this university has been offering online classes from the beginning of the semester. Three experienced teachers 3 participants were chosen after considering characteristics such as age, years of teaching, degree, and professional title.

Table 1. Basic Information of the Participants

Teacher	Gender	Age	Years of teaching	Education background	Prior online teaching experience
A	Male	54	20	Ph.D. in TEFL	No
B	Male	42	11	Ph.D. in TEFL	No
C	Female	38	6	Ph.D. in Linguistics	No

The three participants were investigated using a qualitative methodology, with a particular focus on their perceptions of the three dimensions of professional identity creation. Narrative inquiry, which is commonly employed in identity research (Tsui, 2007, Long & Huang, 2017), uses storytelling and retelling to disclose people's self-perception and self-identification in external contexts (Schultz & Ravitch, 2013). After 16 weeks of online teaching practices, each participant had an interview guided by open-ended questions that lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. Before and after the online training, participants were asked to recall and retell their experiences. This allowed them to compare the contrasting scenarios in face-to-face and online teaching, making it easier for them to focus on the potential changes they would face in terms of professional identity development. The narratives of the participants were recorded, transcribed, and classified into face-to-face and online teaching environments. To begin, transcripts were read multiple times to gain a general grasp of each participant's experiences. Second, the transcripts were subjected to open-coding to obtain a list of analytic codes that was constantly relabeled and amended.

The codes were then investigated using axial coding, which focused on the three components that influenced professional identity construction. Finally, selective coding was used to compare and contrast the similarities and differences in the identity creation processes and outcomes of the three participants.

RESULTS

Daily Routines Adaptions

It's worth noting that everyone referred to the first 1-2 weeks as their "transition time" to online instruction. During this period, participant A and C used live broadcast to imitate

a face-to-face classroom experience, for which they prepared the same lesson content, materials, and activities as they would for a face-to-face class. After trying a few lessons, they both began to reflect on their methods, citing the absence of genuine communication as the most serious issue. Participant B tried recorded classes in the first weeks, so he had to build the material and procedures in a different way than face-to-face classes, using digital tools on a mobile learning platform. Because he only received feedback from students' video watching length time, the discussion board, and assignments, he found it difficult to discern students' true performances. He thought he was "losing control of the class" due to the lack of audio-visual interactions.

All participants used live broadcast for future lesson enactment, which they reflected as a means to impart knowledge as face-to-face lessons. They couldn't cover as much material as they could in face-to-face classes because they had to pause to evaluate students' knowledge and wait for responses.

Knowledge/Skills Adaptions

The technology, pedagogy, content, and organization aspects of knowledge/skills adapted to online instruction were investigated. Participant A and C only perceived the necessity to obtain technology knowledge and abilities in the first 1-2 weeks of online teaching because they thought the distinctions between online and face-to-face education were merely a matter of form. Failures to recognize students' understanding later led them to discover that technology expertise is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective online education. In order to support learning activities, participant C believes that ICT tools must be used in conjunction with certain pedagogy. As a result, they acknowledged that they needed to learn more. Because of their long-standing mastery of College English, both participant A and C stated that their content knowledge was little affected throughout the online teaching process. In terms of organizational knowledge, participant C argued that she needed to adapt different planning and managing abilities based on the educational activities she was conducting in order to ensure that students were approaching the objective in the most effective way possible. Participant B, unlike the others, highlighted organization and pedagogy as the skills with which he battled the most throughout the semester. Furthermore, he encountered little challenges in applying her technology and subject skills.

Beliefs

As they migrated from face-to-face to online teaching, the three participants reported differing views on teaching jobs and online teaching. Before and after online training, participant A did not notice any changes in his opinions. He believed it was the teacher's obligation to make every effort to make instruction workable even under difficult circumstances, thus he was ready to adapt to new circumstances right away.

Participant B stated that his attitude toward teaching has been influenced by his online teaching experiences. He finished her time as a manager in face-to-face classes. He believed that the majority of students struggled to stay focused throughout the lessons. He attempted to totally control students' learning and put himself at the center of the

lessons by presenting material information, providing assistance, and assessing students' reactions.

In both face-to-face and online classes, participant C believed that professors were primarily knowledge transmitters. She claimed that online and face-to-face education were essentially the same, and that the key to adapting to online teaching was having clear teaching objectives and using resources effectively. Online instruction no longer necessitated simple knowledge transmission from teachers, thanks to increasingly comprehensive electronic teaching tools. Instead of a single language input from the subject teacher and other video resources provide several language inputs, which helps students avoid boredom and increase their self-learning capacity.

DISCUSSION

It can be shown from three participants' narratives of their professional identity adaptations to online teaching that they underwent various adjustments in daily routines, knowledge/skills, and beliefs. Participant A did not see any changes in his teaching philosophy. With his innate belief in telecommunications, he enthusiastically accepted online instruction as he went through the contextual transformation. He immediately transferred the same pedagogical, content, and organizational knowledge he had earned in face-to-face teaching to online teaching in the early weeks. He established a distinct pedagogy as well as technology skills after discovering the limitations of online education, which was consistent with his personal conviction in lifelong learning. Daily routines and knowledge/skills adaptations were made to participant an online teaching over the entire practice, but his teacher-centered teaching belief remained untouched. His preconceived notions about teaching hampered new paths, therefore he focused all of her efforts on replicating her previous face-to-face teaching setting.

Participant B, who largely conducted teacher-centered face-to-face lessons, faced professional identity changes in terms of daily routines, expertise, and values. He struggled with the feeling of "losing control" from the start, which made it difficult for him to reconcile everyday routines with his pre-existing conviction. He progressed from tightly regulating to aiding students' development as he learned specialized pedagogical and organizational abilities to cope with the new teaching situation. He also noticed shifts in his role as a manager in face-to-face teaching to a mixture of organizer and designer in online teaching, which he attributed to a shift in his teaching philosophy. It is worth noting that he had the same goal in every situation, which was to make learning easier for students. As a result, he was flexible in adapting knowledge and skills by merging technology tools, and she was receptive to new teaching routines. Furthermore, he saw online teaching as a catalyst for finding new approaches to improve teaching quality. Because of the contradictions between reality and teaching belief, participant B had to adapt his daily routines and knowledge to the new situation, and his successful implementation resulted in believe adaptations.

Due to her previous face-to-face teaching experiences, participant B has shown confidence in her ability to implement online teaching from the start. Despite the fact that she considered teaching as a job of knowledge transfer, she altered the source of

knowledge and the method of delivery, making resource provision a primary work in online education. On a practical level, it appeared that her professional identity had been converted to the online environment so that she could resolve issues that arose throughout the practices. However, her professional identity remained unaffected on a conceptual level, as she continued to perceive teaching as a teacher-centered career. Furthermore, her hardly transformed professional identity was due to her unfavorable feelings about the impact of online teaching.

In this study, EFL teachers underwent more or less professional identity reconstruction in terms of daily routines and knowledge/skills, while their teaching beliefs underwent distinct transitions. All of the teachers had similar professional identity features as reflective practitioners and learners, which prompted them to explore and develop on a regular basis. Nonetheless, because participant A's primary purpose was to make online teaching viable, he made transitory adjustments that did not result in the reconstruction of his professional identity. For participant B, using student-centered pedagogical and organizational skills resulted in considerable teaching effects, as well as professional identity reconstruction. Participant C looked for ways to make knowledge transmission more flexible and efficient in the online teaching environment, which led her to create a new identity as a resource provider but did not change her core belief in teacher-centered curriculum.

CONCLUSION

This article examines how experienced EFL teachers' opinions of their professional identity alter as they move from a face-to-face to an online teaching environment. Professional identity is a dynamic and complex process that evolves over time as daily routines, knowledge/skills, and beliefs change. On the one hand, instructors' adaptations to the online environment are aided or hampered by their inner beliefs and confidence, which have developed through time as a result of their long-term teaching experiences. Their opinions, on the other hand, are influenced by their activities and perceptions of the impacts of actual online teaching activities. Although the epidemic prompted this online teaching, it should not be viewed as only a temporary replacement for face-to-face instruction, but rather as an opportunity for teachers to reflect on and uncover possible breakthroughs in earlier instruction. Teachers must adapt numerous professional identities in light of educational developments, given the rise of teaching with ICT.

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