
English Teacher Identity in EFL Higher Education: Exploring Perspective from Critical Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Teacher identity has a significant impact on teachers' decisions on teaching processes, teaching and learning material, teacher-student relationships, and professional development. However, in the EFL context, despite the important role of the ideal teacher profile in promoting effective language learning, many teachers still experience unclear professional identity experience which results in inconsistencies in teaching standards and limited professional presence. This study explores teacher identity through critical reflections written by university students in the Phonetics and Phonology course, which was facilitated through a critical language awareness approach. The critical reflections were analyzed using an identity-construction framework to examine how teacher identity is expressed through thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions, and how these are related to the social practice (teaching and learning English as foreign language). In this context, it also creates the teacher or lecturer to be the agent of change. Thus, to deepen insights into teachers identity construction, future research should employ interviews to explore more how teachers reinforce their professional roles in supporting successful language learning.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Identity refers to the way individuals or groups represent themselves in communication through language and interaction, involving various social aspects that are consistent yet dynamic (Van Dijk, 2015). Identity and education are two concepts that are closely related, as education does not only transfer knowledge, but also shapes students' personal, social, cultural, and civic identities. The educational process shapes how individuals understand themselves, play a role in society, and respond to a changing social environment (Schachter & Rich, 2011). In an educational context, identity formed through interaction between students and the educational environment, including values, social roles, and life goals developed through learning experiences (Kaplan & Flum, 2012). Identity development is also increasingly influenced by linguistics and cultural diversity, and this is happened in the era of globalization and high social mobility which also described in the concept of translanguaging where students' use of multiple linguistic sources reflects and shapes their identity (Clots-Figueras & Masella, 2013). Education can also be used in strategic ways by nations to inculcate national identities, as seen in the

bilingual education policy in Catalonia that influenced students' ethnic identification and political attitudes (Clots-Figueras & Masella, 2013). Meanwhile, Nero (2006) points out the importance of acknowledging language variation in education to avoid marginalizing the identity of immigrant students. Even environmentally oriented education, as highlighted by (Payne, 2000), is closely related to identity as ecological experiences and self-reflection can shape the way individuals see their role in the world. More broadly, Reimers (2006) emphasizes that the development of a global identity through education is essential to prepare a generation that is capable of facing cross-cultural challenges and sustaining a common life.

In the terms of education, teachers also have an important role in shaping their own identity. It is because teacher identity is a social and dynamic construct that is formed through teachers' interactions with the professional environment, personal experiences, and ongoing reflection on teaching practice. The teacher identity also keeps evolving in the scope and role that the teacher plays in the professional change (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Rushton et al., 2023). In addition, developing teacher identity is also very important as it affects teachers' beliefs, decision-making and pedagogical actions in the classroom (Walkington, 2005). It is not only about beliefs, decision-making, and actions, but emotions also play the important role to form this identity, as described by (Zembylas, 2003), who used a poststructural approach to emphasize how emotions and power shape each other in teachers' professional identity.

Teacher identity is not only formed from internal factors such as personal values and beliefs, but is also strongly influenced by external contexts, including institutional expectations, social norms, and classroom dynamics (Cheung et al., 2014; Richards, 2006; Rushton et al., 2023). Teachers play a variety of roles in a changing educational environment, including those of educators, leaders, facilitators, and lifelong learners. The formation of this identity must be specifically taken into account through critical reflection, teamwork, and professional learning (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Walkington, 2005). The teacher who has a strong sense of their professional identity are able to survive with the institutional constraints and have the ability to positively impact educational practice.

In the realm of language teaching, teacher identity distinctive a new dimension emerges, called language teacher identity (LTI). LTI includes the identity as an educator and as a language user and model to operate in complex multilingual and multicultural contexts (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Varghese et al., 2005; Yazan, 2018b). In the terms of practicing this LTI, the teachers face some challenges, such as linguistic legitimacy, socio-cultural positioning, and the relationship between first language identity and the target language they teach (Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Sang, 2022). Therefore, this concept of teacher identity needs to be contextualized in LTI studies to reflect the distinctive pedagogical realities of language teachers, including how they navigate their identities in an environment of ideology and power (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Varghese et al., 2005).

In examining the understanding of language teacher identity, it will also discuss the context of a good language teacher. Barkhuizen and Mendieta (2020) emphasize that calling someone a “good language teacher” is a complex and social construction of identity, where teachers are not only recognized through teaching performance, but also through collective recognition of their effectiveness and contribution in various professional roles. This identity is shaped and constantly changing through social interactions, professional experiences, emotions, moral values, and the broader institutional and ideological context. The teacher identity also includes cognitive, emotional, historical and ideological dimensions, which all affect how teachers view themselves and are recognized by others as “good” in the context of language teaching (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020; Tajeddin & Griffiths, 2020). Therefore, identity as a good language teacher is the result of a reflective and dialogical process that is dynamic between personal beliefs, pedagogical practices and social expectations (Morton, 2018).

Although identity studies are generally related to educational and social frameworks, in fact, in the field of EFL teaching in higher education, the identity of teachers is still as important

for lecturers to have. As mentioned by Ismail and Elhami (2025) in their article, EFL lecturers have a dual role, not only teaching language, but also playing an important role in building their identity as professional role models and cultural bridge builders. Thus, related to the teacher's identity, especially a language teacher, has in fact been applied by the lecturer in his teaching activities in the classroom. Through the results of critical reflection of the students that are used as data from this study, they explain the identity of their lecturers who are professional, and able to provide learning activities that are innovative and creative. Most of them also explained the identity of the lecturer who emerged as a non-native English teacher through the use of English that she used during teaching activities in the classroom. Although in the context of this discussion a figure of the identity of an English teacher has emerged, in fact English teaching still needs an ideal teacher figure as a learning standard who is able to represent his non-native English identity (Breckenridge, 2010; Hersi, 2018; Medgyes, 2001; Yazan, 2018a; Zhang, 2016). Not only that, there are still many teachers who ignore this teaching principle, and are more concerned with showing the achievement of learning objectives for cognitive aspects only. In fact, teaching and learning includes affective and psychomotor aspects as well. Therefore, this study aims to explore what the identity of the lecturer is like in representing the integration between scientific competence and the art of teaching. Thus, this research is useful to always support the awareness of English language teachers with EFL or non-native contexts that their identity is very instrumental in achieving learning goals.

II. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative framework as a methodological foundation, which later serves to explore in depth the critical reflections that have been prepared by English Education students at one of the state universities in Indonesia. These students have attended Phonetics and Phonology lectures and have finished giving their critical reflections to the lecturer. To ensure ethical compliance, students were informed about the purpose of the study and given consent forms so that their critical reflections could be used as research data. In its implementation, this critical reflection is prepared by the lecturer by adjusting to the semester learning plan which has a target to foster students' critical thinking skills after participating in lecture activities.

With this customized critical reflection implementation, the lecturer instructs the students to write it down based on the three Whats data (what, then what, and now what) that forms the foundation for building students' awareness of their function as part of the curriculum (Rolfe, 2014). "What?" relates to how students are supported to feel the difference between responses, the effects of actual things happening with themselves in the faced environment. "So what", serves to explore the "What?" elements that have been revealed in the previous stage so that they can serve to be transformed into meaningful and harmonized information patterns. The last trigger is "Now What?" This is the part that decides how to act on the best alternative and reapply it to other situations of EFL teacher candidates and tutor documentation of the teaching and learning process (lesson plans and video documentation). Based on the three points raised by the students, this research reveals how students perceive the lecturer based on the identity of a teacher in the classroom during lectures. This research was conducted in Google Classroom involving 136 first-year students from East Priangan, Central Java, West Java, Banten province, Sumatra, and Southeast Asia (Thailand).

Writing critical reflection is an activity to collect data based on the students' experiences related to what they have done in learning activities and also based on their desire to become an English teacher in the future who has the identity of a good teacher. Therefore, with the amount of data to be obtained and analyzed, the critical reflection data was analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with stages including data introduction, examining the data to bring up potential themes, determining potential themes, grouping data, interpreting data, then describing data so

as to answer the research question of what the identity of the lecturer is like in representing the integration between scientific competence and the art of teaching. For data interpretation about identity, van Dijk (van Dijk, 2015) conceptual framework is used to explore the context.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Identity as a Professional Awareness

Professional awareness identity is a key element in the formation and development of teachers as reflective professionals. Teachers' professional identity is not a persistent entity, but a construction that continues to develop through social interactions, teaching experiences, and personal reflection on educational practices. Beijaard et al. (2004) emphasized that teachers' professional identity is formed from the dynamic relationship between social roles, personal values, and reflection on teaching experiences, as well as recognition from the social and professional environment. Geursen et al. (2010) strengthened this view by pointing out that teachers' reflective awareness of their practices not only deepens their understanding of the profession, but also reshapes their identity as educators. This awareness encourages teachers to actively evaluate and adjust their attitudes, values and actions in the changing context of education.

Furthermore, professional identity awareness is important in the face of complex educational policy demands and public expectations. Sachs (2001) highlights the existence of two dominant discourses-democratic and managerial professionalism-that simultaneously shape teachers' identities, requiring teachers to be aware of their positions and values in their professional practice. Izadinia (2013) also underlines that self-awareness as a future teacher is strongly influenced by the educational context, previous experiences, and involvement in reflective learning communities. Thus, teacher professional awareness identity is an important foundation in building teachers who are reflective, responsible and adaptive to social change and education policy.

“When I entered the classroom, I was very happy because the lecturer was very kind, gorgeous, energetic, and inclusive.” – Excerpt 5, Intan

The first impression made by the lecturer when starting the lecture is considered positive by students. Students perceive that the lecturer is a lecturer who has a figure and personality that amazes them. According to students, the fascination when learning in the course is that the lecturer shows a teaching style that is fun and easy to understand in an atmosphere of maximum enthusiasm.

“I feel very grateful and happy to be able to learn Phonetics and Phonology material because my lecturer teaches with great enthusiasm and also cheerfully besides the way she teaches, the way of delivery is also quickly understood.” – Excerpt 7, Nazwan

In addition, the data also stated that students stated that the pleasant teaching style was also supported by effective media involvement so that they considered it very easy for them to understand course content that was considered difficult to be easy. This lecturer skill is what students believe has its own attraction in lectures.

“The lecturer is teaching with funny way and clarity which mean that’s an effective tool in education. Her ability making difficult thing into an enjoyable thing has made me believe that studying should be fun and interesting.” – Excerpt 2, Alis

Another thing revealed from the data is the language skills of lecturers that amaze students. The lecturers demonstrated a standard of language skills that the students thought set an example for them to become good English teachers. The students were inspired by their lecturers' English language skills in presenting the English taught, so this motivated them to be confident.

“I was amazed by my lecturer language skills, basically at that time I was very amazed. My heart felt moved to become a great teacher like my lecturer.” – Excerpt 3, Alisya

“I loved it when my lecturer spoke with her iconic accent because it boosted my confidence to speak English.” – Excerpt 4, Fuja

“The lecturer is very patient because she lets us explore our own thoughts. She gave us chances to ask a question freely, she also somehow made me inspired.” – Excerpt 6, Nataniel

Another thing that makes the classroom atmosphere create a positive mood is that the lecturer's ability to present a comfortable atmosphere for learning, without having to lose the spirit of professionalism. There is humor and anecdotes that enliven the classroom atmosphere full of meaningful impressions that generate and maintain an atmosphere conducive to learning (Huang et al., 2019). Lecturers also maintain enthusiasm in the classroom so as to ultimately encourage students to remain consistently focused on learning and have the determination to become future English teachers who are able to become inspiring and professional role models (Burić & Moè, 2020; Mohammaditabar et al., 2020).

“The lecturer’s ability to make the whole class feel comfortable while being so professional with relevant anecdotes and humor created a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom.” – Excerpt 1, Farel

“The enthusiasm of the lecturer is helpful in this course as it builds students’ enthusiasm for learning.” – Excerpt 8, Ai Linawati

“If I become a teacher in the future I can teach well like my lecturer because being a language teacher we must be able to pronounce correctly and carefully.” – Excerpt 9, Ikhsan

Through the data taken from the students' critical reflection, it can actually prove that there is a professional identity that is raised by the lecturer in teaching and learning activities in the classroom. As shown in some of the excerpts given by the students, they explained that the lecturer has a professional character that was able to give a good impression during teaching. With this professional identity that she had, she was able to make students become more enjoyable while learning because the atmosphere given was always positive and fun. This is reinforced by the excerpt given by Intan and Nazwan who explained that in learning activities, lecturers bring out an identity that is *“very kind, gorgeous, energetic, and inclusive”* as well as

“*great enthusiasm and also cheerfully,*” which Ai Linawati also added the impact of this professional identity in building students' enthusiasm for learning. Thus, it can be concluded that this professional identity can bring a lot of positive energy to the students in the classroom.

Not only that, the lecturer also displays a professional identity that is shown through the ability to speak English so that she is able to emphasize her identity as an English teacher (Andriani, 2022; Efendi & Zulhendra, 2024; Tintingon et al., 2023). This explanation is reinforced by the excerpts from Alisya and Fuja, which are “*I was amazed by my lecturer's language skills*” and “*I loved it when my lecturer spoke with her iconic accent*”. This provides clear evidence that the lecturer is able to demonstrate her professional identity as a teacher who is also able to use English in teaching activities very well. As a result, this identity becomes an inspiration for students who will become language teachers, as Ikhsan said in his excerpt, “*If I become a teacher in the future I can teach well like my lecturer.*” Thus, this professional identity becomes very important to be owned by every teacher in order to provide a good impression, fun and can inspire other future teachers.

Identity as an Innovation

Teacher innovation identity is a construction of teachers' professional identity that reflects not only how teachers view themselves as educators, but also how they navigate and respond to the demands of innovation in a changing educational context (Abdullah et al., 2022; Andriani, Agis & Abdullah, 2017; Andriani, 2014, 2015; Hasibuan & Ichsanda Rahman Hz, 2024; Panchenko, 2021). This identity is formed through the interaction between personal values, teaching experiences, and institutional expectations, and is influenced by the social and cultural factors in which teachers practice. Konstantinidis and Badia (2019) explain that teachers who actively engage in educational innovation could develop a sub-identity as inquirer teachers, who use reflective and data-driven approaches to continuously improve their teaching practices. Lewyckj (2021) has shown that there is a relationship between six dimensions of teachers' professional identity, it includes self-image, self-efficacy, and task perception-with innovative work behavior in schools. At the higher education level, Shcherbakova et al. (2020) also highlighted the importance of teachers' psychological competence and capacity to adapt to risk and uncertainty in modern innovation spaces as part of professional identity development that supports innovative success. Overall, teacher innovation identity is an important foundation for teachers' success in initiating and implementing meaningful pedagogical change.

Lecturers who show their seriousness in professionalism will be felt by students who interact with the lecturer. The interaction that is built impresses the student audience so that it creates an appreciation of learning that affects student involvement. The intended professionalism is that in teaching lecturers carefully use a wide variety of learning method options to ensure that whatever student activities in the classroom must always be connected to relevant media consistently. This will ultimately realize the achievement of learning objectives.

“I appreciated how my lecturer tried to make the lessons engaging with practical exercises and interactive discussions, which helped me stay somewhat connected even on black eyes.” – **Excerpt 10, Aushil**

“The lecturer uses various methods, such as direct practice and relevant examples, which help us grasp complex concepts more easily.” – **Excerpt 11, Arimbi**

“The lecturer utilized audio recordings to clarify complex concepts, enhancing our understanding.” – **Excerpt 12, Erna**

“The lecturer also usually use media in the form of videos and together practice what material was learned, which helped me to understand more the material.” – Excerpt 13, Tita

Students have their own impression to assess lecturers who interact in Phonetics and Phonology courses are lecturers who according to them are uptodate with science. It is very necessary to believe that education must keep up with the times, education must adapt to who the audience is facing, and education must have the value of flexibility so that everyone can follow the flow of change for the better of themselves through an adequate and structured process with a support system that supports.

“The lecture always connected the course material with trends or events that were relatable to us.” – Excerpt 14, Depilawati

“There were so many things that I could take and of course it was very fun, such as interactive class activities, my lecturer often asked for our opinions or understanding of a material and that made us quite challenged.” – Excerpt 15, Najwa

The excerpts from the students above clearly show that lecturers have applied identity as an innovation in their teaching activities. As shown by the excerpts of Aushil, Arimbi, Erna, and Tita who explained that the lecturer applied various learning methods, be it in form of exercises, discussions, or even by using other relevant learning media. Not only that, this identity also arises from how the lecturer can relate the material to a trend that is relevant to students. Therefore, in the end, students can feel the impact of identity through the innovations that are presented to make it easier for them to understand the learning material.

In addition, Najwa also showed the existence of identity through innovation carried out by the lecturer through an interactive activity. In her excerpt, she explained that in this interactive activity, the teacher provides an opportunity for students to express their opinions or understanding related to the material that has been given. Through these activities, there will be a challenging feeling that will eventually lead to a critical thinking process by the students.

Identity as a Creativity

The teacher creativity identity emphasizes that creativity is not just an additional element in teaching, but an essential part of the teacher's professional identity. Craft (1997) stated that in the uncertain context of postmodernism, teachers are required to be flexible and creative, in which creativity is conceptualized as a result of the teacher's personal engagement with the role of educator and is a reflection of a self-orientation that is transcendent and aware of choice. Meanwhile, Greenwood (2009) showed how the creative process, particularly in the dramatic arts, enables teachers and students to actively shape and negotiate their identities, emphasizing that creativity must be practiced consciously and reflectively to generate meaningful understandings of identity in social and cultural contexts. Complementing these two approaches, Khany and Malekzadeh (2015) empirically confirmed that there is a significant relationship between EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers' professional identity, professional vitality, and their creativity style in the classroom, suggesting that teachers who have a strong sense of professional identity tend to be more creative in developing meaningful and contextualized learning methods. All three agree that teachers' creativity identity is not static, but the result of a reflective, social and contextual process that continues to evolve with teaching

experiences and professional interactions (Craft, 1997; Greenwood, 2009; Khany & Malekzadeh, 2015).

“The way the lecturer presented the material, opened discussions, and her own teaching style was interesting so that I didn't feel bored, instead, I felt energized.” – **Excerpt 16, Intan**

“The fun and creative learning methods, like analyzing songs and using PRAAT, made the course enjoyable and easy to follow.” – **Excerpt 17, Nabila**

“One of the interesting experiences I had in this course was that we were divided into groups and given instructions to analyze the sound of several songs determined by the lecturer.” – **Excerpt 18, Ahmad**

The excerpts from the students show the existence of an identity through the creativity that the lecturer presents in classroom teaching activities. As expressed by Intan in her excerpt which explains that the lecturer uses her own teaching style which is able to make her more energized. Not only that, Nabila and Ahmad also explained that the lecturer applied fun and creative learning methods through several activities that involved the use of songs and PRAAT software that could make learning activities easier to follow.

“I had an inspiration from my lecturer about a teaching strategy or methods. I will try to apply the “Three whats” methods to increase my students critical thinking in my future class.” – **Excerpt 19, Nirmala**

“I aspire to teach students using engaging tools like infographics and videos to make learning enjoyable and exciting.” – **Excerpt 20, Dea**

With the existence of identity through the creativity created by the lecturer, in fact, it is able to inspire students. This is certainly a good starting process because these students will later become teachers and must be able to bring out their identity. As stated by Nirmala and Dea who mentioned that they were inspired to be able to apply the same teaching and learning model as what the lecturer had implemented, be it through the use of “*Three Whats*” in critical reflection or in the use of fun learning tools.

Identity as a Technological Adaptation

In today's digital era, the professional identity of teacher educators undergoes a significant transformation along with the demand for technology-based pedagogical innovation. Avidov-Ungar and Forkosh-Baruch (2018) emphasize that the application of information and communication technology (ICT) is not only a learning tool, but also shapes the construction of teacher educators' professional identity. Through three modes of existence, that are being (professional beliefs), doing (innovative practice), and having (institutional support), Avidov-Ungar and Forkosh-Baruch (2018) explored how technology integration could encourages teachers to reflect on who they are as professionals, what they do in the context of innovative learning, and how the institutional environment supports the process.

“The lecturer also used supporting YouTube videos, and tried to demonstrate the correct pronunciation to students with patience and clear explanations.” – **Excerpt 21, Zeta**

“Our lecturer used videos and power point slides to explain the concepts, which made everything easier to understand.” **Excerpt 22, Laela**

In teaching and learning activities, as the students have explained, the lecturer has been able to apply identity through technological adaptation. This technological adaptation is carried out by lecturers by applying online media, such as YouTube, as with supporting tools, such as PowerPoint, Padlet, and PRAAT, which are relevant to the learning material. They argue that the existence of identity through technological adaptation really helps them to understand and get a better explanation of the material. Not only that, one of them also wants to apply one of the learning tools in his future teaching activities. Thus, some of these data findings show that the lecturer is also successful in presenting the identity as a teacher through technological adaptation.

“I have practiced with new things like the last one I learned using PRAAT.” – Excerpt 23, Arifaa

“PRAAT, for the final topic of this semester, is interesting because I’m glad to learn about this software.” Excerpt 24, Khalisya

“The tasks are engaging, involving tools like Padlet for creating infographics and PRAAT software to develop practical skills.” – Excerpt 25, Dea

“Using PRAAT, a software that analyzes pronunciation through sound frequency, significantly deepened my understanding of the intricate complexities in speech production.” – Excerpt 26, Naufal

“If I become an English teacher in the future, I will also introduce PRAAT to my students.” – Excerpt 27, Tita

In the end, the integration between the identity of professional awareness, innovation, creativity, and continuous technological adaptation supports the realization of the ideal language teacher. However, there will be challenges from curriculum changes that are considered to create an unstable situation of change for the consistency of a teacher or lecturer in developing competencies and skills according to their expertise. It is because the change in curriculum that takes place quickly and is less coordinated has created instability for teachers in developing their professional competencies and skills consistently, both in terms of infrastructure readiness, implementation gaps, and demands to reconstruct professional identity (Husaini, 2018; Jiang & Zhang, 2021; Manik et al., 2024).

IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

At this time, education has a very important role in the formation of an individual's overall identity. In order to form a good individual identity, the context of education must also be supported by the presence of teachers who have a strong identity as good teachers or lecturers. This must certainly be a concern, because teachers will later become agents of change, so it is very necessary to have a clear, strong and trusted identity. Not only that, in the ever-changing educational environment, teachers also have demands to be an educator, a leader, and even a facilitator. Thus, it is very important for teachers or lecturer to be able to have an identity that can influence themselves and others so that they can be well recognized in all aspects of education.

This study highlights that teacher identity as reflected in students' critical reflections is implemented through four interrelated dimensions, namely professional awareness, innovation, creativity, and technological adaptation. These four dimensions are demonstrated by the

lecturers' ability to show their strong professional awareness through good language skills, and also how lecturers can carry out teaching activities that are full of innovation, creativity, and the use of technology, which are able to create an interactive and supportive learning environment. Not only that, these dimensions are also recognized by students as factors that contribute to their involvement in classroom learning activities, help increase their motivation to learn, and inspire them regarding their identity as future teachers. Finally, the findings of this study also show that teacher identity has a measurable impact on the attitudes, confidence, and learning experiences of students in EFL classrooms.

To deepen this understanding, future research should go beyond student reflections by using semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and longitudinal studies to capture how teacher identity develops and influences learning over time. This approach will provide richer insights into how EFL instructors negotiate their professional roles within the educational context.

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