

Exploring the Professional Identity of the Iranian English Teachers: The Case of English Institutes of Iranshahr

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Abstract—In the past few decades, professional identity has emerged as a separate research area in the field of teaching and learning language. Research has shown that many contextual factors are involved in teachers' perception about their personal identities and the formation of this personality trait. It has been found that professional identity is one of the factors that impacts the curriculum, teachers' beliefs and behavior, and students' learning. Accordingly, the present study attempted to investigate the professional identity of the language teachers in Iranshahr city, Iran. The relationship between gender and work experience of teachers and their professional identity was also explored to determine any significant relationship. 79 language teachers of private language institutes in Iranshahr city participated in this study. To collect the data, a questionnaire developed by Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000) was used. The questionnaire was piloted and its reliability and internal consistency was verified. Beijaard et al. (2000) identified three aspects of professional identity: teachers as subject matter experts, teachers as didactical experts, and teachers as pedagogical experts. The results showed that teachers identify themselves mostly as didactical experts, then as pedagogical experts, and least as subject matter experts. There was no significant relationship between the gender and experience of the participants and the three sub-scales of professional identity, except for a significant relationship between subject matter expert and experience of the teachers.

Index Terms—professional identity, language teachers, teaching English

I. INTRODUCTION

Both teaching and learning are socially embedded in our emotional experience (Hargreaves, 1998). Teachers' identity is an individual factor which has its roots in social and contextual factors and has been subject of many studies so far. This concept emerged in educational research in 1990s and soon became one of the central topics in the field of education. Gradually in foreign language teaching, concerns about identity increased as well. It seems that understanding how emotions guide teachers' professional practices and decisions, and how it affects their professional identity depends on extending our understanding of the self-image that teachers have about themselves in relation to their profession (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004). As a result, research about how social and individual perspectives relates to teachers' practice seems to be necessary.

There has been much debate on the concept of identity, however, what everybody appears to agree on is that identity is not an attribute one possesses, but rather a relational phenomenon (Beijaard et al., 2004) which teachers themselves adopt or is assigned to them (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). Lasky (2005) defines professional identity as how teachers define their professional roles. Professional identity is the professional self-concept each person perceives about themselves based on their experiences, motives, beliefs, and values (Ibarra, 1999). Teachers are continuously in a process of interpreting and reinterpreting their professional identities according to their experiences (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Ashforth and Tomiuk (2000) argue that professional identity involves a combination of personal, professional, and situational factors; they believe that in every situation one of these components may take over and become dominant. Most importantly, professional identity determines teachers' beliefs, the reason they chose teaching, and how they function in the teaching environment (Kompf, Bond & Boak, 1996).

Professional identity is a dynamic construct (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & Johnson, 2005; Barrett, 2008) which impacts teachers' behaviors in classroom (Abednia, 2012), their teaching effectiveness (Ashforth & Tomiuk, 2000), and their sense of well-being. It also affects their professional development and helps them to cope with educational changes, bring innovation in the classroom and be creative in their teaching practice (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000). Teachers interpret the curriculum and textbooks, choose the style of their teaching, and gain an understanding of students' learning based on their professional identities (Caihong, 2011).

Since teachers' professional identity experiences are the core of their teaching practice and their commitment as professionals (Dillabough, 1999; Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005; Burn, 2007), exploration of teachers' professional identity has great implications for curriculum reform, classroom teaching, and student learning (Caihong, 2011), Hamachek, (1999) states that teachers teach students what they know consciously and teach who they are unconsciously.

On the other hand, many factors contribute to teachers' perception of their professional identity. Schooling, training, work environment, years of work experience, etc., have been found to contribute to formation of teachers' professional identity (Kompf, Bond & Boak, 1996). Urzu'a and Va 'squez (2008) believe that teachers' professional identity manifests itself through their social actions. Teaching context, teaching experience, and the biography of the teacher are highly influencing factors on professional identity of the teachers (Beijaard et al., 2000). Therefore studies on professional identity are integrated into research on language teaching and learning. All in all, due to the role of professional identity in the process of teaching and variety of factors contributing to it, attempting to gain a clearer sense of it in different contexts of language teaching seems logical.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers has ventured to explore the professional identity in recent years (e.g., Duff & Uchida, 1997; Beijaard et al., 2000, Beijaard et al., 2004, Liu, 2009; Tsui, 2007; Clarke, 2008), but despite the impact that this concept has on the teaching process, professional identity has been a poorly defined concept. A close look at the literature reveals that professional identity is a difficult concept to define, since various aspects are involved in exploration of the professional identity. Beauchamp and Thomas (2013) explored the core and peripheral aspects of professional identity using the six-domain O*NET® Content Model. They highlighted the role of teachers' characteristics, occupational and worker requirements, experience requirements, occupation-specific information, and workforce characteristics.

Professional identity has been studied in relation with varied individual and contextual factors such as the gender and power relationships (Dillabough, 1999; Lortie, 1975). Dillabough (1999), for example, challenged the concept of teachers' professional identity from a feminist perspective and demonstrated that gender and history of male dominance is a core element in the formation of professional identity. The relationship between professional identity and social structure was also investigated in construction of identity (e.g., Coldron & Smith, 1999; Reynolds, 1996); the results indicated that the development of a teacher's professional identity depends on various social factors. Concerning the relation between work environment and professional identity, in a research, Reynolds (1996) pointed out that workplace greatly influences teachers' identity and suggested that the work environment can be very persuasive, demanding, and often restrictive. Professional identity was found to be also related to life experiences (Knowles, 1992; Huberman, 1993; Sugrue, 1997) and process of identity formation (Tsui, 2007). Regarding the relationship between the work experience of teachers and their professional identity, a few studies investigated the professional identity of novice teachers (Turbill & Kervin, 2007; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2010). Turbill and Kervin (2007) conducted a study on how first year pre-service teachers develop a professional identity; and Timoštšuk and Ugaste (2010) investigated how beginner teachers understand and describe their professional identities, and how teacher training can affect formation of professional identity.

Beijaard et al. (2000) identified factors influencing professional identity and described how different aspects of professional identity are perceived by teachers. In another study, Beijaard et al. (2004) reviewed the studies which investigated teachers' characteristics of professional identity. They argued that in future studies relevant concepts such as "self", "identity", role of context, and perspectives other than cognitive need to be considered in designing research.

Inspired by a research by Bromme (1991), Beijaard et al. (2000) suggested three sub-identities for professional identity: teachers as subject matter experts, teachers as pedagogical experts, and teachers as didactical experts. They explained that teachers as subject matter experts should be able to process the knowledge they have in order to consciously change the programs, develop tasks, and diagnose students' misconceptions adequately; in didactical field teachers deal with guiding and influencing students' thinking so they can gradually take control of their own learning process and become autonomous; and in pedagogical expert moral and ethical dimensions are covered.

In the context of Iran, there has been some research about the concept of professional identity. For example, Abednia (2012) explored the professional identity of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers in Iran. In his study he observed that a major shift happened in the professional identity of the teachers through taking a critical education course.

A. *Significance of the Study*

As Timoštšuk and Ugaste (2010) put it learning about teaching is the heart of teacher education. Understanding the teachers and trying to gain a clear sense of their identity is the key to understanding the process of teaching and learning (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). Moreover, investigating the contextual aspects of learning facilitates an in-depth approach to this complex process. Teaching is not only a matter of applying decontextualized set of skills and knowledge; it is a dynamic process reliant on the teachers' individual characteristics and contextual factors. Many contextual factors play a role in the formation of professional identity; therefore it seems necessary to explore how teachers perceive their professional identity in different contexts. Since this area of teaching language has been an understudied area in the context of Iran, studies which attempt to explore the professional identity of teachers of language institutes in the context of Iran seem essential. Furthermore, exploring the relationship between such factors as work experience and gender and professional identities of the teachers become a prominent part of research too.

B. *Research Questions*

This study attempted to investigate the aspects of the professional identity of the English teachers in Iranshahr, Iran. Recently, teachers; teaching context, their experiences, and biographies has been put in the spotlight in research of language teaching and learning. These factors are assumed to interact with each other and influence teachers' beliefs, actions, and behavior (Beijaard, et al., 2000). Accordingly, in the present research, years of teachers' work experience and their gender were considered as influential elements that might affect teachers' perception about their professional identity. Therefore, the current study posed the following questions to discover whether there was a significant relationship between professional identity and contextual factors such as years of work experience and gender.

1. Do teachers' of the language institutes in Iranshahr see themselves more as subject matter experts, didactical experts, or pragmatic experts?
2. Is there a significant relationship between teachers' years of work experience and their professional identity in the language institutes in Iranshahr?
3. Is there a significant relationship between teachers' gender and their professional identity in the language institutes in Iranshahr?

III. METHOD

The present study aimed to explore the teachers' professional identity in relation to their work experience and gender. Professional identity as the main variable had three sub-scales which were investigated individually. The sub-scales included subject matter field, pedagogical field, and didactical field.

A. Participants

The participants of the study were 79 English teachers (37 were male, 42 were female) who taught English in the private language institutes in Iranshahr, Iran. Their age ranged from 22 to 39 with the mean of 28.3 years old. Most of them had B.A and M.A degrees in English (45 B.A degree, 34 M.A degree). They had between 2 to 12 years of teaching experience (mean, 5.7 years). All of the teachers taught intermediate and advanced classes at their institutes. The respondents were selected from 8 different language institutes in the city.

B. Instruments

For the purpose of this study, items used in the study of Beijaard et al. (2000) were designed into a questionnaire and were applied to collect the data. The questionnaire consisted of four parts, the first part consisted of questions about the background variables, questions about teachers' gender, age, and years of experience. The second part encompassed the subject matter field (4 items) these questions explored the extent to which teachers put their teaching on the basis of subject matter knowledge and skills. The third part covered didactical field (6 items), in this part teachers were asked to what extent their teaching was based on knowledge and skills regarding the planning, execution, and evaluation of teaching and learning processes. And the last part was pragmatic expert (4 items), in this part teachers described how much they base their teaching on knowledge and skills to support students' social, emotional, and moral development. Since the questions were translated in Persian, the reliability of the questionnaire needed to be re-evaluated. In order to determine the reliability, the questionnaire was piloted and the Cronbach's alpha test of reliability was run on a sample size of 15 teachers. The obtained Cronbach's alpha was 0.804, which indicates a high level of internal consistency for our questionnaire.

C. Procedures

The present study was carried out in Iranshahr City. Iranshahr is a city in Sistan and Baluchestan Province. For the convenience of the respondents and accuracy of the responses the questionnaire was translated into Persian. Then, it was piloted and its reliability was estimated. To fill the questionnaires, English teachers were approached in language institutes randomly and were asked to fill the questionnaires. Filling the questionnaires was not compulsory and the questionnaires were returned on the spot. 5 questionnaires were discarded in the data analysis due to insufficient data. The data were analyzed by the SPSS statistic software version 20.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. In the first step mean and standard deviation were calculated for every item by assigning values to the choices (1. strongly disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Not sure, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly agree). The teachers had to express to what extent they agreed with each item. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1.
MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF THE ITEMS OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY QUESTIONNAIRE

Variant	Mean	Std. Deviation
Subject matter field		
1. It is necessary to keep pace with new developments.	3.475	.29861
2. It is necessary for students to have a knowledgeable teacher.	4.350	.52126
3. Teachers cannot permit themselves to make mistakes.	3.175	.44694
4. Subject matter is not the only basis for a teacher.	4.150	.30861
Didactical field		
5. It is important to keep into account the students' level.	4.575	.23599
6. There are many ways to teach and learn the same thing.	4.650	.17957
7. Students' ways and strategies of learning is important.	4.350	.47957
8. Planning and organization are the basis for teaching.	4.075	.52858
9. To motivate and interest students by changing learning activities is important.	4.225	.46753
10. It is Necessary to be alert by listening and observation.	4.125	.24798
Pedagogical field		
11. It important to be positive, open, respectful etc. when approaching students.	4.550	.23851
12. Good/safe classroom climate is a necessary condition for teaching.	4.475	.24001
13. Being alert for signs of students/ showing involvement is important.	3.850	.18835
14. Students' situation/well-being is starting point for the lessons.	3.292	.57748

Table 1 presents the data regarding the three sub-scales of professional identity. A closer look at the data reveals that all the items have a high mean. In the subject matter field, the highest agreement was on the statement 'students need to have a knowledgeable teacher' (mean=4.35). However, the lowest agreement was on item 3: "Teachers cannot permit themselves to make mistakes" (mean=3.175). This may indicate that teachers confirm that they should be knowledgeable but they do not need to have perfect knowledge in order to be successful in teaching.

In the didactical field, all the items have a mean higher than 4. Teachers realize that it is important to take into account the students' level (mean= 4.575) or consider the strategies that they use in their teaching (mean= 4.350). They are also aware that there are various ways to teach a single concept (mean= 4.650). These items point out those teachers try to have learner centric classes and choose teaching strategies according to students' needs. They also pay attention to students motivation (mean= 4.225), and listening and observation of the class (mean= 4.125).

Responses in the pedagogical field also showed high agreement of the teachers to the items. They reported that it is necessary to be positive and open in class, respect students (mean= 4.550), and make the class environment safe to facilitate the learning of the students (mean= 4.475).

In the next part, to determine how teachers see themselves as teachers, the sum of mean and standard deviation for the three scales were calculated. Table 2 contains the results for the mean, standard deviation, and the Cronbach's alpha for the internal consistency of each part.

TABLE 2.
CRONBACH'S ALPHA, MEAN, AND STANDARD DEVIATION FOR THREE SCALES OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Variant	C alpha	Mean	Std. Deviation
Subject matter field	.72	3.78	1.80526
Didactical field	.69	4.33	2.34247
Pedagogical field	.78	4.04	2.00240

As the above table indicates internal consistency of the scales is within the acceptable range. Furthermore, as the mean of each scale shows, teachers see themselves more as didactical (mean= 4.33) and then as pedagogical experts (mean= 4.04) and less as a subject matter expert.

In order to assess the supposed relationships between the professional identity and gender of teachers, male and female teachers were compared to each other in terms of the sub-scales of professional identity. The results can be seen in Table 3.

TABLE 3.
COMPARISON OF MALE AND FEMALE TEACHERS IN TERMS OF THREE SUB-SCALES OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

gender		Subject matter field	Didactical field	Pedagogical field
Male	Mean	3.70	4.28	3.86
	Std. Deviation	1.90201	1.86689	1.59963
Female	Mean	3.86	4.38	4.22
	Std. Deviation	1.83533	2.84492	2.41704

With respect to gender, males consider themselves to be subject matter and didactical experts more than females, while females see themselves as pedagogical expert more than males. Perhaps this is an indicator that female teacher put more emphasis on the affective, moral, and ethical domain of language teaching and learning, and care more about learners' feelings and creating a safe and positive learning environment.

To examine whether there was a significant difference in the perception of teachers with respect to their gender and work experience, chi-square test was applied. Table 4 encompasses the results regarding the chi-square analysis of experience and gender.

TABLE 4.
THE RESULTS OF CHI-SQUARE ANALYSIS REGARDING GENDER AND EXPERIENCE

		Subject matter field	Didactical field	Pedagogical field
Gender	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	.821	.134	.935
	Value	3.630	12.394	1.825
Experience	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	.022	.548	.117
	Value	111.972	93.686	86.476

The results in Table 4 revealed that there was only a significant relationship between experience and subject matter field ($p < .05$). No other significant relationship was observed between the variables. Gender of the teachers had no significant relationship with any of sub-scales of their perceived professional identity. And there was no significant relationship between the work experience and didactical and pedagogical field.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study was carried out in the Iranshahr city of Iran to explore the professional identity of the language teachers in the private language institutes. The first question of the study was to investigate the teachers' knowledge of their professional identity, and how they perceive themselves as teachers. It appears that teachers identify themselves more as didactical experts. This means that teachers focus on planning and execution of proper teaching, as well as evaluating both teaching and learning processes. After that teachers consider themselves as pedagogical experts, hence, they pay attention to students' social, emotional, and moral development as an integrated element in learning process. Teachers were found to identify themselves as subject matter experts less than pedagogical and didactical experts. However it should be noted that this does not mean that they have a low opinion regarding the importance of the subject matter field. Although, the obtained results for the subject matter field were lower than pedagogical and didactical fields, they realized the importance of subject matter field as a part of their professional identity. Teachers has simply realized that although the knowledge of subject matter is significant, being a didactical and pedagogical expert helps students more in the process of their learning.

Professional identity was also studied with respect to gender and experience in order to find that if there was a significant relationship between these variants and professional identity. So, to answer the second and third question that the study posed, female teachers tended to be pedagogical experts more than males, while male teachers were more didactical and subject matter experts. It can be concluded that female teachers are more attentive to moral and affective domain of teaching. The analysis of the data revealed only a significant relationship between subject matter expert and years of teachers experience as a language teacher. This may indicate that although experience of the teachers does not have any significant relationship with didactical and pedagogical field, it contributes to the subject matter field. No other significant relationship was detected between professional identity and gender and experience of the teachers.

This study was carried out in the hope that in the long run, similar studies help to cast light on the issue of professional identity of language teachers. It is suggested that for further research researchers try to investigate factors that influence this personality trait, and carry out similar studies in different contexts to compare the results with the present study and explore the role of contextual factors. Due to limitations of the study and role of contextual factors, it is expected that studies on the same subject elsewhere show similar or different results.

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