

Professional identity development process of a second career EFL teacher: A case study

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Abstract: This study focuses on an individual transitioning from a non-teaching to a teaching career in Vietnam. The participant's narrative serves as a conduit for investigating the factors that come into play during this career transition and how they influence the development of teacher identity throughout the transitional stages. The study relies on an adapted theoretical framework that encompasses four key sub-components of professional identity, specifically focusing on roles, values, job motivation, and satisfaction. Additionally, it introduces an analytical framework that delineates four influential stages of identity development, facilitating the examination of how adjustments occur within these aspects. To collect data for this study, a methodology involving semi-structured interviews was employed. The researcher utilizes the life-history method to analyze the case. The findings of this research indicate that the development of teacher identity is an ongoing and dynamic process, influenced by lived experiences, deliberate reflection and personal life motto. This research also hopes to show significant potential for providing valuable insights that can improve teacher professional development programs.

Keywords: EFL, teacher identity, second-career teachers

INTRODUCTION

Research on teacher professional identity has predominantly concentrated on individuals embarking on their initial careers as language teachers, regrettably sidelining the emerging cohort of second career teachers (SCT). The surging demand for English in non-English speaking nations has spurred the rapid growth of SCTs (Tsung, 2011). Hence, there is an imperative need for a more in-depth examination of this vital reservoir of teaching expertise.

Existing research has extensively delved into the multifaceted stages of teacher identity development among conventional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educators. Scholarly discourse suggests that the construction of professional identity reaches its culmination after several years of teaching experience, during which educators gain deeper insights into their roles as professionals, scholars, researchers, and intellectuals (Van Lankveld et al., 2016).

However, while much attention has been devoted to understanding the identity formation process among traditional EFL teachers, there remains a notable gap in literature concerning second career teachers. These individuals, although following a trajectory similar to that of first career teachers, embark on their teaching journey after transitioning from non-teaching professions. Consequently, there arises a pressing need for research that scrutinizes the initial stages of teacher identity formation specifically within the context of second career educators.

The aim of this study is to investigate the development of professional identity among second career EFL teachers. The focus is on an EFL teacher who initially obtained a bachelor's degree in TESOL but did not pursue EFL teaching in her early career. Later in her mid-career, she decided to try teaching and eventually became fully committed to the profession.

Adapted Theoretical Framework

This research employed Nguyen's (2021) theoretical framework as its foundation, with adaptations that led to the exclusion of job commitment, self-efficacy, and reflection. Each exclusion is justified for the following reasons: First, reflection, while undoubtedly influential, is often considered a factor that may indirectly impact other elements rather than directly shaping teacher identity. Thus, its exclusion allows for a more direct exploration of core identity components. Second, the omission of job commitment and self-efficacy serves to maintain a clear and focused examination of the foundational elements of teacher identity, as these aspects frequently intertwine with roles, values, job motivation, and job satisfaction within the context of teacher identity development (Day & Kington, 2008). By narrowing the scope to roles, values, job motivation, and job satisfaction, this analysis aims to provide a concentrated and insightful exploration of the central elements in the complex construct of teacher identity.

The four constructs of teacher identity

Teacher identity is a multifaceted construct that encompasses various dimensions, including roles, values, job satisfaction, and job motivation. Roles and identity are intertwined yet distinct facets within professional development. Roles are a central component of teacher identity, as they define the responsibilities and functions that teachers assume in their professional lives (Beijaard, 1997). These roles include not only the tangible responsibilities and functions that teachers undertake but also the evolving nature of their interactions with students, colleagues, and the educational environment. Values, in conjunction with roles and competence, serve as the bedrock upon which professional commitment is built, influencing not only how teachers navigate the complexities of their roles but also how they make ethical judgments and decisions in the ever-evolving educational landscape (Maclean & White, 2007). These deeply ingrained

values not only inform their teaching practices but also guide their interactions with students, colleagues, and the broader educational community, making them an essential cornerstone of teacher identity.

On the other hand, motivation in education, as distinguished by Harmer (2007), spans extrinsic factors such as parental expectations and intrinsic factors like perceptions of success. Teachers may also be driven by altruistic motivation, stemming from noble values and a desire to shape future generations (Whitaker & Valtierra, 2018; Noddings, 1986). Job satisfaction, with diverse definitions and dimensions, is tied to employees' reactions, judgments, and emotions about their job (Jorde-Bloom, 1986). Recognizing the intricate relationship between these elements is fundamental in comprehending the complex dynamics of teacher professional development and identity formation. Hence, the study aims to address two research questions:

- i. What changes occur in the professional identity of second career teachers during their transition to teaching?
- ii. What factors play a role in shaping this transformation of their teacher identity?

METHODS

Professional identity is complex and shapes beliefs and behaviors, helping individuals interpret experiences and self-perception. Therefore, a qualitative approach is employed for in-depth analysis (Marshall et al., 2022). The life history method is chosen to explore teacher identity development due to its flexibility and insightfulness (Tierney & Lanford, 2019). It allows an examination of personal experiences, societal positioning, and responses to past, present, and future events. Semi-structured interviews maintain consistency with this method's themes (Dawson, 2009).

Participant

Analyzing individuals from varied backgrounds and those transitioning careers can yield valuable insights into the subject under investigation (Yin, 2014). This particular study focuses on a single participant, whose identity is safeguarded through the use of a pseudonym. Referred to as Han, this participant was chosen for her alignment with the predetermined criteria for second-career EFL teachers.

Initially, she obtained a Bachelor of Arts in TESOL but embarked on a non-teaching role as a purchaser at a Chinese company upon graduation. After three (3) years in this unrelated field, she began teaching part-time. Following two years of extensive part-time teaching, she has now made the decision to transition into a full-time EFL teaching position.

Procedure of Data Collection

The participant had a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. The interview was recorded, and transcribed in an interview summary form. Data were categorized into themes: teacher values, roles, reflection, job satisfaction, and motivation. Inductive analysis, with literature findings, aided in identifying coding categories and overarching themes. The author iteratively examined the literature review and findings to develop sub-categories and identify new categories. Changes were analyzed by comparing identity constructs across participant's career stages.

FINDINGS

This section will initially highlight key findings related to the evolution of four aspects of teacher identity across the participant's journey through the four stages listed below. Each stage will be described briefly supported by excerpts taken from the interview data. Subsequently, it will engage in a discussion aimed at addressing the research questions.

Key findings of the four stages

This research also identified influential stages in teachers' identity development over five years through data coding, impacting their professional identification. The four stages are:

1. Resisting Entry into Teaching
2. Employment in an Alternate Field and Reevaluation of a Return to Teaching
3. Initial Entry into Teaching as a Trial
4. Commitment to a Long-term Teaching Career

Resisting Entry into Teaching

Han, a student in the final year of the TESOL program, participated in the teaching practicum but ultimately chose not to pursue a career in TESOL upon graduation.

My teaching practicum was a disaster. Despite some positive feedback from my supervisor, I lacked confidence throughout. It felt like standing on stage with crippling nerves, especially with older students. When my supervisors observed my teaching, my anxiety skyrocketed. I ultimately decided to quit because I didn't believe in my teaching abilities. It was a tough choice, but it was the right one for me.

Another factor contributing to Han's career shift stemmed from her desire to explore different aspects of life beyond teaching. This inner need further motivated her decision to leave teaching in order to pursue other opportunities.

Through her studies at university, Han experienced a shift in her perception of the role of a teacher. She noticed changes in her understanding of the responsibilities and expectations associated with this profession both prior to and after her academic journey.

Before college, I used to think teachers were the big bosses in the classroom, and students had to do whatever they said without question. But that all flipped when I got to university. It was totally normal for students to challenge the teacher. Turns out, teachers were more about guiding and supporting us, not bossing us around.

Han's perception of the values associated with teaching was significantly influenced and developed through her experiences as both a learner and a worker. Her negative learning experiences in high school contrasted with the positive ones she encountered in university, coupled with her appreciation for the income she earned from her student job, collectively underscored the importance of dedication as a core value for a teacher in her perspectives.

High school was a drag with all those boring lessons, but I never really had the guts to speak up about it. It wasn't until I got to university that I was blown away by the dedication of some of my professors. I worked my tail off at my student job to make ends meet, so it hit me hard that as a teacher, you've got to be all in. You can't afford to bore your students or waste their hard-earned cash.

Employment in an Alternate Field and Reevaluation of a Return to Teaching

Upon completing her studies, Han diverged from the teaching profession and pursued a different career path. She secured a position as a purchaser for a foreign company in Vietnam,

where she performed adequately. However, during her third year in this role, Han began to experience regret for leaving behind the teaching profession.

The job was alright and all, but something started to nag at me. The more I worked as a purchaser, the more I felt like I was letting all my knowledge and skills in teaching go to waste.

Regarding her job motivation, Han yearned to rediscover her true self and fulfill her unfinished aspirations in the teaching profession.

After three long years in the corporate world, I can't shake this feeling that something is missing from my life. I want to go back to teaching. It's like a calling deep down inside me, urging me to return to that passion. Maybe, just maybe, it can help me rediscover my true self, my purpose. I want to embrace all the challenges that come with it, rather than running away from them.

Another motivating factor behind Han's decision to return to teaching was her personal motto. Throughout her life, she has consistently aspired to live it to the fullest, seeking to maximize her free time after her daytime job.

I came across this book that urged folks to give everything a shot at least once in their life. That's why I'm thinking about giving teaching another try.

Initial Entry into Teaching as a Trial

After deliberating for some time about the prospect of returning to teaching, Han ultimately made the decision to give it a try. She opted to maintain her full-time job while concurrently joining an English center for part-time teaching.

In her part-time teaching role, Han discovered a higher degree of intrinsic meaning and autonomy compared to her office job, particularly in the context of job satisfaction.

Teaching lets me be myself, unlike my office job where I'm just a cog in the machine. In the classroom, I know what I'm doing and can meet my students' needs. It's not perfect, and there's room to grow, but it's clear where I'm headed. Positive student feedback boosts my confidence!

In contrast to her experience during the teaching practicum, Han now perceives a strong ability to establish a meaningful connection with her students.

I really click with my students. We don't have any of that yelling or me losing my cool in class. It's quite the contrast to my office job, where every little hiccup can set me off. Getting along with my students isn't just about making my job easier; it's better for my soul. It somehow soothes those deep-seated frustrations I've been carrying around.

Commitment to a Long-term Teaching Career

Given the opportunity to engage in teaching once more, Han began to reevaluate the possibility of making it her primary career in the future. In contemplating her career path, Han came to the realization that teaching might offer her greater fulfillment and prospects than her current office job.

In the corporate world, I often feel like I'm just here to generate profits for the company, with limited chances to climb the ladder. It's like my role is confined to checking off tasks, and the whole company setup is so rigid that change feels impossible. But when I'm teaching, I get to tap into all that stuff I picked up in college. No matter how much I try to fit into the office environment, it'll never truly be my strong suit.

Regarding compensation, she expressed satisfaction with her current teaching pay rate.

The salary isn't high, but it's enough to get by. Currently, I'm not teaching full time, but when I do, it's certain that it will be enough to live on.

Additionally, it is worth noting that at the time of the interview, Han was on the verge of getting married. The flexibility in terms of scheduling and time management that a full-time teaching career offered played a significant role in her decision to pursue this path.

One cool thing about teaching is that even though I have to prep lessons, I can do it whenever it suits me. There's no strict schedule I have to follow, which is pretty handy, especially when it comes to juggling family stuff.

Overview of the participant's professional identity shift before and after transitioning to her second career in teaching

Over the course of five years following her graduation, Han underwent a continuous process of reevaluating and redefining her professional identity. In general, she leaned toward embracing her identity as a teacher in a positive light. This section narrates Han's identity in terms of roles, values, job satisfaction, and job motivation constructed based on the data collected from the semi-structured interviews.

Roles

Even before pursuing her Bachelor's degree in TESOL, Han initially perceived the teacher's role as a role that is primarily focused on controlling and transmitting knowledge. However, as she advanced through her higher education, her perspective gradually evolved, leading her to view her role as more than that of a guide and facilitator within the classroom. This transformation in perspective was further reinforced during her part-time teaching job, where she gained valuable experience instructing young learners. The gathered data reveals a notable shift in the way Han perceived their her roles after two years of teaching service, moving away from more controlling roles toward roles that granted learners greater autonomy in the learning process. This finding is in line with Forde et al.'s (2006) theory, which discusses how teachers' roles have evolved in response to changes in student empowerment.

Values

Han has always held the belief that dedication is the most critical value for a teacher. This conviction began to take root during her high school years when she endured many uninspiring lessons from teachers who lacked dedication. As she ventured into part-time jobs during her university years and later worked as a purchaser after graduation, this belief was further solidified. These experiences taught her the true worth of hard-earned income.

In her eyes, if a teacher is not dedicated enough, they risk wasting both students' time and money. This perception regarding the value of teachers has had a profound impact on Han's performance in both her work and teaching endeavors.

Job satisfaction

Han underwent a remarkable shift in her job satisfaction with regards to teaching, encompassing changes in her working environment, emotional well-being, and career prospects. Han's transformation in attitude toward teaching is striking. From someone who was consistently nervous every time she stepped onto the stage, she has evolved into a teacher who

feels completely in her element. Over time, she has grown increasingly comfortable with the classroom environment. What's more, the students who initially caused her anxiety have now become a source of inspiration and motivation for her.

Teaching transformed from something that once invoked fear to becoming a significant source of support for Han's mental well-being. Throughout her career journey, she encountered various challenges and pains, but emotional fulfillment through teaching has played a healing role, filling those emotional voids and contributing to a sense of completeness. This journey has also deepened her self-awareness and understanding of her own identity.

While Han may have once believed that teaching limited her professional development, her perspective has evolved. She now recognizes that it is within her teaching profession that she can fully leverage the knowledge and skills acquired through her university major. Teaching provides her with a clearer direction for continuous improvement in her work, offering a unique platform for professional growth and development.

Job motivation

Han experienced a remarkable shift in her job motivation, transitioning from initially rejecting the teaching profession to ultimately embracing it as her long-term career. During her practicum, she viewed teaching as a profession that might confine her life perspective, as she desired to pursue interests beyond teaching. Furthermore, she faced stage fright and struggled to control her emotions while teaching, which contributed to her initial decision to abandon the profession. Interestingly, her time working in the corporate world had a profound impact on her motivation to return to teaching. She realized that revisiting teaching would entail confronting her own fears and completing what she had initiated. The corporate work environment also played a role in her self-discovery, as she recognized that she did not truly belong in the practical world of business; she felt disconnected from her authentic self in this context. Moreover, her desire to return to teaching was driven by a commitment not to squander the knowledge she had acquired through her university program. Additionally, she saw it as a way to nurture her soul, further motivating her to continue her teaching journey.

Flexibility in her work schedule also stands out as a crucial factor in her job motivation. In contrast to her office job, teaching offered her autonomy over her working hours. This flexibility aligned perfectly with her needs, particularly when she had various family-related responsibilities to manage.

Clearly, after five years of professional experience in both non-teaching and teaching environment, the participant made a career redirection in alignment with her personality, personal aspirations, and professional objectives. This parallels the perspective put forth by William and Fox (1995, as cited in Cawte, 2020), which suggests that individuals in the mid-career stage tend to prioritize their long-term goals and consider redirection. In essence, they opt to relinquish roles that no longer resonate with their sense of suitability and alignment with their objectives.

Factors contributing to the shifting of her teacher identity

From a temporal perspective, it becomes evident that Han's teacher identity has been significantly shaped by her four years of studying TESOL, followed by five years of experience in both teaching and non-teaching roles. This period has played a pivotal role in the emergence of her evolving perceptions regarding the roles and values associated with teaching, as well as her levels of job satisfaction and motivation. In summary, three primary factors have played a crucial role in driving the transformation of her teacher identity.

The participant's life motto has played a pivotal role in influencing significant changes at various stages of her career. Irrespective of her current occupation, she steadfastly believes in living life to the fullest and exploring every potential path in her professional journey. This guiding motto prompted her to depart from the teaching profession to explore the realm of the business world, and it also served as the impetus for her return to teaching.

Also regarding her unwavering life motto, which centers on the constant pursuit of self-improvement, propelled her decision to reenter the teaching profession. She sought to confront her own fears and complete what she had initiated, all in alignment with her overarching philosophy of continuous self-enhancement.

The second factor that played a pivotal role in shaping her identity was the interplay of both negative and positive events throughout her journey. For instance, her failure to advance in her daytime job partly served as motivation for her to return to her original profession. Conversely, her positive experiences while teaching at the English center encouraged her to seriously consider teaching as her primary career path. This is similar to the finding of Beauchap & Thomas (2009) and Ibarra (1999) that the alternation of teacher identity strongly relies on personal experiences.

The third factor, self-reflection, served as the foundation for her changing perceptions and actions. Continuous self-reflection made her aware of her inability to overcome her fear of teaching and her suboptimal efforts in her initial job as a purchaser. This self-reflection revealed that surrendering to challenges would impede her career progress. Rejecting the idea of being someone who gives up easily, she returned to teaching, driven by the desire to give her absolute best effort for once in her life. This aligns with the theory that professional development begins with self-reflection, supported by Beauchap & Thomas (2009) in emphasizing the importance of purposive reflection for developing a strong identity.

CONCLUSIONS

This study delved deeply into the career trajectory of a second career EFL teacher with the aim of shedding light on identity changes when educators transition to a second career.

Firstly, the findings corroborated the established theory that the development of professional identity is a complex, dynamic, and ever-evolving process (Beijaard et al., 2004; Canrinus et al., 2011; Kerby, 1991). Throughout the participant's career journey, key facets of their identity, such as roles, values, job satisfaction, and motivation, underwent continuous transformation, subsequently influencing the overall changes in teacher identity. It appears that despite first and second career teachers following different career trajectories, their teacher identities share similarities when it comes to adapting to changing aspects of their profession.

Furthermore, in alignment with prior research, lived experiences and reflective practices emerged as pivotal factors significantly impacting teacher identity. This resonates with the assertion made by Lee and Schallert (2016) that professional development initiates with reflection and subsequently entails identity negotiation and projection.

One noteworthy aspect that potentially sets this study apart lies in its acknowledgment of the significant impact a person's life motto can exert on the process of teacher identity transformation. It becomes evident that the participant's life motto, by virtue of its subtle yet pervasive influence, played a pivotal role in shaping her responses to the various ups and downs encountered in her career. This influence extended to her perception of the roles and values entwined with the teaching profession, ultimately contributing to the development of her job motivation. Future research could delve deeper into the specific categories of life mottos and their potential to exert both positive and negative impacts on the process of teacher identity formation and evolution. Such inquiries could offer valuable insights into the nuances of how

personal philosophies and mottos interact with professional growth and identity, enriching our understanding of this complex phenomenon.

This study holds considerable promise in offering valuable insights into the enhancement of teacher professional development programs. Through the integration of tailored psychological sessions within teacher practicum experiences, prospective educators can be equipped with the necessary mental preparedness to navigate the multifaceted challenges inherent in their roles. Moreover, extending these psychosocial strategies to encompass teacher induction programs not only reinforces their efficacy but also underscores their relevance across diverse educational contexts. By prioritizing the holistic well-being and resilience of educators, these initiatives not only contribute to the cultivation of a supportive learning environment but also foster sustained professional growth and fulfillment within the teaching profession.

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