

A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF TWO ENGLISH TEACHERS' IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Teacher identity is one of the essential aspects influencing the form and quality of educational processes. The present study examines the narratives of one of the writers, Devia, and an English teacher, Trisa, throughout their learning and teaching experiences and the process that were involved as they negotiated their identities as teachers. The data were collected from an autobiographical narrative of Devia as an English teacher, as well as intensive life-history interviews with Trisa. Analysis of the narratives and interview data led to four major themes: inspiring figures, teaching practicum experiences, becoming an English teacher, and pursuing a postgraduate study. The findings revealed that Devia's and Trisa's engagement in the practices and activities of learning and teaching shaped their teacher identity constructions.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, teacher identity, teacher identity construction

INTRODUCTION

Research in the field of teacher identity construction gains an increasing interest from many scholars in the field of language teacher education (e.g., Leigh, 2019; Prabandari, 2020; Trent, 2013), drawing primarily on sociocultural and post-structural frameworks (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021; Salinas & Ayala, 2018; Zacharias, 2010). Unlike previous studies that viewed teacher identity to be a set of relatively fixed profession-related qualities such as beliefs, attitudes, values, motivations, and experiences (Ibarra, 1999, as cited in Nghia & Tai, 2017), recent studies have suggested that teacher identity is an ongoing and dynamic process of individual teachers developing conceptions of themselves, shaping, reshaping, and being shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts (Miller, 2009; Yuan & Lee, 2015).

Along with this increased interest in the broad field of teacher education, teacher identity has been recognized as a critical aspect of language teacher education and teacher learning (Riyanti, 2017). It is possible to gain insight into how language education is carried out by understanding who language teachers are, as Varghese et al. (2005) explained that in order to understand language teaching and learning we need to understand teachers, and to understand them, we must have a greater understanding of who they are. Therefore, understanding language teachers' identities is a crucial part of understanding who teachers are, what they do, and why (Nunan, 2016).

The definition of teacher identity is wide-ranging in the literature. One dimension of it is the understanding of how teachers see themselves as teachers (Teng, 2019), which is influenced by contexts and shaped by experiences (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). However,

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most literature reveals a common idea that teacher identity is an ongoing process and is a multiple, complex, and dynamic process (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop 2004; Gee 2000; Prabandari 2020; Riyanti 2017), whose formation is influenced by a range of factors such as teachers' emotion (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021; S AlHarbi & Ahmad, 2020; M. F. Teng, 2017), their experiences as learners (Bekereci-Şahin & Şallı-Çopur, 2020; Zacharias, 2010), and their work and life experiences in particular contexts (Chu, 2020; Flores & Day, 2006).

Beijaard et al. (2004) worked on a systematic review of the literature on teacher professional identity and identified professional identity as "*an ongoing process*" of interpreting experiences that connects "*person and context*" and professional identity as comprising "*sub-identities*" and requires "*agency*" (p.122) or the active pursuit of professional development and learning in accordance with a teacher's aims. These four characteristics are incorporated in Sachs's (2005) frequently-cited conceptualization of teacher identity:

It [teacher professional identity] provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience (p. 15).

This conceptualization of teacher identity highlights its multi-faceted and person-context features, examined and reemphasized as the central focus of teacher identity construction (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Wilt (2013) emphasized that teacher identity formation begins with personal, understanding and exploring who they are, what they believe in, and how their experiences shape them.

This study draws on Wenger's (1998) theory of identity construction to investigate Devia's and Trisa's professional selves, which are tightly connected to their experiences as learners and teachers. Like other aspects of human identity, teacher identity is shaped through social influences. Wenger (1998) suggested that identities are (re)formed through the "tension between our investment in the various forms of belonging and our ability to negotiate the meanings that matter in those contexts" (p. 188). We identify with and negotiate these meanings through three modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment. Engagement involves social interactions between individuals and their environments: individuals build experiences and competencies through such interactions. Imagination concerns how individuals "locate themselves in the world and history," relating identity with "other meanings, other possibilities, other perspectives" (Wenger, 1998, p. 178). Alignment involves adjusting the self to environmental expectations and coordinating exterior and interior efforts with aspiring individuals. The alignment phase assumes some degree of mastery or control over the external world as the individuals negotiate for it. Wenger (1998) argued that the process of identity development is dual by nature, involving both participation in the external environment and personal, and individual reflection through the modes of belonging.

In Wenger's (1998) conception, the community is viewed as a social setting in which one's involvement is valued and what one does is defined as something worth doing. It illustrates how identity is constructed and expressed in various discourse forms, reflecting how learning alters who we are and how we become members of a certain community through establishing personal histories (Torres-Rocha, 2017). Wenger's (1998) theory of identity construction, which proposes that identity entails forms of participation and interaction within a community, thus serves as the theoretical foundation for this study since teachers are likely to reconstruct and renegotiate part of their identities in the community.

Many research studies explore teacher identity construction (e.g., Brudvik et al., 2018; Küçükali, 2017; Prabandari, 2020; Salinas, 2017); however, there is still limited research that employs autobiographical narrative inquiry. Hence, in this article, we explore the complex processes of teacher identity construction through a narrative inquiry into the professional identity of two English teachers at a university in Bandung, namely Devia and Trisa (a

pseudonym). Drawing on Wenger's (1998) theory of identity construction, this study discusses how Devia's and Trisa's language learning backgrounds have contributed to shaping who they are now, how they became English teachers, and how they plan to continue their careers. As they have committed themselves to teaching English, their experiences have revealed different meanings of learning and teaching experiences at schools.

METHODS

This study was a narrative inquiry into how two English teachers, Devia and Trisa, constructed their identities as English learners and teachers. A narrative had been considered the most appropriate and effective way of representing and understanding the experience of identity construction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1995; Leigh, 2019). It is a way of constructing experiences, identities, and worlds (Bansel, 2013), and it is essential for the understanding of the identity of teachers (Rudd, 2007).

We found that narrative inquiry would best enable us to explore our research interests. Narrative inquiry helped us comprehend Devia's and Trisa's experiences and the impact of those experiences, as well as their experiences and how that meaning reflected on their 'professional self' — how they see themselves as professionals.

This study involved two English teachers, Devia and Trisa. The teachers' demographic information is presented below.

Table 1: Teachers' Demographic

Name	Sex	Age	Highest Level of Education	Teaching Experience	Category of Teacher
Devia	Female	25	Bachelor Degree	2 years	Novice
Trisa	Female	24	Bachelor Degree	2 years	Novice

Devia is a 25 years-old teacher with 2 years teaching experience. She graduated from English Education Department in an Islamic University in Bandung, and she took a master degree majoring English Education Department. Her involvement in a postgraduate program opened up her eyes to the importance of understanding teacher identity as a way to understand her own journey as a teacher. This realization became the impetus for the conduct of the present study. In tracing her own teacher identity construction, Devia reflected upon her experiences of English learning and teaching, and her identities as an English postgraduate student and an English teacher.

In order to push beyond 'the personal' and to represent a range of different experiences, we involved Trisa to share her experiences. Trisa is a 24 years-old teacher with also 2 years teaching experience. Like Devia, Trisa also graduated from English Education Department in an Islamic University in Bandung. We purposefully selected Trisa because both she and Devia share much in common: they are novice English teachers with two-year teaching experiences at the time of the study, are working at the same language institute, and are currently studying at a postgraduate program. Besides, Devia and Trisa attained their Bachelor's degree from the same university and have both been involved in an international teaching practicum. Considering these similarities, it is therefore interesting to inquire into and compare how their experiences shaped their identities as English teachers.

Autobiography has been credited as an effective tool that encourages self-reflection on one's own identity (Chisholm, 1994; Curtis, 1998, cited in Lu, 2005). In this study, Devia's autobiography plays a significant resource in the investigation. As she recorded, categorized, and analyzed her own memories, experiences, and dilemmas as a learner and how she became an English teacher, she was able to construct her 'personal theories' about teaching

and learning and gather insight into both her personal and professional development. The advantage of collecting data from an autobiography was that we could look into Devia's learning and teaching experiences and how writing an autobiography improved her knowledge of good practice, which led to changes in her personal and professional practice.

In addition to Devia's autobiography, we use a life-history interview approach to collect Trisa's experiences. The focus of the interview was on Trisa's learning and teaching experiences, which were critically believed to construct her teacher identity (Olsen, 2015). Adopting a life-history interview allowed us to understand Trisa's professional experiences through her respective accounts (Gao, 2008).

The approach used in analyzing the data is thematic analysis. The analysis process consisted of five stages: (a) organization and preparation of the data, (b) obtaining a general sense of the information, (c) coding, (d) categorizing from which themes emerged, and (e) data interpretation (Creswell, 2014).

The organization and preparation of the data stage started with transcribing audiotapes immediately after the interview to make sense of the narratives. The coding process was the next stage in which the data were coded manually. The coding process consisted of re-reading the transcripts and identifying recurring words, ideas, or patterns generated from the data (Patton, 2002). Codes were then placed into logical categories. These categories, in turn, reflected the themes that have become apparent and represent the study's significant findings (Creswell, 2014). The last stage of the analysis was interpreting the data or making meaning (Creswell, 2014). At this stage, the themes, or the categories and their corresponding codes, were interpreted in light of the theories pertaining to teacher identity construction.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The repeated 'patterns' that are evident in Devia's and Trisa's narratives led to four themes: inspiring figures, teaching practicum experiences, becoming an English teacher, and pursuing a postgraduate study. Each theme is discussed subsequently.

Inspiring Figures

When reflecting on Devia's early experience of language learning, she remembered that she enjoyed learning English with her teacher in senior high school. The teacher was a kind, humble, and caring teacher. Devia admired how he taught, for he made learning English so much fun by using different methods like songs and games, so the students never felt bored learning English with him. There was always one session in his class where he would bring his guitar and sing a couple of songs. He gave the students a piece of paper with the song lyrics on it. While listening to him singing, the students had to fill in the song's missing lyrics. Later on, the students sang together. It was enjoyable. Besides, he was a caring teacher. He cared about every student and saw them as individuals with their own unique selves. He would talk to us, and at that time, that was Devia's happiest time studying. She loved the learning environment that the teacher created. From him, she learned that learning English was not limited to learning grammar or sentence structure in a traditional way, but it could be that fun. This teacher ultimately shaped Devia's notion of a good teacher: one who really cares about the students, helps, and is able to motivate them.

Trisa shared the same experience about her English learning experience at school and recounted how she loved her English teacher:

"When I was in junior high school, one of my English teachers was a very fun and easy-going teacher. She made me love learning English because the way she taught was, I could say, creative and innovative.... With her, we learned English a lot from music, especially by listening to a song. We were exposed to many new English vocabularies when learning through songs. From that point, I knew that learning English can be that fun and exciting. I think the way

teachers teach in the class matter; it can affect how we as students feel when learning English.” **(Trisa’s Interview)**

Devia’s and Trisa’s experiences in learning English involving an image of their high school teachers whom they admired contributed to a ‘significant moment’ that seemed to have influenced their identity construction. In line with this, Basalama and Machmud (2018) point out that the influence of an inspiring teacher is critical to the motivation in teaching and learning English and the teacher’s identity. The findings also resonated with what Trent (2011) found in his study that the role of former teachers could result in teachers’ positive evaluation about their identity as a teacher. The teacher developed a picture of the teaching profession and their role within it through their connections they drew across their past, reflecting their identity formation. Devia and Trisa characterized teachers when they were in high school as role models who encouraged them to become teachers and who they desired to be like. In other words, the way they were taught in school had been profoundly embedded in their belief system, forming an image of how a teacher should teach English. Their experiences appeared to have formed Devia’s and Trisa’s assumptions or expectations of teaching. Their assumptions were in line with Wenger’s (1998) observations of ‘imagination’ beyond the boundary of a community that a member belongs to. In this case, Devia and Trisa formed positive ‘imaginings’ of how a good teacher should be. In Trisa’s view, qualities such as ‘fun’ and ‘easygoing’ are important to possess by English teachers. That way, students can feel comfortable learning English. For Devia, it is a quality like ‘caring’ that is essential in teachers, for that way students can feel better understood.

Teaching Internship Experiences

During their undergraduate studies, Devia and Trisa joined an international teaching internship in a rural area in South Thailand. During the first week in Thailand, they met their English mentor at school, and they were taught about their duties and what they should and should not do in their role as teachers. Devia recalled that they also had opportunities to observe the school’s settings as well as how children were taught or taken care of by the teacher. Based on Trisa’s observation, the learning process at the school was still quite traditional, where the teachers only referred to the book and used it as the main resource for teaching. The students’ motivation to learn English was also very low because learning English was boring for them. Bearing this in mind, Trisa stated that she then had to create a fun learning atmosphere in the classroom. She did not want to be a traditional teacher who created lessons around structure-based syllabuses and teacher-led instruction.

“When I did my observation, the students in my class were not enthusiastic in learning English. I guess it was because they learned English in a very traditional way where the teacher only came to the class and asked them to complete the tasks from the book. So, from this point, I knew that I had to engage them with various fun activities like singing and drawing.” **(Trisa’s Interview)**

During the program, Devia and Trisa initiated an English club at the school. The students there had limited access to English, so by providing them with an English club, they wanted to facilitate them and better expose them to English. Devia personally believed that exposure to English is vital to help students be more familiar with the language. What Devia and Trisa did during the internship program showed their commitment in teaching. Commitment refers to the teacher’s personal involvement in and engagement with teaching, the degree to which he or she has a sense of profession, connects with and supports the school’s aims and procedures, and is willing to devote personal time and energy to achieving excellence in teaching (Richards, 2021). In addition, Devia’s and Trisa’s efforts to engage more with students were linked to the engagement aspect in Wenger’s (1998) theory. According to Wenger (1998), engagement in meaningful activities and interactions is crucial

to identity formation as we invest ourselves in what we do while also investing ourselves in the relationships we have with other people. Their desired engagement as teachers were indexed by teaching practices and activities that included making lessons “varied” and “fun” activities to motivate and involve students in language learning. Their descriptions of the variety of classroom techniques and activities they claim to use, such as singing, drawing, and initiating English club, showed some evidence of their engagement in the teaching endeavor.

When asked how she felt about her teaching experience, Trisa described that she was happy to know that she could create a slight change in the English learning environment in her Thai classes:

“I was feeling delighted and satisfied because, after two months of teaching there, I could feel the change in the students’ learning. In the first two weeks of teaching, the students were passive and looked confused about what they learned in the English class, but as time passed, they began to be more active, participated more in classroom activities, asked questions, showed their curiosity, and be more open.” **(Trisa’s Interview)**

This finding related to teacher’s agency. It refers to the degree to which teachers may actively contribute to and control change in their own teaching and professional development. It is the capacity of the teacher to take control of their own learning and environment, as well as the ability to set goals, develop curricula, start changes, and make decisions that have an impact on the teacher’s work and working conditions (Richards, 2021). In this study, Trisa contributed to the improvement of students in the learning process and were able to create a positive change in the classroom.

Trisa then reflected that upon completing the program, she learned to be more sympathetic as a teacher.

“I think I learned that as a teacher, we have to be more sympathetic. I remember a teacher said that the students were lazy, so they didn’t perform well in class. I totally disagreed with her. We, as teachers, couldn’t easily judge our students that way because we had to understand that each student has a different level of understanding. They didn’t understand what we understand.” **(Trisa’s Interview)**

She also described that by being sympathetic, teachers have to understand what students need and adjust the materials and activities based on their level or ability to feel comfortable learning English. Teachers have to be able to plan and organize the learning activities that are in accordance with the students’ ability and help them improve their English skills. Trisa nominated the newly gained insight of being a ‘sympathetic teacher’ as an important quality that a teacher should possess so that students can feel comfortable learning English.

Becoming an English Teacher

After Devia graduated from college, she worked as an English teacher at a language center at a university in Bandung. In the first meeting, she asked her students about their learning English experience. Most of them shared that learning English was difficult because they had to master English grammar rules, remember the patterns, and understand sentence structure when they were in high school. They did not really practice their English speaking because they were not given the space to speak English, and they were afraid of making mistakes. Moreover, in their high school, most students would easily laugh at other students’ mistakes when speaking English. Thus, for them, learning English was like a nightmare. Devia could very well relate to her students’ experiences, as she herself was once an English learner;

she was able to put herself in her students' shoes and understand their difficulty in learning English in Indonesia.

As Devia began her teaching career, she was determined to change the learning environment where learning English was seen as complicated and rigid. She wanted to create a fun and enjoyable learning atmosphere in her class. She wanted to make her students feel motivated and comfortable learning English because she believed that by making them feel so, they would be more confident to speak English. Therefore, in her class, she incorporated some creative and fun game-based activities into English teaching to engage the students in learning English. She intended to be 'their friend' that could help them improve their English and learn together with them. This idea of how she aspired to encourage and empower her students to learn English shaped her identity as an English teacher.

Teaching at the same institution as Devia, Trisa shared her teaching experience in the class:

"Here, I teach speaking for university-level students. I notice that most of them are elementary to intermediate-level students who still have difficulties in speaking English. So, I think I had to provide them with topics like hobbies, movies, music, and the like, which are closely related to their daily life. I want to be a communicative teacher, so I usually used task-based learning activities, including discussion, group work, and games, to make sure students actively participated in the class, not passive. I want them to explore language and be brave, not be scared of making mistakes." **(Trisa's Interview)**

According to Wenger's theory (1998), identity is both participatory and reflective. Trisa's excerpt illustrated her reflection about her teaching practice. She tried to adapt her teaching method to her students' level, so that the students could actively participate in the classroom activities. In line with this, in his study, Dheressa (2022) found that meeting students' needs, preferences, and adjusting to students' level were essential for teachers as they could reflect and look for effective strategies to teach and meet students' needs. Moreover, Trisa's reflection was beneficial as it provided lessons for her own professional growth. This finding resonated with what Borg (2011, as cited in Moradkhani et al., 2017) suggested that teachers who regularly reflect critically analyze their teaching methods and beliefs with the objective of improving their teaching quality. Her narrative also indicated that she displayed her identity as a "communicative teacher" and addressed the problems she encountered in the classroom by applying aspects of her preferred teaching style.

When asked about how she saw herself as a teacher, she described herself as a caring teacher. She wanted to be a friendly and helpful teacher that could motivate her students to speak English more.

"I am the kind of teacher that cares so much about the students' needs. I tried to listen to them and understand their difficulties in class. I often asked them how they wanted to learn, how they saw their learning progress. As a teacher, I wanted to give them the space to grow and improve their English skills." **(Trisa's Interview)**

Further, Trisa mentioned her intention to achieve a 'balanced relationship' with students—being caring and loving on the one hand, but also strict in managing her classroom effectively. She hoped to spark enthusiasm in her students, but she also realized the need to apply discipline.

Devia's and Trisa's construction of their teacher identities can be understood in terms of Wenger's (1998) engagement mode of identification. For Devia and Trisa, engagement in

the teaching enterprise was partly reflected in their descriptions of the repertoire of classroom practices and activities they claim to deploy, such as group work, discussions, and games. Their engagement in teaching also reflected their understanding of teaching as the development of close and positive relationship or bonding with students, understanding students, and caring for students. As reported by Gan (2021), having a positive teacher-student relationship could lead to various benefits, such as a high level of class participation, students' self-confidence, positive motivation, and more effective instructional task design.

Pursuing a Postgraduate Study

To advance her teaching knowledge, skills, and expertise in English, Devia decided to pursue a master's degree at an English Education Department at a University in Bandung. She pointed out that among all subjects that she learned, one particular subject contributed to improving her teaching quality, and that was the Curriculum Analysis class. In this class, she learned how to develop a proper and effective lesson plan and syllabus and realized the importance of scaffolding in the teaching and learning process.

Trisa also studied in the same department. When asked how university courses contributed to shaping her teacher identity, she said that learning in the Pedagogy class opened her eyes to teaching.

“I felt so much benefited when learning in pedagogy class. In this class, we had many discussions on current educational issues in Indonesia. I also learned how to teach students with different backgrounds and needs. One important lesson that was insightful and eye-opening was that we couldn't teach and treat all students with one teaching approach.” **(Trisa's Interview)**

Trisa further reported that when in class, most of her friends are high school teachers. She felt that she could not fully relate to the class discussions because she did not teach at school.

“There are many school teachers in my class. I sometimes felt insecure when discussing educational issues in Indonesia because I didn't teach at school, so I can't really relate to most of the issues. It made me think about teaching at school, actually. I began to feel that it is important to have a teaching experience in school.” **(Trisa's Interview)**

Trisa added that her plan somehow changed now. Previously, she intended to be a lecturer, but now, she plans to teach at a junior high school. She wanted to explore and know more about the education system in Indonesia. Echoing Trisa's experience, Devia also felt the same way about having teaching experience at school. She felt that without having teaching experience at school, she could not really know how the education system in Indonesia worked. However, unlike Trisa, Devia did not have a strong motivation to teach in high school and preferred teaching at a university because she felt more confident with adults than with younger learners, and she felt she could not manage a class of children well.

The learning experiences in the postgraduate study provided opportunities for both Devia and Trisa to negotiate practices related to their teaching profession. Moreover, the courses they learned contributed to shaping their teacher identity. Richards (2021) indicated that professional education is one of the sources of teacher identity because during the education process, teachers will gain a fundamental set of knowledge, beliefs, principles, and practices that will shape their view of language teaching, as well as their identity and role as language teachers.

CONCLUSION

The current study revealed that the learning and teaching experiences shape a significant part of a teacher's identity, as indicated in Devia's and Trisa's narratives. These experiences shaped how Devia and Trisa saw themselves as particular types of teachers. In terms of Wenger's (1998) framework for identity construction, the current study suggests that the concepts of engagement and imagination, as modes of identification, are structured and influenced by the role of the teacher, teaching internship experience, and their learning process in a postgraduate program, which make available certain possibilities for their identity construction. Besides, this study highlights the multi-faceted and person-context features of teacher identity construction. It might undergo changes over time as a result of teachers' experiences and practices.

In exploring and writing about English teachers' life stories, this study has extended our understanding of English teachers' learning and teaching experiences in relation to teacher professional identity development. With deeper understandings of English teachers' professional identity, teacher educators may be able to help language teachers embrace their identities and support them to incorporate their distinctive backgrounds into teaching resources. Their prior collective experiences and skills should be taken into account to explore what they can offer for the quality of teaching. Furthermore, gaining awareness about their motivations and decisions to enter teaching and their attributes will help school and campus benefit from the contribution they will make.

It is suggested that to make the research process more organized, future research can use clearer and more solid framework regarding the teacher's identity construction. Experienced teachers can also be involved to have a more comprehensive data by comparing the experiences of novice and experienced teachers. Besides, it is recommended to employ another instrument, such as observation, to add to the data and to expand some informative inputs in narrative inquiry study.

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