

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF TWO EFL TEACHERS IN VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS: EVIDENCE FROM INDONESIA

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Abstract

While studies on teacher professional identity construction have been extensively documented, there is a paucity of research that explores English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' professional identity construction in vocational high school contexts. To address such a gap, this paper reports on a narrative inquiry into two Indonesian EFL teachers' professional identity construction in vocational schooling sectors. Data were primarily garnered through online semi-structured interview with the participants. Encapsulated by Gee's (2000) and Mockler's (2011) identity frameworks, the study's findings suggest that 1) the participants' teacher professional identity is constructed by social-collegial interaction, school policy enactment, and past experience and future aspirations, and 2) their identity is developed across time geared by family support, gendered perception, engagement with colleagues, and interest in the English language. This paper ends with suggestions for in-service teacher education to design pedagogy that leads teachers into systemic professional identity trainings.

Keywords: English as a foreign language; narrative inquiry; teacher professional identity construction; vocational high school

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of vocational high school in Indonesia has been started since 2006 and it was reinforced by the Ministry of Education and Culture's revitalization program in 2016, which planned a vocational high school and general high school to be equally developed. Statistically, the number of vocational high school rises from 13.236 (2016/2017) to 14.301 (2019/2020) with 3.622 public and 10.679 private schools and the total numbers of pupils are 5.249.149. The main goal of this revitalization focuses on preparing students to be skillful and ready to work (Maryanti, Rohana & Kristiawan, 2020; Wagiran, Pardjono, Suyanto, & Sofyan, 2017).

In light with these reforms, English language as the required subject in the school is situated within the curriculum reform such as aligning bilingual learning system in vocational high school sectors, for instance, English Day Program and English Area Program. Furthermore, Kailani and Rafidiyah (2020) explained that these programs ran well to encourage students to use English on daily basis. As a communicative language, recent research has portrayed how students' English proficiency is influenced by various teacher's teaching approaches (Yufrizal, 2017).

Despite the various educational reform programs applied by the government, Indonesia is still struggling with several issues in terms of teacher capacity and development, such as teacher professional identity. As stated by Syamsinar and Jabu (2016) on their study which concentrated on the issue of teachers' problems dealing with professional competence in teaching English, findings of this study are inform six problems of teacher competence in vocational high schools, including (a) mastering materials problems, (b) mastering in curriculum, (c) developing creative materials, (d) developing teacher professional continuously, (e) problems using the IT and (f) managing the class.

Furthermore, the atmosphere of local culture and society around the students and teachers have different perception of the important becoming proficient at English language (Asmin, 2019; Margana, 2016; Wang, 2021; Saddhono, 2018; Widodo, 2015). Discussing about the influence of local culture to learn English, Leigh (2019) in her study examines the professional identities of eight early years EFL teachers working in Shenzhen, China through interviews. The findings reveal that Chinese local culture affect teacher's teaching experiences and their perceptions of professional identity (Gandana & Parr, 2013). Factors such as school management, teacher and student interaction, and school atmosphere also affect the teaching and learning process (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019).

Teacher professional identity construction has been an influential domain in teacher career. It relates to what Norton (2013) argues as how a person sees his/her self in relation to the world and the surroundings. Given the inconclusive studies of teacher professional identity construction, the present study seeks to explore how two Indonesian EFL teachers in vocational high school context construct their professional identity and to what extent this identity changes over time.

METHOD

Research Design

The general purpose of this study was to portray how two English teachers in this study constructed their professional identities in the vocational high school context and how their identities changed over time. The study, therefore, adopted

qualitative and narrative inquiry research framework. Narrative inquiry emphasizes on the story of experience's life, viewing humans as storied creatures who talk their experience life in their personal and social part, that people can change their mind and emotion to understand better the world (see Beijaard, 2009; Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin, et al, 2007; Danielewicz, 2001, Gee, 2000; Manara, 2013; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2019). Therefore, the present study attempts to find out the various ways of understanding and conceptualizing teacher professionalism within the context of Indonesian society and culture.

Teacher's story captures how they interpret their world (and their understandings of reality) and what those interpretations were at a particular point in time and in a particular context. Their reality is, therefore, not fixed or single but a multiple and dynamic one that changes through times. I was interested in how these teachers made sense of their teaching experiences with respect to the various discourses of professionalism day to day. It is therefore, this study applied narrative inquiry according to Connelly and Clandinin (2006).

Researcher's position

In this study, I positioned myself as the interviewer who worked together with the participants to understand meaning in the stories conveyed through interview questions (Mishler, 1986; p. 52). The relationship between the participants (interviewees) and I (interviewer) have a space and scope for reformulating or specifying questions in and ongoing process of making sense of what they are saying each other.

The Participants

The two EFL teachers who participated have been teaching in vocational high schools for more than 10 years. The participants have been certified by the government for their professional career. I used an insider perspective to recruit the participants as they are my colleagues in teacher forums. In narrative research, it is important to have a close relationship with the study participants in order to collect comprehensive data in terms of stories (Clandinin, 2006; p. 47-48). All participants' names were pseudonym in this study. Below are brief profiles of the two participants.

Yiyin (aged 48) is an English teacher at *pesantren*-based vocational high school in Pasuruan for nearly 20 years. She has become my sharing partner and also my competitor when we participated in some teacher competitions. She finished her graduate study the educational policy development department in 2013. She had strong motivation to learn more about their profession. She became the winner in some competition related to her profession, such as the first winner of "*Guru SMK Prestasi dan Inovatif (professional and innovated teachers)*" in Pasuruan regency, 2019

and at the same time she became the candidate of her regency to participate the same competition in East Java. She was a productive teacher in writing some researches and created learning media to support her teaching activity.

The second participant is Udin aged 43 years old. He started his career to be an English debate coach in a private vocational high school in Malang. Since 2009 up to now, he has been teaching English and coaching English debate in one of the famous state vocational high school in Malang. His debate teams became the winner in regional and national English debate competition more than 20 times. He became an adviser of TVET Camp in Thailand 2010, an English interpreter of Printing machine workshop in China 2012, and as the adviser of Sakura Science Program in Japan 2018.

Data Collection and Procedure

During COVID-19 pandemic, it was impossible for me to conduct face to face interview. Therefore, the data of this study were collected by individual in depth-interviewing via WhatsApp message and voice note for 25 to 60 minutes during February to April 2021. In collecting the data, I first invited them to be my participants, explained my foci of the study, typed their privacy, and asked their CV and some artifacts, such as their certificates, photo of their works. After that I chatted them to discuss when they could be interviewed so it couldn't disturb them. Through the informal interview, the data can be gathered naturally, as participants can understand the questions and their answers so that nothing different between routine nature such as habits and the situation of research interview (Mishler, 1986, p.1).

The interviews were conducted in three sessions based on three main topics. I delivered some questions related to the background and the process of becoming EFL teachers in their first year of teaching. Some questions of these interviews were cited from Djoudir, L. (2019) and the interviewing process strengthened by Mishler's concept of "joining construction of meaning" (Mishler, 1986, p. 52). In this stage, the interviews started in general questions, for instance, "Why did you become EFL teacher? Could you tell your story becoming teacher? Continuing conversation more about the first second years of teaching English to explore their professional identity. How they manage the class; what strategy they apply to solve the problem during the learning and teaching process. Next stage, the interviewees narrated their present experiences to develop their professional identity by asking "Could you tell how important English for you, personally and professionally? Could you tell about yourself as the EFL teacher? What your weakness and positive side? How do you construct your professional identity? What kind of forums do you join? Could you tell what the positive effect joining those forums? The last, seeking participants' story of their prospect to be better teaching and teaching is their soul.

I communicated with them in different time and I did not give my detail questions list to them. The next questions were delivered after they answered those. Because of that, the interviews were done more than once based on the participants' willingness (it was 2 or 3 times).

Data Analysis

The data analysis was presented by using an iterative process, alternating between listening to interview records, reading the transcripts, coding, categorizing codes into themes, and consulting the themes (Cresswell and Poth, 2016). First, the data were analyzed by coding the data by listening to the interview records and reading the transcripts of all participants many times to find out the message of their journey and more than sense of struggling to construct their professional identities continuously.

After coding the data, I categorized into themes, then I analyzed the data integrated with the three dimensions of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006): 1) *interaction* refers on the participants' social relationship and interaction with their colleagues (professional community/forum) and students; 2) *temporality* explains their struggle to reconstruct professional identity on the earlier career, current career and future; 3) *situation* talks about how their place (school, family) influence their professional identity. The last stage of analyzing the data in this study was member checking of the participants to indicate that this study in validity (Creswell and Poth, 2016, p. 406).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

The study's findings are not merely to understand how the EFL teachers in vocational high school construct and change over time their professional identity, but also to understand the factors that can pressure them to be English teachers and their struggle to form their professional identity. These stages then became part of their identities, which were shaped and developed over time, to form new beliefs and perceptions toward teaching.

Identity before becoming English teachers

Since the major goal of this study was to recognize the process of teachers' professional identities construction, it was significant to reveal the role of their prior experiences of learning, that was, being the recipient of other people's teaching, or any other teaching that they might have done, however informal, prior to their embarking on English teacher. I am aware that each teacher's identity is ongoing and has a unique learning journey. Therefore, this study stated that these personal stories

derived from family, culture, friend, and interest in English helped construct their identity before they became EFL teachers. Thus, the continuity or changes in their established identities must thus be examined to produce a sense of metamorphosis of their professional identity.

As Yiyin says, she became a teacher motivated by her friend in "pesantren" when she was in senior high school. Not only that, after graduating from senior high school, she continued her study in "PGA (Pendidikan Guru Agama" (school specification on learning religion) whose major was Arabic. Because of her father, she moved her study to English department. She believed that she could learn English as well as she learned Arabic although she had to start at the beginning in learning English.

I became a teacher because my friend in "pesantren" motivated me when I was in senior high school. After I finished my study in PGA with background Arabic, my father wanted me to change my study to English department. Although my background was Arabic, I believed that I could learn English.

(2/12/2021)

Her belief and traditional culture that positioned women as teachers were more acceptable than other professions, and being a teacher was a figure. She could have more time to do her role as mother and wife in her family. She trusted that being a teacher she would get not only something new but also reward from God. She could learn how to understand character of other people from the students.

*I believe that being a teacher was better than other professions and it was a figure of character to be imitated as Javanese philosophy "**guru means digugu lan ditiru** (teacher is someone who has to be respected and become a model)". It was flexible. It meant that I could I have more time to spend my time with my family; I could understand others' character because of my interaction with my students and others.*

(2/12/2021)

It was different with Udin, who wasn't interested in teaching English when she was at Junior High School where he at the first studied English. Even though he didn't have a dream to become an English teacher and knew English at that time, and his family didn't have teacher or English background, he persuaded kids around him to learn in group and became an instructor (playing as a teacher). He used to apply various technics in teaching them, such as guessing vocabulary.

Actually, I didn't have a family who had English or teacher background and I got English firstly when I was in Junior High School and at that time I didn't have ambition to be an English teacher. But I didn't know why I used to let kids around me to learn together and I became their teacher. When I was teaching them, I used to practice various games, such as guessing vocabulary and I did it after school. This happened continuously until I became a teacher.

(4/6/2021)

Udin was so interested in English since he was a child and then this love of English was growing up when he was staying in Bali after graduated from vocational high school. He obsessed while he was watching Chinese Films with English subtitles and looking at foreigners who were speaking English. Their style was interesting.

I was interested in English when I was a child. I liked to watch Chinese movies, of which subtitles was English. Their style of speaking was so interesting and it made me so obsessed in English.

After I graduated from vocational high school, I had to work as salesmen in Bangka, Yogyakarta and Bali because my family was ordinary people. During my long-life journey, I develop my interest in English when I met foreigners and talked to them face to face in Kuta, Bali.

(4/6/2021)

During his life journey to be a salesman in Bali for six years, he developed his interest in English until he went back to Malang and decided to continue his study in English department in one of a private university in Malang in 2003. He realized that he was older than his friends, but he motivated himself to study harder because he was late for six years to continue his study. His struggle in constructing his identity was narrated:

I used to look for friends who had interest in learning English and I found it in debate community. Then I joined some English debate clubs in Malang. They helped and motivated me to gain my career. The activities of this clubs really improve my English. I joined English debate competition as the representative of my university at the first time, though I failed, I could practice and apply debate technics to my class now.

(4/6/2021)

To Yiyin, learning English liked learning Arabic. Due to her activity in *pesantren*, she had to obey the norms, so that she had limited time to do an activity outside. The activity that could help her to develop her English was *English and Arabic speaking habit*. She and her friends should speak English and Arabic in every occasion. Through this activity, she could improve her English.

... After that I should continue my study to English department because of my father's role. I lived in pesantren where my friends and I should speak Arabic and English in every occasion. Yeah...learning English liked learning Arabic. The way to learn both languages was similar. It should be my habit. I believe that through this habit I could improve my language.

(2/12/2021)

Identity of early career as English teacher

Becoming a teacher needs a long process which brings issues, especially at the first year of teaching, like Yiyin and Udin faced. Vocabulary and grammar were the hardest problems they should solve beside pronunciation and class management. Yiyin was an English teacher in state junior high school in Pasuruan for five years after she finished her study. Her voice of becoming English teacher in the first year of teaching was narrated here:

My first teaching journey was in state junior high school in Pasuruan for five years as a honorary teacher...

Yeah...of course I faced some problems at the first year of teaching, for instance grammar, vocabulary, lack of confidence, nervous, class management and social interaction in new place.

(2/12/2021)

Similarly, Udin talked about how his first-year teaching English as English teacher in a state vocational high school in Malang in 2009. He noticed that his struggle was a challenge if he wanted to become a professional English teacher. He described how he positioned himself as a novice teacher who was challenged to be more professional in his first-year career. His strong passion for becoming a teacher encouraged him, therefore he devoted himself to develop their identity, even though he had to face difficulties in grammar, vocabulary preparing materials and class management. As he told:

...alkhamdulillah in 2009, I became an English teacher in a state vocational high school in Malang though I was a novice teacher. The curriculum vice principle

told me that I could be a teacher in this school if I worked better in a year. It was my challenge.

...In my first year of teaching, I realized that I had problems in grammar, vocabulary and class management. Of course, if I had lack of vocabulary, it would cause my speaking ability.

(4/6/2021)

His voice revealed that his serious effort was acknowledged by his headmaster and others, shown by good interaction between him and his headmaster, friends, and colleagues. To Udin and Yiyin, teaching involves knowledge and competence to support their effective learning and teaching activities. Both of them agreed that their problems of teaching would be accomplished through learning. Udin said:

As I told before that my problems of teaching came from myself, it wasn't from my students. And to carry out them, I had to prepare my material before having a class. Previously, I wrote a script of my lesson, then I tried to read it without bringing the text. If I didn't understand the vocabulary, I looked for in dictionary and check how to pronounce it. Not only me but also my students had similar problems in grammar and vocabulary, so that, I applied my technics to them.

(4/6/2021)

Present and Future Identity Construction

All the participants had their own stages of developing their identity after their first year of becoming EFL teachers and enjoyed their profession. To continue their professionalism, both of them strengthened their position and identity as a teacher. They have joined some professional forums or organizations which can help them to strengthen their identity.

Yiyin taught in one place and taught in other private school for three years and in 2006 she moved to a state vocational high school in Pasuruan after she became a government employee until now. In 2013, she continued her study on Master in Educational Policy & Development in a private university in Malang. After finishing her study, since 2016 she became a lecturer. Starting in 2006, she has been active in joining various teachers' training not merely in English as her major subject, which can put up her professional identity. She thought that through these activities she could get something new, for instance, teaching strategy that can be applied to her class and share to other teachers. She has a lot of learning media innovation and has participated in some teachers' competition; in 2019 she won the competition of

innovated and educated teacher in Pasuruan regency and became a representative to join the same event in East Java.

Like other people, a teacher will change and I am a teacher, so I should change. My weaknesses as an English teacher in my first career, as I told before, are nervous etc. Because of that, I need to improve my competence. To do this, I joined workshops, trainings, professional test, and innovating in learning and teaching.

(2/18/2021)

Udin focused his professional identity through his interest in debate. Thus, he always joined the English debate clubs before becoming a teacher. He also becomes an English debate instructor in some schools and a private English teacher. He could bring his teams to be the winner in some English competitions, regional or national competitions. In 2012, he was one of representatives from Indonesia who was an English interpreter of printing machine workshop in China and in 2018, he was the only English teacher from Indonesia who was as the adviser of Sakura Science Program in Japan 2018. His interaction with his colleagues in his institution, and forums change his stages to be better. Now he is a vice of English Teacher Forum in Malang and in East Java. His experiences develop his pedagogical and strengthen his identity as an English teacher. He wants to continue his study. He hopes that he could get a scholarship as his students who are successful in getting it and studying in famous university in Indonesia or aboard.

I have joined so many forum and communities, and even I have an English club, namely "Java English Club". I am a vice of English teacher forum (MGMP) in Malang. We can share strategy of teaching and our experiences. I also joined the writers' forum and now I've written two books of mine, sport community, and as instructor of reading Al-Qur'an in one of junior high school...I am also attending formal or non-formal webinars, teacher trainings, workshop of librarian and others...

(4/6/2021)

Both of them love their profession, always motivate themselves, and have a strong passion for constructing their teachers' professional identity. To emphasize their identity, they have to learn and interact with their environment continuously. Members within a community constantly build an identity via the involvement and contribution to their practices. They want to have their own classes, where the students can enjoy in learning English and have motivation to learn better.

DISCUSSION

The main aims of this study were to analyze and to comprehend the identity of EFL teachers in vocational high school context of their transition to become professional teacher. Other aspects such as the personal experiences that support professional identity have emerged throughout the study. This study does not merely attempt to comprehend professional identities at this period, but took into account the personal experiences of EFL teachers in vocational high school context, as part of the development of their professional identity.

Early Identity of Becoming an English Teacher

The data show that there are some factors that influence the participants of this study to become English teacher. The factors are family, culture, interest in English, and friends' influence, as I figure out the factors based on their narration.

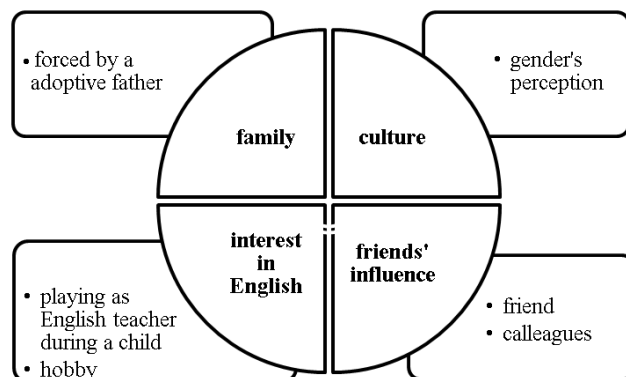


Figure 1: Factors of becoming English teacher

In becoming an English teacher, Yiyin was motivated by her friends and father. They ensure Yiyin that English is required for getting good jobs. Besides, Yiyin's father agreed that women should become a teacher. It means that she was identified by her family, friend and culture on gender's perception. Djoudir's (2019) research identified some factors that influenced his participants to be English teachers such as the role of family, genders' perception, love in English, and teacher's influence. He agreed that those factors could be influential to form their teacher identities. Gee (2000) theoretically explained that two of the four factors from Yiyin's story are *Nature identity (N-identity)* and *Institution identity (I – identity)*. These identities can be identified through Yiyin's narratives which situated her into different roles as woman, mother, and teacher.

Unlike Yiyin, Udin's early identity as an English teacher was motivated by his personal interest in English by watching English-subtitled movies. His love in English grew up when he understood that English would be needed in his future though his family had no English education background. His struggle to improve his English ability narrated when he was seriously joined English debate clubs in Malang while he was studying in an English department. His friends in his team and university motivated him to learn more. According to Gee (2000), this explains that his identity was influenced by *Institution identity* (I – identity) and *affinity identity* (A-identity). These identities position him as a part of social interaction who was a student and a member in his communities or clubs that he joined in and had passion to mend his knowledge (Oakeshott,, 1977; Wenger, 1999).

Professional Identity Construction during Teacher Profession

In their early career, they became novice teachers who developed their professional identities through negotiating the significance of their past experiences with current and future experience. Teaching English as second /foreign language for the non-native teachers bring some issues for them. As Abrar (2019) concluded, his study participants have challenges in some language's issues, such as pronunciation, grammar, fluency, vocabulary, and accent as the major issues in learning English as second/foreign language. He also explained that to solve their problem of speaking, they have "overcoming strategies". Abrar quotes Abrar and Mukminin (2016), who said that to overcome speaking issues, non-native learners tend to use speaking strategies to participate in discussion/talk actively.

Other issue that Yiyin and Udin faced in their early career was managing class and mastering material (Wang, 2021; Widodo, 2015). Udin showed his passion to write firstly before he acted in front of his class. Using appropriate vocabulary and grammar while he was writing and practicing English debate with his students or colleagues helped him to be able in mastering English and think critically. Related to what Udin acted, Widodo, Fang and Elyas (2020) in their research agreed that conducting research and ongoing in-service training for university ELT professionals are needed for their professional identity. They argued that the qualified English teachers know how to teach and understand what their students', parents' need, be flexible and devoted to English teaching, and conduct research for their professionalism. For these, Udin and Yiyin have conduct research for their professional identity, such as writing book which explains their strategies applied in their class, innovating teaching and learning media using technology as the development of technology.

Thus, the identity of teachers moved from imaginary identities to practical ones. In their early career, the participants in this study understand what they want to be through interacting with others in different communities. They understood that their problems during their first year of teaching could be solved by sharing experiences and motivating each other (Danielewicz, 2001). Likewise, with Danielewitz, the idea of Cooley's Looking Glass (1902), referenced by Day et al (2006 p. 602), states that identity construction has grown into a strong effect over the self-construction of others and that it is a relationship between self-consciousness and assuming perceptions of others. In other word, the society involves to form identity beside ourselves.

Their first year of teaching wasn't smooth but it helps them to reconstruct their professional identity. Their love in teaching motivates them to learn and learn. Udin hopes that he can get scholarship to continue his study as his students who get it. He is consistence on his activities as English debate instructor, and private teacher. Now he also joins in writing forums and has two published books; one is anthology book and the other is English module. Yiyin does the same way in writing her books and creates learning and teaching media IT based. Her imagination teaches her class with love; teaching her students like her own children always motivates her to move forward, from traditional teaching to innovative and communicative teaching.

CONCLUSION

This study has revealed how teacher professional identity was constructed and how this identity changes over time. In the findings, the two participating teachers experienced gradual and complex identity constructions within their early journey of becoming English teachers, identity negotiation during their professional career, and their future projections. These findings have brought to the realization that teacher constructed their identity through multiple experiences gradually. The present study has implications for stakeholders to design teacher professional career development which enhance teachers' identity.

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